

Mara
and the
Mangala



by
Ajahn Amaro

*This book is respectfully and lovingly dedicated to my teachers,
Ajahn Chah & Ajahn Sumedho,
to whom I owe great gratitude for the incalculable spiritual blessings
they have brought into this world;
and to Karl Gjellerup,
the insightful and visionary groundbreaker who responded to the call
for Buddhist poets to “do their work,” and thus wrote ‘The Pilgrim Kamanita’ –
may the efforts that he made bring him to
the perfect peace of Nirvana.*

© Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation 2010
Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery
16201 Tomki Road
Redwood Valley
California 95470
USA

www.abhayagiri.org

*'Twas life's bright game
And Death was 'he.'*

Walter de la Mare
Ding Dong Bell, 23

~

*The blessèd end of all things eternal:
do you know how I attained it?*

*Grieving love's deepest suffering
opened my eyes:
I saw the world end.*

Richard Wagner
Götterdämmerung (original version)

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THIS STORY IS INTENDED to be both a partner to the novel 'The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,' written by Karl Gjellerup in 1906, and a tale that stands on its own. There is no need to have read the earlier book in order to make sense of this one, however, should you wish to go to the source from which many of the characters and scenes of this tale have sprung, an English version of it is to be found on this same web-site, at <http://www.abhayagiri.org/main/book/366/>

This book was originally projected to be published entirely as a serial novel, appearing one chapter at a time on the first day of every month, over a couple of years. However, some of the same type of unpredictabilities that populate this tale intervened and, before the planned twenty-six months were up, it became necessary for me to leave California and relocate to England. This move, in July of 2010, precipitated the decision to release the entire book early, as a parting nod this fair country that has been the focus of my attention for the last twenty years, as well as the seedbed of so many of the fibres of this yarn.

The worst thing that could happen to a story to be read for pleasure is to have it surrounded by footnotes and appendices. This is true; but it's also true that some readers might like to know: "Did *this* come from the Buddha?" "Where can I find the rest of that quote?" "That tradition sounds interesting, I wonder what it symbolises?" What has been done, therefore, is to create an appendix of notes and references, outlining the sources of the derived material that has been used.

The main body of the text is not marked in any way to indicate these notes; however, if you are curious about a certain passage, go to the end of the book, look for the page and quotation in question and see if there's a comment or reference for it. This way, if you just want to read the story and ignore the rest you can easily do so, or, if you are interested in finding out more and checking the facts, the origins are mostly outlined there for you. We will also be delighted to hear of any mistakes, omissions or unwanted intrusions that any reader might find in these notes – feedback will be helpful for any future editions.

Also, gentle reader, please note that the original author (Karl Gjellerup) switched freely between using Sanskrit (the language of the Northern Buddhist and Hindu scriptures) and Pali (the language of the Southern Buddhist scriptures) during the course of his tale. In our efforts to be true to his original style we have maintained this mixture of usage.

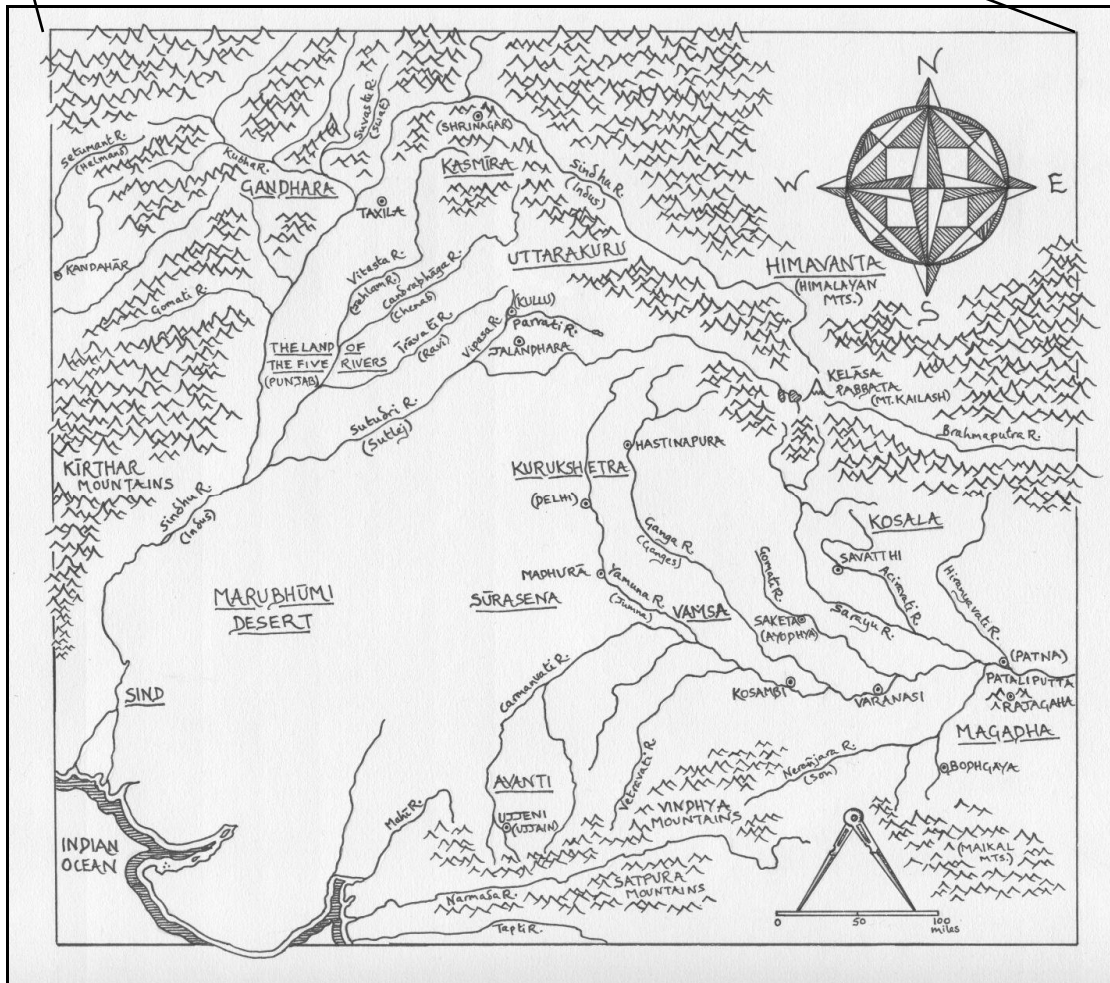
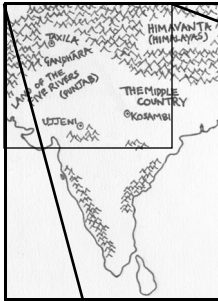
Amaro Bhikkhu
Abhayagiri Monastery
California
Midsummer Night, 2010

CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1:	The Argument.....	8
CHAPTER 2:	The Road.....	15
CHAPTER 3:	The Deadly Bite.....	22
CHAPTER 4:	The Kinnaris and the Yakkha.....	33
CHAPTER 5:	The Royal Progress.....	42
CHAPTER 6:	The Fire.....	50
CHAPTER 7:	A Peaceful Palace.....	62
CHAPTER 8:	The Unshaven Monk.....	66
CHAPTER 9:	At the Minister's Mansion.....	74
CHAPTER 10:	"Why is Everything so Quiet?".....	85
CHAPTER 11:	The Festival at the River.....	97
CHAPTER 12:	A Rival Arrives.....	111
CHAPTER 13:	Krishna at Play.....	123
CHAPTER 14:	The New Gardener.....	136
CHAPTER 15:	War in Heaven.....	150
CHAPTER 16:	Leaving Home.....	164
CHAPTER 17:	The Arrow.....	178
CHAPTER 18:	The Bickering Bhikkhus.....	194
CHAPTER 19:	The Wanderer.....	209
CHAPTER 20:	At the Knacker's Yard.....	226
CHAPTER 21:	Magandiya's Story.....	242
CHAPTER 22:	The Noxious Cave.....	257
CHAPTER 23:	The Perfumed Holocaust.....	269
CHAPTER 24:	The Invitation.....	286
CHAPTER 25:	The Iron Skillet.....	306
CHAPTER 26:	The Message.....	323
	Notes & References.....	356

Northern India

In the Time of the Buddha



Modern-day names in parentheses

PART I

CHAPTER 1

THE ARGUMENT



It is not easy to evade the King of Death – even when he is only being embodied by a rambunctious three-year-old chasing his sisters in the rain.

It was the monsoon burst; after months of dust and parched anticipation it had arrived, at last, that morning. A stiff breeze had preceded it, then huge steel-blue, grey and black piles of churning cloud had appeared marching from the south-west. The roar of wind and approaching rain had then suddenly been lost amidst the shouts of joy from people all over Ujjeni and the ferocious drumming of the deluge as it began its tattoo on the buildings and streets of the town.

As it pounded onto the roofs of Kamanita's palace, the water ran in haphazard spumes straight off the eaves and arced wildly in the wind as it gushed from overloaded downspouts. The children were in heaven as they rushed and darted, soaked to the skin, around the courtyard where they were playing off-ground He.

"I am He! I am He!" yelled little Krishna, vainly trying to raise his voice above the roaring of the water. He dashed fiercely after his sister Amba who, squealing with glee jumped up onto a stone bench before he was able to tag her. He searched for other quarry. Kambha and Khina, the twins, were taunting him from the edge of the low wall, just below the eave and out of the rain, when suddenly Tamba, his other sister, made a leap from the edge of the fountain and ran right across his path. When he took off in pursuit the other girls all left their perches, their yelps and cries also swamped by the all-abounding thunderous clamouring rain.

Tamba was quick on her feet so Krishna, being the youngest and thereby smallest of the group, was unable to get anywhere near her: too fast, too nimble. As he chased her, the others had also come teasingly close, calling, "Yah Death! King of Death, you can't catch me!" Suddenly, as he twisted and made a lunge to try and tag Khina, his left leg gimped awkwardly under him and he crumpled to the ground; he curled on his side on the stone paving slabs clutching his ankle while the warm rain streamed down his face and over his body, clad in thin summer cloth.

Tamba was the first to react. She jumped down from the cleft in the wall but, knowing her little brother's tricky and mischievous nature, just like that of his divine namesake, she hesitated briefly, her eyes instinctively narrowing with suspicion. Amba meanwhile, as soon as she realized that he was hurt, rushed to help.

As she knelt beside him and lowered her head to his ear, the running water dripping off her nose and down her cheeks, he burst into motion – rolling on his shoulder away from her while he deftly tagged her on the arm with his free hand: “You are He and I am free! You're It, you're It, you're It!”

“You cheating little rat!” she swung herself at him, trying to get him right back, but before either she could reach him or he could get to the safety of an off-ground ledge, a piercing voice made itself heard above the din.

“Amba, Tamba, come here immediately! How many times do I have to tell you not to play with that odious little urchin, the colour of a demon, spawn of that little witch's infidelity? If you touch him, you'll end up just as black as he is!”

The two sisters were well-used to this sort of rebuke from their mother and had learned quickly to nod their heads and say sorry, and studiously to ignore the admonition. For in truth Krishna *was* only their half-brother: the girls were the children of Kamanita, the wealthy merchant, and his first wife Sita; when he had (so the story went) been persuaded that Sita was not able to ever bear him a son, he had taken a second wife, Savitri, and it was she who was the mother of Krishna and whom their own mother had just spoken of so harshly. So although to them he was simply their brother and companion in their many little escapades, to their respective mothers they were far removed from each other.

This distance was made all the greater through Savitri, by being the mother of Kamanita's only son and heir to his estate, feeling that she therefore deserved the senior position in the household, and more pointedly Sita's belief that Kamanita was not the true father of Krishna, that the new wife had made a cuckold of him (and a laughing stock) as could be clearly seen by the fact that her son was as blue-black as the god Krishna – while both the mother and Kamanita were fair-skinned. It was a scandal and an outrage, as she told any and everyone who would listen.



As can be the way of things, when Sita called out to her daughters, two other changes took place in the scene simultaneously: there was a momentary lull in the downpour, as if the rain was taking a breath before the next onslaught, and Savitri and one of her maids appeared at another entrance to the courtyard. This meant that not only had the children heard the words that Sita yelled at them but so had her arch-rival, the second wife.

For a moment, all stood still. Everyone present seemed to take in what had just happened and, in that second of empty pause, decided how to respond, or at least reacted with blind feeling: Kambha and Khina, the granddaughters of Kolita, the house steward, melted away behind a pillar and slipped out of the courtyard by the gardener's door. Amba and Tamba felt embarrassed for their mother, but both meekly looked down at the ground and hurried to her side, under the shelter of the covered walkway surrounding the yard. Krishna mostly felt disappointed that the game had been stopped, just when he had made that ever-so-clever move and had tagged Amba. Sita felt her lips tighten in defiance and her pulse begin to strengthen. Savitri felt a surge of rage and indignation erupting within her breast – since the time that her beloved son was born she had heard whisperings, and the gossip of the family and townsfolk, reported to her by her friends and through the servants – but *this* was the first time she had heard the accusations directly, with her own ears.

She knew that she was utterly innocent. She had been an untouched maiden when she had been wed to Kamanita and she had been impeccably faithful to him ever since. Even after he had left the household and disappeared nearly two years ago, she had not so much as looked at another man longingly or even had the thought pass through her mind. As far as she and (she hoped) all the gods and spirits were aware she had been the perfect wife and mother to Kamanita's son.

It was undeniable that the boy was an astonishingly dark colour. She had been as surprised as everyone in Ujjeni when he was born, and, in a somewhat fruitless attempt to counterbalance his striking blackness, when his naming ceremony had been held she had insisted on his being called Komudi – after the full moon called 'white lotus' in the month of Kattika in which he was born. As might be expected however, although she insisted on using this name with him, she was the only one to do so, everyone else – had either called him Kanha ('Blackie') in the local dialect, or more usually Krishna, meaning the same thing but the more commonly used since it was, auspiciously, the name of the great and famous deity, in the language of the ancient scriptures.

It was also somewhat predictable, if not unavoidable, that Krishna would have acquired such a nickname since his two half-sisters had also been given theirs through their own unusual complexions – Amba (meaning 'Mango') having been born with rich golden-hued skin, and Tamba (meaning 'Copper') having both a distinctly reddish-chestnut cast to her colouring and auburn lights in her hair – especially so when the sun shone through it from behind.

It was only a second or two that passed after Sita's outburst but, in that moment, the years of shame unjustly applied to her, of frustration and self-righteous wrath, built to a head and burst forth; Savitri was incandescent.

"Who are you calling 'witch' you foul-mounted, noxious excuse for a mother?! And how dare you accuse our husband of being such a fool that he doesn't even know

if a child is his own!!! In the name of and before all the gods in heaven, I attest that our master, Kamanita, is the true father of my son – and he would swear it before you and all the gods as well, if he were here and had heard your foul and poisonous accusations.

“You are a selfish, jealous and evil jade, ignorant even of the most basic ways of nature. Everyone knows that people have children now and then who are vastly different from their parents, and with dark skin, just like Kamanita’s son. Why, even the Lord Krishna, who was as dark as my son, had parents who were fair-skinned. It happens all the time. The Lord Buddha too – in past lives of his, they say, was also born with black skin, although of brahmin parents. So, not only does the colour of my son’s skin not imply that our husband was not his father, it might well instead presage the fact that he is destined to be a great minister of state, or a warrior like the Divine Lord, or even a holy sage.”

The torrent of words gushed forth as if a gate in her heart had opened and the dammed up feelings of those difficult years had at last been allowed to be heard. As she was speaking the twins, Kambha and Khina, had raced off to tell their grandfather, Kolita, that there was big trouble afoot. He tried to gather his wits and now scurried rapidly to the courtyard where the confrontation between the two wives was unfolding.

Savitri had not allowed Sita to get a word in edgewise as yet, so intense and unrelenting was her rage. They were also face to face by this time so not even the pounding of the rain all around them was able to buffer the exchange. “I have tolerated your gross and unwarranted abuse for long enough. I will not stand it for a day longer; I refuse to spend another night under the same roof with you. I don’t believe my son is safe with you anywhere around.”

As she spoke, and Sita took in the full force of this wave of vehement passion, a tangle of different feelings swirled within in her: anger, indignation, fear, spite, protectiveness and, to her surprise, joy – for it sounded to her from the other woman’s words that she was going to leave the palace and relinquish the claim of her son to their husband’s fortune. “So, she won’t spend another night under the same roof,” Sita reflected, “splendid! At last there’ll be some peace around here again...”

This thought had hardly had time to form before the self-satisfaction turned to a nauseous flux in her belly and then to a rage of her own. For her rival had turned to address Kolita, the steward of the estate, and was talking to him with a level gaze and defiantly emphatic tone: “When our master, Kamanita, left this palace to take up the religious life, you were the only one he spoke to of his plans before he departed—is that correct?”

“Er, yes Ma’am, I was the only one there; I tried to stop him but...”

“Yes, we know, but he wouldn’t listen. Now he said to you ‘I leave this house and my estate in your care until my son is grown to manhood’ is that correct?”

“Er, well, yes Ma’am.”

“That being the case, with my son as the sole heir, and inheritor of the family honour, I demand that you throw this woman and her brats out of my son’s house – she has insulted the master and has besmirched the good name of this noble line. I have declared that my son and I will not pass another night under the same roof as this malicious and evil harridan. See to it,” she said, fixing the anxious and gentle retainer with a glare of icy keenness, “that they are dispatched by this evening. And keep your eyes peeled as to what goes with them. The master would not be happy if the gold and silver and jewelry, that are the property of his son, went wandering by way of greedy hands.”

“Oh dear, Oh my...errr... Well, the law certainly supports you, Ma’am but... Oh dear...”

“Don’t worry, Kolita,” Sita barked. “Don’t you worry; you’d have to chain me to the pilasters here if you wanted to get me to stay.”

The curious, conflicting emotions that Sita had been feeling had, by now, resolved themselves into a single sturdy cord – there was no more tangle – it was vividly clear that she and her children should leave this poisoned place forthwith and, if there was to be any future for them at all, she had to find her husband and learn from him, by his sworn testimony in a solemn Rite of Truth before the whole pantheon of gods, whether he was indeed the father of this boy. Or whether, as she strongly suspects, through his well-known passivity and dislike of conflict, he had known of his second wife’s infidelity, but had let it pass since it had at least provided him (and his eager family) with the much desired son.

There was also some doubt in her heart, as well as for many others, as to whether Kamanita had *really* gone off to become a wandering religious seeker, a yogi treading the dusty paths of India.

He had never expressed much in the way of religious feelings, right up until the night he left. He had been a wealthy merchant and indeed, even on the fateful night that he had departed he had seemed very far from any spiritual concerns, rather he had been solely bent on trying to protect his precious property. He had been ready to fight to the death, with the aid of some hired blades and free-lancers, against Angulimala and his gang of bandits who had threatened to attack his palace.

The hired men who were questioned later said that Kamanita had been genuinely expecting the clash but the bandits had never come: “He looked just like a man before a battle who didn’t really want to fight – if he was acting, he could make a career out of it ‘cos he right convinced me...” According to Kolita, Kamanita had simply announced to him at dawn, once it was clear that Angulimala was no danger, that he had decided to take up the wandering monk’s life; but was Kolita telling the truth about that, and about the bequest to his son? Certainly girls rarely inherited property – they have their dowries at marriage – but maybe it was a plot...Kolita had the master killed

and had agreed to split the spoils with that witch Savitri...But Kolita cannot even kill a mosquito and loses sleep if he has put too much ghee from the stores onto his flat-bread at lunch...



It was impossible to know what had ‘really’ happened but the best Sita could do now for herself and her daughters, in fact as far as she could see the *only* thing she could do was to set out and find her errant husband. Whether he was a monk or living as a merchant somewhere else, or whether he was indeed dead, somehow she would find him and learn of the truth what she could. If she had stopped to think it all through rationally, she would have seen that there were all sorts of flaws in this plan but she was in a state that did not allow much rationality – they needed to get out and this was the only pathway she could see.

If this had all happened earlier, her first thought would have been to go back to her parents’ house, just down the street, as this was the usual mode of escape from an unworkable marriage situation. The fortunes of her father, the great merchant Sañjaya, had waned, however – this situation in no small part due to being out-competed by Kamanita’s sharp business practices – and her whole family had upped and moved to Savatthi, the capital of Kosala. For, not only had Sañjaya seen Kamanita’s wealth expanding while his shrank, but he also realized that, with the birth of a son to Kamanita’s second wife, his last hopes of tapping into that fortune were gone. Thus they had moved – lock, stock and barrel – to Savatthi to make a fresh start with the capital and merchandise that they had, and Savatthi was far, far away.

Her mind raced, and when she pondered where Kamanita might have gone to, the only place that came to mind was Kosambi, the capital of the nearby kingdom of Vamsa. She knew that he had been there once or twice, and that some major event had happened there for him. She suspected that he might have had a secret lover there – he never spoke of it consciously but often in his sleep he would mutter the name of the town with a sad and loving tone. Even if he heard the name ‘Kosambi’ in other people’s conversations, he would wince and fidget or release a quiet sigh. He would also often mumble the name ‘Vasitthi’ as he dreamt, so she half suspected that the so-called monk’s life was just an excuse to be rid of his tiresome family in Ujjeni and to take up again with his old flame in that far-off city.

This all passed through her consciousness in a flash and she there and then decided to aim for Kosambi, seek this lady called Vasitthi, and see if her husband was to be found there. “Kolita, if you and some of the maids will help us pack up a few of our belongings – we want to make sure we don’t take any little thing that is not ours – Amba, Tamba and I will set off for Kosambi this very day.”

“But Ma’am, your ladyship, it’s so awfully raining hard...” He begged and mumbled as he followed her fierce stride down the corridor. “Please Ma’am, the little ones, you can’t properly travel in weather like this sort. It’s so nasty. It’ll finish all you off...”

By the time that they had finished packing their things – Sita moving in severe, brisk bursts, the girls in shock, silent, numb, their limbs operating as if automatically – the good Kolita, in a very round-about manner of persuasion, had got them to agree to wait out the monsoon at the house of a cousin of his on the far north side of the town. The owner was away and he had entrusted it to be let out by Kolita.

The presence of the rains – still coming down steadily and turning the lanes to an impressive network of mud and puddles – and the promise (Kolita assured her it was quite legal, the girls, after all, were the legitimate children of Kamanita) that the rent for the house would come out of the general estate funds, and thereby from the pocket of the young master, made Sita see that this might not be such a bad idea after all. They could let the rains finish and adjust themselves to their new, straitened circumstances, and plan as best they could for the road ahead.

As the rain finally eased off at dusk, the three, and a few helpful hands from the staff, made their way out into the street to begin their new lives. Krishna had momentarily slipped away from his mother, and stood forlornly at the gate, crying quietly, not knowing if he would ever see his beloved sisters again. He watched them go and bid his sad farewell.

CHAPTER 2

THE ROAD



he little house that Kolita had provided for them was on the far side of the town, conveniently remote from Kamanita's palace. It was not a shanty or in bad repair, but it was nevertheless a far cry from the broad halls, echoing colonnades, cool marble floors and swaths of lawn that they had all become used to; the young girls had never known any other way of life than that of the palace so it was a rude shock to be suddenly confined to three or four rooms and a scrap of yard.

In addition to the abrupt shrinking of their living space, from the moment that the three of them arrived in their new home it was clear that, if they wanted to eat, wear clean clothes and not be surrounded by cobwebs, dust and lizard-droppings, they were going to have work for themselves for a change. Once Kolita and the handful of maids, and the handyman who had helped them move, had all departed – with some anxious faces and promises to lend a hand when they could, and the unsettled mien of those caught between two contending parties whilst being sympathetic with both – Amba, Tamba and their mother were left completely alone.

It took them a few days to settle in; although the girls missed their ayah and the maids, whom they had tended to spend most of their time with, and of course their little brother and the other children of the house, they surprised Sita with how quickly they adapted. They were young (only five and six years old), and thus more flexible-minded, still it was a relief to have them taking on this world as a new and interesting game rather than having them weeping, moaning and complaining.

Sita launched herself into the round of cooking and cleaning, shopping in the market and endless mounds of laundry, with a will and a forthright zeal born of raw necessity. They had to survive and if this was what it took to do that, she was ready. The natural containment of their little house and the absence of much contact with any people outside their tiny clutch also left Sita alone with her thoughts much of the day.

The more she mulled it all over, the clearer the picture became for there is nothing quite like the absence of outside influences for helping a person to be confirmed in their certainties.

All was now lost to her and her daughters *unless* she could get Kamanita's testimony that Krishna's parenthood was dubious. She could, of course, just go to her parents' house and raise the children there, or beg for refuge at the home of one of her brothers or sisters. To do either of these she would need to trek all the way to Savatthi, where her father was now a well-to-do merchant and where most of her siblings had settled. However, Savatthi was even further to the north-east than Kosambi and, more importantly, it was a terrible disgrace to crawl home like a beaten dog. After all, she had no more been discarded by her husband than had that little whelp of a yakkhini and, if she neglected to seek Kamanita and set the record straight, justice would have failed to have been done – it was all so clear.

It was not a question of revenge – although she could not resist imagining the scene of the now-provenly wanton upstart being beaten out of the palace gate with her coal-coloured tyke in tow – it was simply a matter of honour and honesty, karma bringing its natural and proper result. That was all.

The more she rehearsed the 'facts' in her mind, the more solid they became, as is their nature: She and the children would wait out the Rains here in Ujjeni; when the roads dried out they would pass through the Vindhya mountains, descending to the Yamuna River and the city of Kosambi, capital of Vamsa, the kingdom ruled by King Udena; they would seek the home of the lady Vasitthi; in all likelihood they would find her errant husband there, now married to this woman; she would assure him that she was not interested in winning him back and returning with him to Ujjeni (for in truth she was much more concerned for her children's security than for any romantic wishes of her own) and would simply ask him, as his final obligation in his duties as a husband to her, to take part in a solemn Rite of Truth. He would agree to this and (she was now sure) testify that he was not the true father of the boy – being as afraid as anyone of the terrible karmic results of lying in such a Rite – she would have this Rite properly witnessed and would then return to Ujjeni. She would show Kamanita's testimony and call the witnesses before the royal justice; Savitri, that faithless and deceiving strumpet, would be cast out, and Sita's daughters – as Kamanita's only legitimate children and therefore, the rightful heirs to the palace, 'one of the wonders of Ujjeni' as her former husband was so glad to have it described – would move back into their home and be at peace. Now it was just a question of fitting these few simple elements together.

She was not aware of it but it was through being similarly blinded by emotion – in his case, his youthful bedazzlement with love for Vasitthi – that Kamanita had also rendered himself insensate to the dangers of the road.



The house that they now lived in was small but not unpleasant. The girls spent the first few days searching out all the nooks and crannies and learned to enjoy – as long as it did not go on too long – the scrubbing and sweeping jobs that their mother gave them. The yard behind the house was paved, there wasn't any real garden at all, but a good sized guava tree stood in its midst and, even better, a huge old mango tree whose trunk formed part of the back-wall, spread its densely leaf-bedecked branches over much of the area. This meant that they had plenty of good shade for days when the sun was out and burning hot as well as as many mangoes as they could eat, at the start of the rains, and, later on, a similar glut of guava.

Prior to their move to the new house, the girls had not been encouraged if they tried their hand at tree-climbing – that was the sort of thing that boys did and *they* were supposed to be learning to be lady-like – but now, if with a somewhat anxious eye, Sita happily encouraged them and beamed with as much delight as they did if the girls reaped a goodly crop from these trees. Even though Tamba was the younger of the two of them, she was the stronger-willed and considerably more daring. She was the one, therefore, who was usually in the upper branches, reaching for that perfect fruit hanging up so high, or out on the limits of a limb, spreading her weight across the twigs to reach her precious goal.

Sita was glad to have this fruit and whatever else the three could glean as things were tighter for them than she had hoped. The only source of funds she had was the gold and silver jewellery that had come with her as a bride. Every week, it seemed, she had to sell another piece, just to keep them fed and clothed and safe.

She had reckoned, at the start that she would have enough for them to live on for the Rains and to help them make the journey to far Kosambi. The situation had worsened in many ways when, after a few weeks, Savitri found out that Kolita was taking the rent out of the funds of the estate. She was incensed and utterly deaf to his assertion that this was quite appropriate and legal. When he took his courage in both hands and, as if he were nervously waging his head on a throw of the dice, tried to insist that *he* had been entrusted with the administration of the master's fortune, not *her*, the stream of abuse that burgeoned forth would have made a battle-hardened soldier blush, and it lasted for several hours. When the good Kolita had finally been brought to his knees and the lady of the house was satisfied that her message had been received, she relented momentarily, picked up her somewhat shell-shocked son, tilted her nose up to an angle suitable for indicating deep affront and strode off.

And, just in case the point needed any underlining, for the next three days, on every occasion that she encountered Kolita and sometimes when she sent for him particularly, she refilled his ear with her insistence that not one wooden masaka from

the estate of her son was to be given to that woman and, if she found any one of the staff offering them any food from the stores, materials for repairs, let alone any money from the treasury, they could expect to be up before the royal justice and to lose a hand, their nose and ears, or even their head as a common thief. They got the message and, as a result, Sita and her daughter's lives got a little harder.

Up until this time their new home had occasionally received visits from Kolita and those of the palace staff who wanted to help them out – mostly the girls' ayah and the maids who had grown fond of them as they had grown from infancy. These calls came to an abrupt halt. Few were prepared to risk their jobs, if not their lives and limbs, to lend a hand to these exiles from the family. They had usually brought little gifts of sweets, odds and ends of clothing and food and other useful offerings, as well as home-made dolls or trinkets, so this new regimen meant that all these gestures of kindness were to cease.

Sita did everything within her power to keep her children well cared for and tightened her resolve to not allow this increased austerity affect them in any negative way. The main result of this effort was that, more and more, she herself went without for, apart from these few kind people from the palace, there were no others in the town who really knew or cared for them.

Sita reflected: She had never made many friends among the rich merchant class of Ujjeni – they were all too concerned with social climbing and local gossip for her taste – so her whole life since her marriage had been built around her husband and her children. Furthermore, Kamanita's family was not at all inclined to help them either, for it was his own father who had called in those loathsome and half-witted brahmins, who had convinced him that she would never bear Kamanita a son. Before she knew what was happening they had found this spiteful and misbegotten little son-producer Savitri, she had been wedded to Kamanita and, with the appearance of her little darkling dung-ball, they – Sita and her daughters – had been firmly consigned to the shelf. Their recent ejection from the palace and the family was just an extension of the same projection: they were on their own now.

More than anything else the fact of their isolation had the effect of narrowing and sharpening Sita's resolve; she nursed her wrath and tightened her jaw – nothing on earth or in the heavens would stop her seeing that woman ground to dust and cast into the winds. Her will to survive and to succeed in their journey grew stronger and more focused than ever.

Things were hard. However, along with the endless exchanges of: "No, you can't have," "No, there aren't any," "You'll have to pretend," "But why can't we..." There were also many toys that came from this time. Not only did the girls get to climb trees and hunt for fruit and berries on their own, but Tamba also became a crack shot with buzzing little stones at the troop of monkeys that came to raid their garden. And, although they were absolutely forbidden to beg, Amba had perfected the art of

happening to wander by the sweet stalls in the market, then letting her large eyes widen in her round and innocent face so the vendors, before they had stopped to think, found themselves inviting the slightly ragged sisters to help themselves. They became a regular feature of the market and, to their delight, managed to win the hearts of a few of the different stall-keepers.

Of all the unexpected benefits of their poverty, however the most gladdening for all of them was how close the girls now were to their mother. In the palace it was the nurses and maids who were their constant companions and who had most often dried their tears and found them little treats; their mother was so often busy doing other things, being a grand lady and looking after the house, that sometimes they had hardly seen her all day and only got to cuddle and kiss her goodnight when it was time to go to sleep.

Now she was their closest ally and friend as well as being in their company all day. She would also scold them, first as their ayah would, and she'd make them work until they were really tired, but it was worth it ten times over. It was as if they had been strangely separated in the palace and now their hardship had made them close and whole.

In addition to the delight of this new found companionship, leaving the palace had also blessed them with a vision of a greater world, for their new home commanded a glorious view of the lands around Ujjeni. The palace had been splendid and beautiful but you could not see much beyond the walls of the garden – they were so high that all that showed above them were the tree tops and the sky. Here the world was huge. Ranges of distant peaks and gentle valleys spread all about them. On the days after a big rain storm, when every drop of moisture and speck of dust was gone from the air, Amba and Tamba would vie to see who could descry the things furthest away: a speck of an eagle wheeling above a high pass; a tree standing free, silhouetted on a far ridge; a hint of ice-sparkle on the highest of peaks – often Sita would join in with them but then claimed that her eyes were already old, “worn out before my time!” The winner was always decided on between the girls.



The time in this house passed swiftly. After three months the Rains had all but ceased and the rice in the terraced fields was high, heavy-headed and smelled of ripeness and rich desserts. The mud of the lanes and roads had hardened to a solid surface, in all but the lowest patches, and the sun rode the sky daily amid gently floating clouds. It was time to go.

Sita sent word to the doughty Kolita that she was about to set off. He made his excuses to the mistress of the house – although through his being such an incompetent dissembler and actor she almost certainly knew what he was up to – and came across town to see them on their way.

He made a brave attempt to press some extra gold upon Sita, assuring her that it was not from the estate but from his own savings. She however, easily outweighed him, both in pride and power, and managed to force him instead to accept all the rent that he was owed; she was not going to live as a beggar or be indebted to anyone.

They took to the road early the next morning. The three of them each had a small bundle of clothes for the journey and Sita carried a few simple cooking utensils. She had not told the girls, or Kolita, but she had had to sell every last piece of her jewellery and still only had meager funds to last them.

At first the two girls were filled with excitement and spent the first hour or so of their walk naming the trees and plants that they knew, collecting occasional flowers, and trying to catch sight of the many birds that they could hear along the way: flocks of luminescent green parrots, stately coucals with chestnut wings, blue-black bodies and tails, kingfishers near the ponds and tree-pies – there were so many!

After a couple of hours the brightness of step had waned to a steady trudge and the heat of the day was beginning to tell on the little troupe. They sat down to rest in the welcome shade of a broad banyan and Sita passed out some of the food she had brought with them for the road. Their feet hurt and the long journey ahead seemed suddenly harsh and forbidding. Amba tried not to cry but couldn't hold it all back.

“What’s the matter, pet? Why the tears?”

“I want to go home, mummy” she sniffed.

“Well, so do I, but right now we don’t have one. That’s why we have to go to Kosambi.”

“Come on Amba, don’t be such a wet” offered her sister, “I bet my blisters are much bigger than yours—look at this one...”

They soon got to comparing their wounds and, before long, the salty trails down cheeks and neck had dried into faint grey marks and then were lost in sweat as they took to the road again.

They reached a high bend in the hill around about noon; the two girls were ready to throw themselves down on the verge again, despite the absence of any shade. Just then they began to discern a heavy, creaking sound coming from a way down the road behind them. When she looked back Sita saw it was an oxcart. Like them, and many others, they were taking advantage of the end of the Rains and making their way across the countryside. This wagon had only the driver and what looked like his young son on board, together with several sacks of grain to sell at the nearby villages.

“Well you three look a right sorry picture, I must say – you want a ride?”

“No thank y...” Sita couldn’t finish before Amba and Tamba chorused: “YES PLEASE!”

“I’m only going another league or so, might not even get all the way there today, but you’re welcome aboard. These fellahs love to pull a load and there ain’t a lot of weight on you lot – not so much as they would notice anyway.”

And thus it was for many days, there was plenty of farming traffic on the road and, despite Sita’s determination never to beg for anything, Amba and Tamba developed their skills of looking particularly forlorn and travel-weary, Amba blinking her sorrowful, sad-dog eyes at just the right moment to catch the glance of the waggoner. They were passed from cart to cart, through village to village, sometimes walking for many hours, sometimes riding all day, following, as it turned out, the very route that Kamanita had taken those many years before.

At first, once they got used to the rhythm of the road, to the girls it felt like one long series of picnics – it was a great adventure – but there were periods where the days got desperately hard. Some nights in the mountains had been freezing cold and they had all had to bundle together in a heap to stay even slightly warm. In the Vedisa forest there were few villages and sometimes they had had no food at all. There were often scary noises at night, especially in the wild woods of the lowlands. Nevertheless through all this Sita’s resolve never wavered. She was tested but the challenges only seemed to make her stronger, although this was a strength of the spirit, rather than the body.

She had made a habit of passing most of the food that they acquired on to Amba and Tamba. After some weeks she thus became more thin and physically stressed than ever. In contrast the girls, adapting to this yet new configuration of the world, became more fit and robust than they had ever been – sun-darkened and keen-eyed as they honed their wood-craft skills. Now well-used to the travelling life, the two of them prided themselves on their new found skills as huntresses, nut and berry finders and fire-makers par excellence, to cook and for warmth at night.

CHAPTER 3

THE DEADLY BITE



For most of the day Sita and the children had enjoyed the relative comfort of a ride in a local ox-cart. The steady tread of the two brahma bulls who pulled it lulled them into a doze in the late afternoon light. The rumble of the axle and the tall wheels on rutted earth, the creak of wood against wood and iron and leather, all mingled with the sounds of the forest around them – the birds and the crickets, the calling of langurs and the burst of leaf-crash as these brave leapers made their own journeys through the tree-tops.

It had been at least a month since the last monsoon shower so dust was already beginning to rise from the road. It hovered and gently swirled in the long shafts of golden light that lanced through the canopy round about them.

Sita's mood was rising. The land was steadily sloping down toward the north-east and the valley of the River Yamuna below them. Their road meandered mostly through wooded slopes and dales, with villages dotted here and there. Occasionally, when there was a break in the trees and the fall of the land allowed it, they would glimpse the far valley. Amba and Tamba would cry out that they could see the great river, although in truth it was mostly hazy and unclear. These were bright days, close to the shortest of the year, but still the great distances masked all within their veil. They would see, when they were lucky, a flash or a sparkle off the waters but mostly the Yamuna and Kosambi lay secreted. As when one knows the hiding place of a precious gift, it was like a promise soon to be fulfilled.

The farmer whose cart they were riding in now had assured them that Kosambi was no more than four leagues away. "Just four days journey in a waggon like this should get you there give or take. Course I never been there myself – never had no need to – still, those that make the journey regular from my village, that's what all of them says. You aren't far off now – I suspect you'll be right glad to get there, after all the travelling you've done – and all the way from Ujjeni, with those two nippers as well."

They had been getting much the same word from the others that they had encountered on the road – mostly the foot traffic of villagers between their homes and their fields but also they had seen one or two royal messengers. These men rode on horseback, or drove chariots, and were always in a hurry, as you would naturally expect. It was exciting to see them as they rode such fine steeds and wore the bright colours of the king. If they could be persuaded to stop, or even slow down enough to exchange a few words, they always had the best information about the region the family was travelling through and about the possibilities of shelter, water or dangers on the road up ahead. They had even once been passed by a troop of royal cavalry, whose arms and uniforms, the bold caparisons of their charges, made even the messengers look pallid.

It was being rumored that the terrible bandit Angulimala, although once thought to have been captured and executed, was now loose in these parts again. Other stories, even more fantastical, held that he had given up his life as a brigand and had become a monk instead, a disciple of the Buddha. Whatever the truth of the matter was, the effect of even the rumor of his presence was to terrify the villagers of this area, so King Udena now had the roads all patrolled with shows of force. Needless to say, when Tamba had called out to them as they rode by, not even an eye in any of the 30 helmed heads had moved in her direction. They were far too grand to engage with roadside urchins. Nevertheless, while Tamba was grumbling about how rotten and rude they were, without having seen any of them as much as twitch a hand, Amba's eye caught the shimmer of a spinning coin, arcing through the air behind the last pair of riders. She dived for it and caught it before it even hit the dust.

"Tamba look – they're not so bad – a whole kahapana. Mum look! We can get some more things at the next village."

They had often met with such unbidden acts of kindness on the journey, and the rumours of the various perils of the road – the threats of starvation and wild animals, and particularly of the fearsome gangs of bandits – had all proved unfounded. They had survived and their goal now was, almost literally, in sight.

The girls' buoyancy also began to lift the spirits of their mother: "You know, even if we got kidnapped by Angulimala now it might not be such a bad thing after all. Your father used to say that he got quite friendly with some of them, after they captured him on this road all those years ago. One, who was like a priest for the gang, even seemed to act like a father to him. He protected his life a few times from the ill-temper of the other bandits and was just about in tears when the ransom for your dad arrived and he was released.

"Your father also confessed to me, when he had had a few drinks too many one time, that he learned quite a few tricks of the business when he was in their company. He told me we should thank Angulimala and pray for his welfare as our benefactor, as much of the wealth that we enjoyed – the palace he built, all the fine food and clothes

and jewels – was due to the lessons he learned while he was with their gang. So, if Angulimala took us prisoner, maybe we would come out ahead as well!”

Amba and Tamba made no reply to this but each seemed to feel that their mother had been a bit too long in the sun or somesuch, otherwise she’d never have said such strange and disturbing things. Her lightness of heart was a relief, though, as she had been so tense and anxious for so long. “I think I’d rather pray *not* to meet him, mum,” Amba finally responded, “he sounds a really horrible man.”

She had, in fact, just spent half the morning being regaled by horrific and mostly tall tales about the demonic bandit by the teenage son of Janaka, the farmer who was giving them the lift. Her eyes had got wider and wider and her brow more furrowed with fear as young Punnaka’s yarns got gorier and more monstrous.

“You *do* know, of course, that he’s very partial to human flesh. Those fingers he’s so famous for wearing round his neck, they’re all from people what he ate. Mostly folks aren’t in much danger of him doing away with them like that though, ‘cos he likes his meat to be real young and fresh.

“I’ve heard he’s sent people away that he’s captured ‘cos they were too old and scrawny for him, you know, like over ten years old, but anyone under seven... Well he’s right partial to them tender ones.

“Likes his meat rare too, you know – get’s gamey if it’s left too long – so he generally stakes them and puts them over the fire while they’re still alive...

“He lives near here these days; if I were you I’d...”

“Now just you shut up!” Tamba had barked. “She might believe your stupid stories but *I* don’t for a second. You’re just trying to wind her up and make us frightened. Why don’t you find someone your own age to pick on rather than trying to scare little girls?!”

Even though she was but five years old and the younger of the two, Tamba was by nature a fire-spitting type and had often leapt to the defense of her credulous and trusting sister when she was being teased or taken advantage of in some way. They certainly squabbled as any siblings do, especially when stressed and tired and hungry, but there was a fierce love between them that showed at times like this. And neither was it just one way: Tamba was a proud girl and hated to be taunted about their current poverty, being scruffy and low tattereddemallions. When even poor village children had a go at them, mocking their ragged clothes and grubby hair, Tamba’s usual fire was well-subdued – she even became tearful a few times – and it was gentle Amba that leapt to her defense, rounding on their mockers with a sudden vehemence that surprised and gladdened Tamba, as it did their mother: “Well, our little doe-eyed deva has some heat in her as well...”

As it was, on the subject of Angulimala, Tamba echoed Amba very quickly and said, “I really don’t want to meet him either; anyway, we’re nearly there. And, even if dad *did* see him disguised as a monk that was ages ago. So I’m sure he’s not around

anymore." All of this was put forth with her usual, slightly over-confident, but nevertheless clear and convincing manner. Somehow she always got taken seriously even though she was so young a child.



The sun was beginning to fall when they reached a fork in the road. Farmer Janaka pulled the bulls to a halt. "This here is where we say goodbye, madam, unless you and the little ones would like to spend the night in our village. Don't expect you would though, seeing as how you'd just have to come back another three miles to be at this same spot again in the morning."

They were grateful to receive the offer but, as there looked like another good couple of hours of daylight, they decided to bid farewell and set off down the main road on foot. Tamba had been looking daggers at the farmer's son ever since she had given him that earful and he in turn had studiously tried to ignore their presence for the last few hours. Sita and Amba gave them both their grateful thanks, however, and the family set off alone once again.

As the three of them had been riding in the cart for so many hours, Amba had forgotten that she had injured her foot the night before – with her legs propped up on some sacks or tucked underneath her, and what with either being assailed by horror stories or snoozing in the afternoon heat, the presence of the wound had slipped her mind almost completely. Now as she walked it throbbed quite terribly and she winced every time it hit the ground; it was hard to put any weight on it at all.

She had gashed it badly on an acacia thorn while on a firewood hunt in the forest where they had last camped. Tamba was the great fire-lighter so it had become Amba's job to gather kindling and larger deadwood for the fuel. It had been late when they had stopped but the moon was bright and she had been scavenging by its light with great success.

She had had a bundle of sticks gathered in her arms when she strode into a patch of shadow. The thorn on the forest floor had ripped an ugly gash three finger-breaths long and a half a finger-breadth deep along the sole of her foot.

The firewood had scattered hither and yon as she cried out and fell but, doing her best to wear a brave face, when Sita called to her, "What happened?" She had just answered, "I tripped and fell, that's all." She collected up the precious sticks once more and hobbled over to their camp. "Did you hurt yourself?" Her mother asked. "Not badly; I just trod on a thorn," and they made little more of it that night. They were all tired and hungry at the end of a long day's travel so getting the fire going and cooking some food was all their thought. Before they went to sleep, Amba did her best to mop up the blood-stains and clean it out with some water from their gourd; she then

wrapped it in a tattered piece of cloth to help staunch the last of the bleeding and to protect it as much as possible.

Come the morning it was very sore but the bustle of breaking camp had pushed it far from her mind once again, that and the sound of an approaching wagon – the very one which had brought them all this distance today.

She didn't want to be a nuisance or to hold the others back so she tried all sorts of ways of walking to ease the pain. Nothing worked *that* well but she found that using the outside of her foot and not touching the cut to the ground helped a little. What was better was the variety of games she invented to occupy her mind while they walked for she found that, if she was distracted, the pain wasn't there for that time. She counted trees, footsteps, clouds, birds, she invented names, rhymes, sang songs – all of these helped a little but, sooner or later, the aching throb and the sharp sting would come back through her defenses and she would limp and often whimper involuntarily.

Neither Sita nor Tamba were people who missed much so they both soon noticed how Amba was struggling. As she had always tended to be the most delicate of the family and prone to grand reactions to minor ailments, the others kept half an eye on her but continued walking for quite a while. Sita could see how hard Amba was trying not to be a drag on them or to complain, so she called a halt after a mile or so and, once they were seated on the verge, asked to have a look at her daughter's foot. "That thorn you trod on still seems to be a bother – take that rag off and let's see what's going on there."

She had expected no more than a small puncture with part of the barb, perhaps, broken off inside the wound. When she saw the cruel tear along the sole, and the depth of the cut, she was startled and immediately concerned, but did her best to swallow the shock. "Well, that was a thorn and a half, young miss, wasn't it? What a nasty gash – it must hurt like the fires of hell."

"It's not too bad."

"Oh Amba, look at this whole bit hanging off here," said her sister, rapidly getting involved with the examination, "that's so disgusting!" She had a fascinated, almost rapturous smile on her face. "You must have been in agony – why didn't you say anything? I'd have been screaming hours ago."

Amba felt annoyed with herself that she was now going to be holding them all up but she also felt a distinct glow of pride that the fearless tough-nut Tamba was impressed with *her* fortitude and courage for a change.

"This isn't really that good a place to stop for the night. May be there's some water nearby though and we can get that foot washed out and properly dressed – or at least as well as we can manage."

"How far did the farmer say to the next village, mum?" asked Tamba. "I think it was at least three or four miles from the junction, he said. We've only gone a mile or so, so it would be a good couple more on from here. There's no point even thinking of

trying to get there tonight though – with Miss Mango here on one leg – not unless another cart came by and offered us a lift.” Sita saw that they had very few options at that moment; the only thing that made sense was to take care of Amba now and to pray to the gods and spirits that some locals would come by who could help them along the way until she could walk properly again.

They had settled themselves under the branches of a broad banyan by the roadside; this ancient tree, being held as sacred and the dwelling place of protective forest-spirits, was decked and draped with many faded and tethered votive flags and festoons of orange wrapping. There were both fresh flowers and the remains of numerous others with which it had once been begarlanded, and old clay lamps and the ashes of incense were scattered all around it.

Sita was sure she could hear the sounds of rushing water nearby so she decided to set off and refill their near-empty gourd. Even though there was less danger of robbers these days, she got the girls tucked away on the forest side of the great tree, telling them to stay hidden if someone came along the road, unless of course it was an oxcart that looked likely to be able to give them a ride to the next village. By now they knew well who were the types that were safe to travel with and who were to be avoided at all costs. The ground sloped evenly downwards from the banyan so Sita picked her way carefully into the forest, following the sound of the water.



The undergrowth was dense around there so she had to make her way fairly slowly. Nevertheless the sound of the stream grew steadily louder and soon, to her great delight, she found herself at the top of a bank looking down into a clear and strongly flowing brook.

It looked good to drink and she guessed that it must be coming from a spring rising nearby. Often at this time of year, after all the rains, the streams were full but mostly turbid with muddy run-off from the hills. This clear water was a great find. In addition, when she looked around her to seek a good way down to reach the stream, she saw that there was already a path that led from the road to the waterside. They had missed it as it began just north of the sacred tree, and she realized she had scrambled through the bushes needlessly.

She quickly crossed over to where the path came down the bank, rinsed out the gourd in the cool, fresh current and then filled it to the brim. She plugged in the stopper and drew the shoulder-strap over her head, rising to her feet at the same time.

Filled with water the gourd was now heavy. She had long-since stopped taking into account how thin and physically weakened she was – hunger and weariness had been her companions for weeks now – and she lived mostly on will, all of her energy

being narrowed into the single beam of fierce intent to reach Kosambi. As she straightened up she suddenly became dizzy, her vision blackened while multi-coloured sparkles swam and floated. She stumbled toward the bushes, her feet shifting instinctively to try and correct her balance.

Before she had time to see anything she felt a sharp burst of pain in her ankle. She heard her voice cry out and simultaneously her vision cleared; she looked down and saw the deep orange bands of the snake that had just bitten her. In her mind a single word formed 'dvapadamarana' – the name of this type of snake meaning 'take two steps and die.' A wave of terrible despair rose in her heart, a vista of anguish and loss that she had failed to complete the journey, that her daughters would have no protection from now on and that they had been so tantalizingly near to safety and happiness.

She crumpled to her knees as the swirling lights and darkness returned and she breathed her last right there, beside the water.



The girls heard their mother's cry and Tamba immediately leaped to her feet, shouting out, "What happened? Where are you?" Not receiving any reply, she dashed off into the woods, following the path her mother had just taken, as best she could.

She bashed her way through the thick brush beneath the trees, not able to see much ahead of her but letting the slope lead her down to the stream that Sita had been seeking. She reached the water but again, could not see far. For a while she looked among the bushes downstream, calling out all the while but still she heard nothing in response.

She then had the idea of climbing down into the water and using the streambed itself as a path. It only reached her calves, being no more than a swiftly flowing brook, and she was well-used to the art of walking on slippery rocks in chilly water from the last couple of months of their travels.

She decided to try upstream, calling "Mum! Mum! Where are you? Are you all right?!" as she went. She soon rounded a bend and saw her mother's body, lying slumped half on the path and half in the bushes. She splashed ahead at a run and soon was at her side.

"Mum! Mum!, what happened? Are you all right?" She shook Sita's shoulder and took firm hold of her hand, squeezing as many of the fingers as she could grip in her small palm. "Mum, Mum, what's the matter? Did something hit you? Did you get bitten by a snake or a giant centipede? Did you slip on a rock?"

She felt sure that her mother was just unconscious but, when she stroked her brow and ran her hand over her mother's head, she could find no blood or swelling that would have come from a blow. It was then that she noticed her swollen foot and the marks of the lethal bite on Sita's ankle.

If Tamba had looked into the shrubbery nearby, she would have seen the tell-tale orange bands of the krait that had just killed her mother. These snakes are famous throughout the East for being both the most poisonous of reptiles and for their apparent knowing that that's the case – they never hurry to get out of the way or show fear of any other being. They seem to know their own power.

"Amba! Amba! Mum's been hurt!" Tamba hurtled up the track and back to her sister's side. "She looks really ill. She's been bitten by some kind of snake – you can see these really nasty marks on her leg – at least that's what I think it must have been. She's been knocked right out by it anyway, whatever it was. We need to get help for her, some medicine or something, right away." Even though she lay so still, neither of the girls allowed themselves even to consider that she might have died – it was too sudden, too unthinkable – they seemed to agree tacitly not to say even so much as the word.

Amba had had a hundred different horrible possibilities running through her mind whilst Tamba had been searching so, even though it was some bad news that she brought, at least she now knew what had happened; and, even if it was a snakebite, she knew that lots of people (especially out here in the country) were well-acquainted with all sorts of remedies and that they would probably be able to get something to cure her without too much trouble.

"So, what do you think we should do?" she asked.

"Well, we need help so I'll have to go for it – you can't get very far on your foot with that big flap of skin all open and sore."

"That farmer's village was a few miles back and he said that we would not meet any other houses along this road for another couple of miles yet. Even if you ran all the way it would take you ages to get to either place and look, the sun has gone all the way down already."

Tamba then remembered that the path that she had just come up on had seemed to continue across the stream, winding up the bank on the other side. It had looked very much as though it was an oft-used trail. "I think the path by the stream where mum is carries on over the other side. There must be a village close by through the forest and that's where they come to get water and to reach the main road here. I didn't actually see any houses through the trees but I'm sure it can't be far away – that track looks like it's used by a lot of people."

As was usually the case, Tamba's forthright confidence and reasoned self-assurance carried the decision, even though there was precious little in the way of facts to back her up. They swiftly gathered up their few things, including the gear that their mother had been carrying and made their way down the path to where Sita was lying.

Amba hobbled on her bad foot while Tamba dashed by, making several trips to collect everything together.

Between the two of them they managed to maneuver Sita into what seemed would be a more comfortable position, for even though they were very young, their mother was so light now it was not too hard for them to do. While Amba did her best to make her mother a little more comfy, talking to her and humming the songs that they had all sung together many times, Tamba sprang away, leaping the stream, racing to reach the forest village before dark.



She ran and ran with every ounce of will and strength that she could muster. To her dismay there was no cluster of houses and fields just over the rise, instead the path weaved its way among the trees and undergrowth – now traversing a slope, now dipping and then rising once again. She also found that, far from there being just a single clear path to a village, there were several places where it forked in two directions and other paths altogether that it crossed.

At each of these junctions she did her best to pick the most well-worn route but it got harder and harder to be sure – dusk was now falling and the light from the waxing moon made all the shapes and shadows different in the woods. By the time night had closed in completely she admitted to herself that she was lost.

While she paused and got her breath back again she tried to decide what to do. She remembered the first branch in the paths that she had come to and felt sure that was where she had gone wrong. She was tired and upset now, especially that her mother was so ill that all help depended on her and so far she was failing at the job. Still, being one who, like Sita, could focus her will with great intensity, she set her jaw and trotted on, trying to retrace her steps back to the stream.

The winding paths among the trees had seemed so clear, even in the twilight, but now the moon-shadows and the flat silver-grey light warped her sight and made her lose her way: the blackness of the shadows would hide the real track while the bright blades of light often made her run into the bushes, tricking her that the beams were the forest path.

She also tried hard to listen out for the sound of running water, when she thought she was getting near but by now not only was she well beyond ear-shot of that stream, but the ocean of sound which is the tropical forest night – the countless crickets' ringing and the vast orchestral plethora of nocturnal life – submerged all other sounds beneath its racket. Nevertheless she refused to give up, even though there were by now no signs of any landmark that she had passed by before, and little clue of where she now wanted to go. She had even occasionally spotted lights winking in the distance and

had raced toward them, believing them to be houses, cutting deliberately off the path. However, when she had got closer, or when her sight re-focused, she had realized that these had only been fireflies – bursting into glowing life with their tiny floating lamps and then dimming into blackness once again.

After several hours she found she could go no more; she was hungry, hot and thirsty but, more importantly, her little legs would simply no longer work – they were cramping and ready to buckle under her. Up ahead she saw a broad clearing, brightly lit by the clear three-quarter moon; on the northern side of this glade stood a thick-trunked Bodhi tree. The buttresses of its roots were drenched in the cool white light and Tamba could see how they formed a little bench – at least big enough for an almost-six-year-old like her. She clambered up and nestled into the tree’s pocket, gratefully leaning her head on one of the descending ribs.

“I’ll just stop and rest for a few minutes... oooh this is so nice... just until my legs can go again, then I’ll carry on – mum needs my help...” Her eyes closed; the lids let a little of the moon’s brightness through but her mind knew nothing whatever of it, already she was fast asleep.



During the hours that Tamba had been vainly searching for the village, her sister had been trying hard to nurse their mother. She spent some time gathering the large fallen leaves from around about them and made the best bed that she could, at the top of the bank. She gently wriggled Sita’s body over on top of these, hoping that they would help to keep out the coolness from the ground in the night; they had carried out this little leaf-mattress ritual many times now and it had saved them quite a few chills on their journey. For even though it was nowhere near as cold down here, close to the plains, as it was up in the mountains, it was still the cold season and the iciness of the dark hours had often kept them huddled together shivering.

She folded up her own wrap and tucked it beneath Sita’s head to make a pillow. Then, using both the clothes her mother was wearing and the patched and tattered warm wrap she kept in her bundle of belongings, Amba covered her up and tucked her in, just as her mother had done for her a thousand times.

As night fell she became a little more frightened than usual of the forest and its noises rising round her. Even though she was the elder of the two sisters, Tamba’s resilience and devil-may-care character had always provide an unconscious reassurance – without her, and the comforting, familiar words and songs of her mother, she shrank back into her habitual nervous coil. She felt vulnerable and frail for this was the first time she had ever been without her sister for a night.

She thought about trying to get a fire going, as the warmth and light would, as it always did, make her feel safer and more cozy in the wilds, however, she was a hopeless fire-lighter – always being cack-handed with the fire-sticks – and so didn't even want to bother trying, besides, with her foot so bad she couldn't get about to collect much in the way of wood anyhow. She also had in the back of her mind the thought that, any moment now, Tamba would come dashing down the path across the stream bearing a fire brand and with the snake-bite doctor from the village. She would get a fire going in no time while the doctor treated their mother so there was no real point in Amba making the effort.

Thick pellucid shafts of silver-grey now illumined their little camp beside the rivulet. There was nothing else to do but wait for Tamba to return. She had dressed her foot as well as she could, after having washed it out in the cool of the waters. She pulled up the side of her mother's wrap and nestled herself under Sita's arm, now going strangely stiff and swollen. Keeping up a gentle stream of all the encouraging words she could conjure, almost as much for herself as for her mother, she closed the wrap around them both and settled down for the night.

She lay awake for a long time, however, her ears straining for the sounds of deadly animals as well as for the voice of Tamba or some rescuing night – traffic on the road. She drew in closer to her mother, still not allowing the thought that she might have died to surface for a moment. She lay very still in the crook of Sita's arm, feeling the strangely inert presence of the body next to her and the hot throbbing pain in her foot.

CHAPTER 4

THE KINNARIS AND THE YAKKHA



here did she say they were?"

"Somewhere on this pathway heading down the slope."

"I can't see anything."

"They must be here somewhere; she wasn't making it up, she was really quite worried."

"Here," called a small red figure from up ahead, "I've found them."

"Who are they?" asked her friend, coming to her side and peering at the clumped bundle of Amba and Sita.

"How should I know? But there's only two of them, the spirit guardian of the banyan said there were three – an adult and two youngsters – and rukkha-devas are usually right about such things. They're observant, steady types so the other one must be nearby somewhere."

"I don't know," said the tallest of the three kinnaris, now all clustered around the prone mother and daughter, "humans are just one problem after another." She stood up straight and rolled her shoulders assertively, her raiment of maroon and purple flower-gauze rippling in the moonlight. They may well be in trouble of some kind but why should be any business of ours? Apart from the Master, and the sisters and brothers who follow him, these *people*," she propelled the word from her mouth as if it were an unexpectedly bitter seed, "are difficult in the beginning, worse in the middle, and a nightmare at the end."

"Don't be such a suspicious grouch, Bee." Her rose-clad companion now leaned further over, drawing closer to Sita's impassive yet harrowed face. "She's dead. Well gone. She must have been the little girls' mother – I wonder if the child knows... she's all snuggled in as if they were both just fast asleep."

"Where d'you think the other young one's gone? It must be her brother or sister," said the small one in red.

“Who knows? Can you hear if there’s any of them nearby? There’s plenty of moonlight but nothing obvious I can see...”

“Well, one thing’s for sure, Maggot, the girl here’s alive and well, and if she’s going to have any chance of surviving without her mother, or whoever this lady is, we’ll have to help her find food and get to safety when she wakes up.” As the two of them carried on this discussion, their tall friend crossed her arms over her chest and put on as disgruntled an expression as she could manage.

“If you’re not inclined to help too much, Bee, you can at least stand guard and look after her if she rouses. Ant and I will take a look around here and see what we can sniff out by way of edibles. It will be nice to have something for her in the morning and, what with the Rains being just over, there must be some fruits and shoots and roots in the area. Maybe the banyan-deva will know – she’s ancient and has lived here surrounded by all these other trees and plants for so long.”

The two smaller kinnaris, clad in their flowing garments of creamy-rose and bright red respectively, were about to take off on their search when a fierce squall burst upon the trees around them, stirring the leaves into a frantic shimmering, fracturing the shafts of blue-white light and breaking a few dead branches overhead. The luminescent apparel of the three friends flapped and scintillated wildly in the wind; instinctively they threw their arms up to protect themselves from the tumbling twigs and tree-limbs while Bee, by far the tallest and strongest of them, jumped forward to shelter Amba as well as herself.



“Well, well, well – lovely – looks like dinner!” A huge burly red-eyed form came crashing through the upper boughs and landed untidily beside the stream. Its hands and feet ended in long twisting talons; beneath the unblinking eyes was a hairy wedge of nose and mouth as broad as a horse’s, filled with snagged and curving teeth. Hooked to its belt was a sizeable war-club, and it smelled terrible.

“That big one’s a bit off – not too bad, mind, nothing wrong with grub that’s a bit ripe – but that little one’s fresh as a daisy. Nothing like a nice bit of liver, piping hot and straight from the pod, that’s what I always say.” He’d been drawn to the spot primarily by the smell of his favourite quarry, fresh human flesh, and it was only now that he looked up and took in the presence of the three kinnaris gathered behind Amba and Sita, further up the slope.

The yakkha, not the quickest of thinkers but one who had been swift and deft in a fight in his day, pondered the situation for a moment: “Look’s like we’ve got company. Don’t reckon they’d be after a slice – not all decked out in flowers like that—more like pollen-eaters if you ask me... That lot can be a right nuisance, mind, fussing

and flitting about all over the shop, getting all high-minded and that...Well, no problem, I'll just flash my gnashers and roar a bit and they'll be off, double quick."

He strode forward, unclipping the ugly truncheon at his side at his side and raised it threateningly above his head; he leaned toward them pulling his lips back to bare his fangs, issuing a violent and noxious-smelling roar from the depths of his throat, and bugging his crimson rolling eyes with a crazed menace. To his surprise – and somewhat to their own – the three kinnaris drew together and formed a (slightly trembling) barrier between him and his prospective feast. Equally unexpected was that the one known as Bee, who had been so hesitant to get involved, had now placed herself at the centre of the trio and seemed to be taking the stance of chief protector.

"Stand not between a yakkha chieftain and his prey!" He boomed, trying to sound as imperious as possible. "Go on, clear of out of it – pesky little imps," he continued, quite forgetting to use his best classical accent and his stock of 'great threatening phrases' that he had gleaned from the bards' recitals of the ancient epics.

"You'll have to take *us* on first, you loathsome, stinking creep – don't you dare even try to lay a finger on them!" Bee had narrowed her gaze and set her jaw – it was clear that she would now defend Amba and her mother to the death.

"Hah!" he guffawed. "Ha! That's got to be a first – a warrior-yakkha gets told by three pink fairies that he can't have his dinner, and he just says, 'Oh, do excuse me your ladyships, how rude of me to even think about having a bite to eat in your august presences. You must forgive me for being an uncouth ignorant old git...' Now, I might think about having you three as horse doovers (or whatever you call them) – or maybe one for starters and couple for pudding..." Soon getting lost in his own mirth, he let the flow of his monologue slip and broke into uncontrolled laughter, blasting the kinnaris with a gout of his rancid breath into the bargain.



Where she had been half-stirred by the noise of the wind in the trees and the low musical mumble of the kinnaris' conversation, the manic cackling of the yakkha now brought Amba fully awake. She pulled the wrap from around her head and blinked a few times to get used to the midnight light. As her sight cleared she was amazed and delighted to see the magenta, red and salmon-pink luminescent figures before her. Meanwhile the raucous laughter that had woken her had muted itself to a series of jerky chuckles. Amba peered between the radiant forms of the flower-clad beings to see the source of the disturbing voice and rapidly made out the hulking presence of the brutish celestial demon behind them.

Fear and shock shuddered through her as she asked, "What's happening? Who are you all?"

“Very glad you asked, miss,” the huge bristling face loomed high above the heads of her defenders, “the name is Gumbiya, yakkha warrior-chief (rtd.), and what’s happening is I’m starving hungry – haven’t had a bite to eat for at least half a day – and you, my darling, are my dinner.”

“Just you *shut up!*” roared Bee, in her own gruff, commanding voice, her wrath now fully roused, “how can you be so horrid, saying such vile things and frightening a little girl!”

“Frighten her!? I’m going to *eat* her!” He chuckled, flaring his crimson eyes, “Now just get out of my way before I turn the three of you into pink ‘n purple mush.” He drew back his club, studded with iron spikes and naga-teeth, and poised himself to sweep the three courageous kinnaris aside. “I’ll count to three...”

The smallest of them, Ant, clad in flower-gauze of kanavera petals, swiftly turned to Amba and said “We’re all disciples of the Buddha – if this beast harms us he’s in trouble; if he tries to grab you, just recite “Namo Buddhaya!” and you’ll be protected too.”

“One!”

“What good’s that going to do?” her friend in pink whispered, “she doesn’t even know what the words mean. For the protection charm to work you have to be a real disciple – the Master’s said so many times how it’s not a matter of just reciting the sound of the words, you have to *mean* it.”

“Two!”

“If the charm is to work he has to attack *us*. As long as we stand firm, he’s in trouble.”

“Three!”

“Now, if you’ve finished your little discussion, ladies, would you please flutter off and let me have my grub – my belly’s growling like a bear with ruptured piles.”

“We’re all disciples of the Buddha,” barked Bee, “and if you lay a single of your nasty claws on us you’ll regret it, long and painfully.”

Surprised by his own forbearance and somewhat impressed by the pluck that the three were showing, he chuckled, “So how’s that? I can’t hardly wait to hear how the likes of you three are going to do me in – what’ve you got in mind: hitting me with your pom-poms or maybe drowning me in a heap of flower petals? Vicious!”

“Don’t you remember what happened to Suciloma, the yakkha who attacked the great monk, Sariputta?”

“Remind me, my dears; old age and hunger have a very trying effect on the memory.”

“You tell it Maggot – you heard it directly from the Elder Maha-Moggallana who saw the whole thing.”

“It was a bright, full moon night,” she began, “the two great friends, the Elder Sariputta and the Elder Maha-Moggallana, the two chief disciples of the Buddha, were sitting in meditation out in the forest together. Their heads were freshly shaven, as is their custom at the full and new moon days, and the moonlight gleamed radiantly on the pates of these two great beings.

“At that time there were two yakkhas passing by, flying southward on some business or other. The one, foolish Suciloma, suddenly felt the desire to strike one of the Elders on the head, as it shone so invitingly, down there in the glade below them. He announced this intention to his companion, Khara, who wisely advised, ‘It would be a great folly to do such a thing, my friend, these disciples of the Blessed One are often mighty and powerful. If you were to attack them it is certain that you would suffer for it greatly.’”

Her gentle voice recited the tale in rhythmic folds of sound; Amba and the other kinnaris, and even the fearsome yakkha were all drawn into the spell of it as the stately cadences rose and fell.

“No matter how he tried to dissuade his rash companion, none of it affected him, Suciloma would attack. He swooped to the forest floor and delivered a fell blow to the head of Venerable Sariputta – such as would have easily levelled a bull elephant, by Maha-Moggallana’s guess.

“To the stark amazement of the yakkha Khara high above, to Maha-Moggallana and to Suciloma too, the savage club glanced harmlessly from the noble Elder’s head – Venerable Sariputta sat unflinching in his pose, he not so much as twitched at the mountain-smashing strike. And, before the grisly goblin could raise his cudgel once again, the Earth, grossly offended by his heinous act, opened wide beneath him, sending forth great tongues of flame and swallowed him into her yawning maw.

“A little later, once he had emerged from depths of calm, the Elder Sariputta looked about. When his eyes met those of Maha-Moggallana, his friend asked him: ‘How do you feel, friend, are you well? Do you have aches or pains?’ ‘Come to mention it, I have a slight headache,’ Sariputta replied, ‘otherwise I feel quite fine and well.’

“‘It is incredible, amazing,’ said Maha-Moggallana ‘your powers of concentration are so deep and finely-tuned. A great yakkha just struck you with a blow that would have felled a bull elephant in battle yet you are scarcely touched by it!’

“‘Well, what is equally wonderful to me, is that you have the powers to so easily discern beings in other realms whereas I, for all my gifts, have not the eyes to see so much as a humble little mud-sprite.’

“And so, delighting in each other’s great and holy powers, these two noble beings went on their way. The yakkhas Khara and Suciloma, meanwhile, each fared on according to their different kinds of karma.”



The sound of the kinnari, clad in her rose-pink flowerets, sank away and, in its absence, the ringing of the forest night seemed to rise. A tense airlessness then formed around the group of figures by the rivulet and Gumbiya’s broad brow knitted with concern. The seven rough tufts of matted, coarse hair along his crown and spine then seemed to bristle and rise once more; he squared his shoulders and stood firmly with his club before him.

“Yeah, well, now you mention it I did hear about that – nasty way to go and all – I knew him too, we fought in the same battalion in one of the campaigns of King Indra against the asuras. But that Sariputta,” Gumbiya reasoned, putting into play the full force of his logical powers, “he’s one of the big chief’s main men isn’t he? You three are just a bunch of little pipsqueaks.”

“Oh yeah?” Bee planted her fists firmly on her hips, feeling the advantage now tilting their way, “Well what about the warding charm that your own king, His Demonic Majesty, Vessavana, composed to protect the Buddha’s disciples, if attacked by one of his unruly subjects – eh?! Does that ring any bells in your thick head?”

“If we have recited that set of protective verses and you decide to have a go at us, you my dear, will be heading down to the cooking pots for a long time. Feel like you want to try your luck?”

The massive Yakkha, although more than somewhat concerned with what he was getting himself into, nevertheless was driven forward by a potent mix of wounded pride and complaining rumbles emerging from his gut. He took a step to widen his stance so he could smite the three of them in one hammer-fall but as he raised his weapon behind his shoulder the kinnaris in turn raised their hands with palms together and began to chant:

“Namo me sabba Buddhanam...”

“All right, all right – have it your own way – I won’t touch you *or* the little girl, but hows about me just taking the dead one? She’s no use to you...”

“Don’t be so gross, you disgusting heap of demon dung; just clear off out of here and leave us alone. Even if she is dead, you’re certainly not getting your grubby claws on her – she deserves a much better end than to be chewed up in your stinking gob, you smell like you ate rotting dog for breakfast.”

“Now, now, let’s not get personal.”

“What do you mean, ‘even if she *is* dead’?” Amba’s strained voice broke in, “my mum’s not dead. She’s just paralysed or something. She got bit by a snake and she’s very ill but it’ll take more than a little thing like that to stop her – you don’t know what she’s like, she’s very tough.”

“Listen dearie, that there is a dead body – I’ve seen enough in my time so I can tell you. Besides, she’s stone cold isn’t she? Go on, feel her. No heart-beat either – right?” Amba cautiously touched the skin of her mother’s face and tried to find her heartbeat in her chest; it was not there and the skin was reptile cold.

“See, what did I tell you? The Killer has done his work – the King of Death hath taken her – *dun-die-finish-mata-mata*. So, I don’t mean to be, y’know, unsympathetic and all, in this time of your loss but, well, you being just a little slip of a thing, and now being in need of some way to... what do you call it?... ‘dispose of your mum’s mortal remains,’ so how about you just let old Gumbiya here take her off your hands and help you out like?”

“You loathsome, heartless, obnoxious brute! Don’t you dare suggest such a horrible thing to the poor girl; how would you feel about eating your own mother if she died, think about that – it’s disgusting...”

“What d’you mean ‘disgusting’!? My mum was very tasty, if you don’t mind. Anyway it looks like I’m not going to make much headway here – you girls’ve put the mockers on me getting any dinner in these parts – so I think I’ll just scarper and leave you lot to it.”

Decidedly crestfallen (his seven tufts had indeed just lost their perked up zing and were now once more flattened to his head) the disappointed yakkha turned away, hooking his war-cudgel back onto his belt as he went.

He was scanning the tree tops from the bank, looking for a good open space to fly away through, when a thought formulated itself disquietingly in his mind. “One more thing – if I might ask a little favour – I’d, err, appreciate it if word of this, err, encounter didn’t, errr, get passed on; if you know what I mean.”

“What *do* you mean?” asked Ant, her neck bent right back to look the yakkha in the face.

“Well, you know, the lads at the barn, my mates, they’d give me no end of grief if they found out that I’d been faced down by a bunch of pink fairies.”

“We are *not* ‘fairies’!” retorted Bee, with a snort. “Or ‘ladies’ or ‘girls’ for that matter – if you don’t mind! We are kinnaris, proud earth-spirits, bhumma-deva, and protectors of flowers. Let’s get that straight for a start.”

‘What’s in it for us?’ Ant cocked an eyebrow and swung the billowing sleeve of deep red kanavera blossoms on her left arm to and fro. “Why should we be bothered to save your pride after you’ve behaved so nastily towards us?” Being small even for a young kinnari, Ant was greatly enjoying this moment of power over one so huge.

The burly yakkha's brow crumpled as he brooded over what he might possibly offer them and that they might be at all interested in; he could knock up some custom-made kinnari-sized war clubs but he suspected that there wouldn't be much interest in that. Then it dawned on him and his face lit up with inspiration and hope.

"Well, I was thinking, if you or your friends ever need a little muscle for anything, y'know to help with a little persuasion, that kind of thing, or an ugly mug to scare off some villains – just let me know, all right? I'll do my best to help you out."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Swear it on Lord Vessavana's protection, the Atanatiya Paritta?"

Gumbiya gulped, "All right."

"Very good," said Bee, "then we're all agreed? OK, so we promise, in turn, that we won't let anyone know about this... encounter."



The kinnaris watched him take off and barrel away amidst the trees, shaking his shaggy head as he flew into the night sky. Behind them Amba had begun to cry and begged the three to reassure her that her mother was actually still alive and that the monster had only been trying to frighten her. "She isn't really dead, is she?"

"We're very sorry, little one, but in this instance he was telling the truth, your mother has passed on into another realm. It looks like she left this life a few hours ago. It must have a very deadly snake."

For quite some time Amba was inconsolable but the three friends were skilled in giving comfort and managed to calm and sooth her after a while. They encouraged her to realize that Sita had probably been reborn in a fine heavenly realm and they promised they would endeavour to find out where, when they next had the chance to see the Buddha or one of the others, like the Elder nun Uppalavanna or Maha-Moggallana, who were able to know such things through their psychic powers.

By the early hours of the morning she had become fast friends with them. They had found out that her name was Amba and she in turn asked theirs.

"Our proper names are frightfully long and florid: mine is 'Jambu-sirivanna' – 'beautiful radiance of the rose apple'" said Maggot.

"Mine is 'Sugandha-kanavera' – fragrant kanavera blossom."

"And mine," grumbled Bee, "is 'Maha-paduma-sundari.'"

"Which means – 'glorious great red lotus,'" giggled Ant, knowing how much her friend disliked the grandness it conveyed. "But actually, we call each other by our nicknames all the time: so I'm Ant, she's Bee, and that's Maggot."

“How did you get the name ‘Maggot’?”

“Oh you know, the same way anyone gets such things; when I was tiny, someone gave me a jambu fruit, a rose apple, and it had a maggot in it, so when I found it I was apparently very upset and yelled out ‘Maggot! It’s a maggot!’ and that’s been what everyone has called me ever since.”

“Well I got my name from the fact that people thought that my skin was the colour of mangoes so they named me after that.” Amba had now warmed to the three of them as if they were old friends, she felt greatly at ease with them. “I think you could have much better nick-names than the ones you have – you should be called after your own colours like me – I think I’ll name you Pinkie, Little Red and Garnet.”

“‘Pinkie’ – don’t you think that’s a little too chichi?” said Maggot; appalled at the idea of having to live with such a name.

“Well ‘Little Red’s’ not a lot better,” chuckled Ant. “At least you got something half-way decent Bee, I mean Garnet.”

Nevertheless, they were happy to indulge Amba’s inventiveness – she was not yet seven after all – and having made it safely through the trauma of the night, they were all in a playful, forgiving mood.

It was very late by then and yet, even though Amba was sure she would not get to sleep, (what with meeting with kinnaris, the attack of the yakkha and the realization of her mother’s death) she started to drift off anyway. As she floated between waking and sleeping she wondered if she should still cuddle up to her mother, now that she had died – while part of her mind tried to decide what would be right, she found she had wriggled up close to her regardless.

CHAPTER 5

THE ROYAL PROGRESS



ing Udena found himself walking along a country road. The land around him seemed familiar yet there was something strange about it all as well. He then realized that, customarily, he never walked anywhere outside the palace, he was always on his elephant Bhaddavatika, or on a horse or in a palanquin – why was he on foot? And where was everyone else? As a warrior-noble king he always had his guards, at least a dozen servants... yet it also seemed so normal. He paced along amid the trees and the winter sunlight – looking just as they had done in the terrain they had been passing through these last few days. He could feel the dusty ground against the soles of his feet and the cool morning breeze stirred the loose white tunic and pantaloons he was wearing.

“I wonder where I left my sword. And why do I feel so light – should I not have my armbands, rings and bracelets? But it does feel delightful here, anyway.”

As he pondered these curious feelings and oddities in his well-regulated world, he rounded a bend and saw a huge banyan beside the road; it was a sacred tree-shine and, kneeling before it, facing the road was a small girl of astonishing beauty. She had large round eyes and radiant golden skin, she was clad in garments of pure white, like his own but she was arrayed like a deva-princess. A diadem sparkled on her brow like sunlight shining through prisms of morning dew. Her necklaces and bracelets, earrings and hand-jewels were all wrought of finest gold and were studded in swirling, knotted patterns with gems of countless hues.

She held something in her hands, raised up to the level of her chin, just as his serving-maids would do when offering him some refreshment or a bauble he might fancy. He drew closer and saw that it was in the shape of a golden wheel. It seemed to fit neatly in the cup of her raised palms yet, at the same time it was huge and was slowly turning.

“How can this be?” His mind groped in the shadowy chambers of reason and memory, “it rests on her hands like a jeweled plate, but it is vast, ten times her size and surely it will crush her as it spins...” But it did not.

The child raised her eyes to meet his own. On her face was a gentle beautiful smile, she was obviously unawed by him and he felt strangely ill-at-ease. “This is for you, if you would like it,” she said, offering up the golden wheel.

“What will it cost me?” the King suspiciously replied.

“It is yours for the taking but, if you cannot give up being driven by pride and anger, hatred, greed and delusion, then it will be as if it was in another world.”

“I’m not sure about the price.”

“The price of what, Messire?”

“What?!” The King’s eyes burst open, fraught and staring for a moment, glancing to every corner round about him.

“What price are you not sure about? You spoke loudly in your sleep, Your Majesty.”

“I what? Oh. Yes.” He blinked to try to shake off the images of the dream but when his eyes were closed, the soft, half-quizzical features of the golden child still hung there. He shook his mane of crow-black hair and breathed deep. Soon the girl faded from his consciousness – gone, yet not completely, like unanswerable question half-remembered.

“I just had a most extraordinary dream. It was not a cauchemar – full of horrors and death – but it was eerie, so vivid.” He was now trying also to remember the name of the concubine who was sharing his couch in the royal pavilion.

It was still before dawn and she drew close to comfort and distract him from the visitation that had disturbed him so much. He also wanted to be comforted, by this girl from his harem, but something about the dream was too compelling. He lay there in the quiet, before the first birds called, and stared at the folds of his silken roof.



Maggot felt very pleased with herself. She had gone off on a food-hunt to find some supplies for them all for breakfast. Bee was guarding the little girl while she slept and Ant had gone to try and trace the missing sister; before they had all parted company it had been agreed that the best plan was to somehow bring the children into the care of some adult humans and see if they could help them find their father in Kosambi. When Maggot had been talking with the old rukkha-deva in the banyan, she had told her that there was news of a party of the royals camped on the road nearby. She had soon tracked them down and then managed to plant some dreams about Amba in the minds of a couple of the people there.

"I just chose the two biggest tents, which also had loads of guards and the most decorations on them. It turned out that one was owned by the King and the other held our friend the Minister, Lord Ghosaka, whose park we live in, in Kosambi. You never know exactly how a dream is going to turn out in someone – it always mixes with their own karma and their own fears and desires – but both of them *should* have seen our little friend here clearly. With a bit of luck that will persuade them to help her out rather than just leave her by the roadside."

"Well done," grunted Bee, "and amidst all of the magic did you manage to conjure up anything to eat?" She was still only half-convinced that they should be getting so mixed up with humans and, despite having the quasi-ethereal kind of body that all kinnari do, she was blessed with a healthy appetite as well.

"Ta-dah!" Maggot unfastened a spider-silk bag from her back and swung it down onto the ground between them. "Half a dozen different fruits for young Amba; *three* large flasks of nectar – one I brought along and two freshly gathered this fair day – *and* several handfuls of pollen, both on the flower and off. What d'you think?"

Bee grinned broadly, "What a busy little Pinkie you have been!"

"Oh shut up! I don't think you deserve any of this if you're going to be like that," said Maggot, passing her one of the flasks.

The dawn was rapidly breaking now and, with the growing light, the riot of birdsong and the banter of the two kinnari, it was not long before Amba stirred and hauled herself up onto her elbows. She looked around, taking in the fact that the new-found friends of the night before were still there and that her mother laid stiff and cold beside her.

She felt uncertain as to what she should do, until Maggot beckoned her over to have some food and Bee moved across to tidy up the wraps around her mother's body. She folded the cloth neatly about the corpse, framing her face and placing some flowers in her hands, now resting together upon her chest.

Amba watched closely as Bee arranged things in this careful and loving way and, when all was complete, she felt at ease to turn away and join Maggot who was preparing food nearby. She had peeled and cut up the various fruits and, using a broad waxy leaf as a plate, had arranged them in a spiral of modulating colours.

"How did you do that?" wondered Amba in amazement – it looked more exotic and splendid than even when her father had held great banquets at their palace, and had hired the greatest cooks of all Avanti.

"Do what?" asked Maggot, puzzled at her wonderment.

"Make such a beautiful pattern; it's like a fairy whirlpool."

"It's just food – this is how we always arrange things – it's nothing special."

Amba was about to ask them if they could teach her how to make such lovely shapes when a glum-faced and breathless Ant arrived at the camp. Even her garments of

kanavera flower-gauze, and the deep red blossoms that adorned her, seemed dim and droopy, woebegone.

“Well, I failed miserably” – her body settled slowly to the ground like frail petals or dandelion down drifting to the forest floor; when she had fully landed she was forlorn and slumped. It took her a moment to shake off the mood.

“The girl left a bit of a trail but it crossed back and forth, hither and yon; I found a few different villages she might have gone to but no reliable sign of her at all, as far as I could tell.

“I thought that I’d better come and let you know so that you wouldn’t be expecting her soon – also it’s near full light now and all the humans are up, and I really don’t like being around crowds of them too much.”

“Why’s that?” asked Amba, surprised since they seemed happy to be with her.

“Well...” began Ant.

“It’s sort of...”

“The fact is...”

“The fact is,” said Bee, diving into the delicate subject, “that to devas most humans stink pretty badly. It’s only the ones who are kind and virtuous that we find bearable – actually you smell very nice.”

“Well, thank you very much!” Amba was unsure whether to feel complimented or offended.

“The King’s tent, where I just was, for all its incense and perfumes, was like a slaughterhouse at the end of a hot market-day, to *my* nose,” said Maggot, “beings in different realms perceive things in very different ways – like the fruits I gave you: to you it was amazing, to me, I thought it was a bit slapdash and that the colours were not balanced... it all depends.”

“Anyway, smells or no, we’ll see if we can find her for you before we have to get back to our homes in Lord Ghosaka’s park.”



While Ant had some breakfast and rested, Bee took a look at Amba’s foot, which had begun to throb noticeably again now that she was up and about. “Nasty,” Bee wrinkled her nostrils in undisguised disgust, “We’re going to need to do some serious doctoring here.”

Amba blanched. “No, don’t be frightened; I may be gruff but I wouldn’t chop your foot off – not unless I had to, anyway.” She smiled warmly and managed to put Amba at her ease. “Maggot, did you see any all-heal around here? I’ll mop this up if you see what you can find.”

Bee poured some water from the gourd into one of the empty nectar flasks and held it in her hand. She closed her eyes for a few moments and the spout began to send forth some fumes. "There we go. Now this will sting a bit while I mop it out." To Amba's surprise the water that Bee swabbed the wound with was quite hot – there was also a sharp pain from something in the flower she used to wipe her foot with.

"Nature's own cleanser," Bee commented, anticipating the question, "very handy for healing hobbling humans."

"You fairies are good at so many things – how did you learn all this even though you're so young? You don't look that much older than me but I hardly know how to do anything."

"For starters," grumbled Bee through her teeth, "if you don't want me to chop your foot off, you'll stop calling us sodding 'fairies' – we are *kinnaris*, can you remember that?" She narrowed her eyes and glared at Amba playfully.

"And, as for our age, you know how Maggot was saying that it's not the same from one realm to another. Well, I am the youngest of us three but I am 98 sun-turnings old, Ant is 103, I believe, and Maggot is a grand old lady of 115 – actually we're all still very young in kinnari terms, our usual life-span is about 1000 sun-turnings."

"What's a 'sun-turning'?"

"You know, the time it takes for the seasons to come back to where they were, so the sun appears in the same place in the sky again."

"So you're 98 years old?!"

"That's right, still a youngster, like you," chortled Bee.

While they had been talking she had been making up a poultice from the leaves and flowers Maggot found for her. She now packed these around the cleansed wound and tied it on tight with some of the spider-silk cloth they had with them. She had just finished with the dressing and had declared Amba fit to walk around, when all of them caught the sound of movement on the road, carried to them on the wind.

Maggot dashed up to the top of the bank, by the ancient banyan, and saw that it was the royal party on its way. There were glittering ranks of cavalry in the front, these were followed by several great elephants and behind them came a phalanx of gaily decked palanquins and gilded carriages. Another guard of horsemen held the rear and on both sides of the richly caparisoned assembly, numerous servants, maids, wagons, bearers and pack-animals completed in the throng.

Atop the lead elephant, seated in the full majesty in his howdah, sat King Udena looking stern.

After waking he had been unable to stop turning his strange dream over and over in his mind so he had had the whole camp roused early and set in motion. When he broke his fast and conferred with Lord Ghosaka, as he often did, he told him of the dream and asked him what he thought it meant.

"I know not what it might mean, Your Majesty, but I will tell you that things are now doubly strange." The King was not easily amused at the best of times but cryptic statements that he failed to follow irked him more than anything. He was about to bark at Ghosaka when the latter called forward his own man-servant, Mitta, "Please recount to His Majesty the dream I told you of this morning – and be a good chap and keep it brief."

"Lord Ghosaka told me, Messire, that he dreamed he was walking down this very road, with bare feet and in plain white clothes when a little girl, all dressed up like a princess and kneeling by the verge, stopped him and gave him a mango."

"Were you listening just now, as I spoke with your master?" The King's eyes grew flinty and cold with an icy fire – he would not be duped.

"Why no, Messire, I was attending to the staff, getting them to hurry up and break camp, just as Your Majesty ordered." His utter openness and freedom from guile, with which the King was familiar, served him well here and the King, against his better (that is, suspicious) nature, decide to believe him. He said no more.



Maggot hurried back down to the others to let them know the King and his party were on their way. "Amba, you just go up and stand by the big old banyan tree there. This man who is coming is King Udena, ruler of Vamsa; Kosambi is the capital city there. The three of us live in a big park owned by the Minister Ghosaka. With a little luck they will stop when they see you by the road and then take you to Kosambi. Quickly now, let's go."

It was all such a flurry that she hardly had time to gather her wits let alone ask why such grand people might stop for her and pick her up; so far on the road she had seen that the richer the traffic, the less likely they were even to acknowledge her family's existence. She limped up the slope and stood on the verge nonetheless, in front of the great tree where she could not be missed.

The grand procession approached. Amba stared with wide-open eyes, enchanted by the flashing colours and the noble mien of the soldiers, the pounding of the great drums and the golden draperies and bright jewels that covered the King's stately elephant. She raised her gaze and met his piercing stare – fierce, yet somehow frightened too, although she would not have named it as such – the contact resonated between the two of them then, without a further thought the King called "Halt!"

He was not, as a proud kshatriya, a warrior-noble king, accustomed to looking behind him but, at this moment he turned fully round and peered into the eyes of the Minister Ghosaka on the next elephant. He raised one eyebrow. Ghosaka flicked his

attention onto the ragged child by the roadside and, returning his look nodded his head almost imperceptibly.



“Down!” Bhaddavatika, the aged and noble elephant, gently bent her four knees and brought the King to the level of the road. He dismounted and beckoned Ghosaka to join him as he went to speak to the little girl. The rest of the royal party were filled with curiosity as to why they might have stopped – the King was not noted for making offerings at spirit-shrines and it certainly could not be anything to do with this beggar-child.

As the two grandly-dressed men approached they could both see, beyond a doubt, that this was the very person they had met in their dreams, although here they were in their finery and she was a ragamuffin, not a deva-princess.

“What’s your name, child, and what brings you all alone to such a place in the wildwood?”

“My name is Amba, Your Majesty” she said, trying to bow like she had done when the King of Avanti had visited their home. The Minister heard her name and a broad smile crept across his face, “So you are the little mango,” he murmured to himself.

“And I’m here because my mother and my sister were trying to see my father who became a monk and we got so far but last night my mum got bit by a snake and she died but we didn’t know it and Tamba that’s my sister she ran to get help ‘cos I’ve got a cut foot but she never came back and then during the night we got attacked by a big yakkha and then three fairies came along and they saved us from getting eaten they were so brave and then this morning they got me fruits for breakfast they had pollen and nectar and one of them who’s really rude but also really nice she fixed my foot and it’s much better now and then they said you were coming Your Majesty and that if I was lucky you’d take me to Kosambi and please can you also help to find my sister ‘cos I think she’s lost and she might be hurt too.” She paused for breath.

“Hmmm...,” said the King thoroughly unimpressed “that’s quite a story, young lady – your mother dying, attacked by a yakkha...”

“But it’s *true*! He was going to bludgeon us all to death, the fairies too, and he was going to eat us.”

“Ahem,” interrupted Ghosaka, “It’s true, *Your Majesty*.”

“Sorry,” Amba corrected herself, “It’s true, *Your Majesty*. If you don’t believe me you can see, my mother’s body is just over there, by the stream. And the fairies, err, kinnari are right here,” she indicated the three of them, beside the old tree; they all paid their respects to the King but he looked furrow-browed and seemed to stare around or

through them. He nevertheless sent some soldiers down the path where they soon found Sita's body and then brought it up to lie beside the road.

"Well, I'm not usually in the habit of rescuing lost waifs but it seems that you spoke the truth about your mother, and you will certainly come to grief if we leave you here. You have my permission to join us – Ghosaka, see that she's taken care of."

"Certainly, Messire," he then caught the glance of the King which he knew meant he had just recollected the dream again; he guessed the King's train of thought and asked, "Child, did your mother not have any jewellery or precious things she was carrying – she is quite bereft of decoration now. Were things hidden, or stolen from you perhaps?"

"No, Your Lordship, she only had a few jewels but she had to sell everything just so that we could have some food."

Lord Ghosaka had no clear idea of what the golden wheel, inexorably turning, might have meant – it seemingly hadn't been referring to ordinary jewellery – he had the strange intuition that this element had been the most significant feature of the King's dream yet he could not put a finger on any reason why this should be so.

He looked toward King Udena, who merely raised a part of his upper lip in one of his various types of sneer. He directed the men to make a bier to carry Sita on and called Mitta over to take charge of the new addition to the household. The King was striding away to remount his elephant when Amba, suddenly recalling her sister's plight, cried out, "Your Majesty, Sire, what about Tamba, my sister, she's lost in the forest somewhere. We can't leave without her!"

Turning around for the second time that morning, with a mixture of wry amusement and vexed impatience he replied, "Surprising as it may be to you, young lady, we, as a monarch wielding absolute power, are not in the habit of receiving orders from small urchins, regardless of their ability to tell tall tales." To his own surprise, however, he ordered the captain of the guard to send out a small search party but he also directed that they were to join the main group within the hour, whether or not they found the girl.

"The royal progress is not to be delayed. The guard will seek her and, if she can be found, they will bring her to us. Have no fear."

CHAPTER 6

THE FIRE



Amba watched silently, her tears running as the men gently lifted her mother's body onto the litter that they had crafted from bamboo poles. They had cut these nearby, binding the lengths together with slender vines.

"The men will carry her for a while," said Mitta quietly, "there's a charnel ground out beyond the next village, a league or so up ahead, and when we reach there we'll... we'll have a ceremony for her." He couldn't quite bring himself to say, "We'll burn the body," but Amba was smart enough to know what he meant.

"I hope that the other soldiers will have found Tamba by then, we should both be together when we say goodbye to mum." Mitta's large round eyes wrinkled in his equally round face; he smiled at her with affection and a pang of sadness. A wave of warmth washed through him for this kind and serious little foundling.

"Well, young lady, we'll just have to wait and see what the future brings." He wanted to be encouraging and to provide some fatherly reassurance, however in his gut he felt a ripple of dread – knowing the dangers of the forest and its denizens; four-legged, two legged, no-legged and many-legged – he did not hold out much hope for this gentle little girl's younger sister. Even in the light of Amba's vaunting the resourcefulness and grit that Tamba possessed, Mitta didn't want to think about what might have become of her, alone in the woods on a cold-season night.

As the platoon of troops shouldered the bier upon which Sita's stiffened corpse lay spread, Mitta hoisted himself, huffing noisily, into the back of a wagon. His years of service in a wealthy household, in a prosperous kingdom, had rendered his girth expansive. He now leaned over the bulk of his paunch and stretched an arm down to

Amba. She was just reaching up to grasp his hand when she felt a firm grip clamp her beneath both arms and hoist her swiftly from the ground. She was plumped down on the heap of cushions that formed a cozy lining to the wagon's interior. As she

caught her breath she turned to see a dark and shining face smiling at her broadly and fixing her with fiercely piercing eyes.

“Get in, Khujjuttara,” Mitta said, addressing the bright-eyed girl, “I’m going to need your help in looking after our new charge here. My wife Sundari and I have raised a lot of children but I’m out of practice with small ones. Besides, she’s back in Kosambi and you’re the only woman of Master Ghosaka’s staff here.”

The dark girl clambered clumsily into the back of the vehicle and crawled over the rugs and cushions to seat herself beside Amba and opposite her boss. As she settled and organized a comfy spot for herself, Amba realized that the young woman was hunchbacked, her upper body seemingly twisted in what looked an uncomfortable way.

“Well, young miss, you’ve done me a real favour here,” the new arrival said, in a rich country accent, “the likes of me, being a slave *and* crook-backed and all, we *never* get to ride with the nobs, not usually.” She laughed gleefully at her own observation, tickled by the absurdity of things, and flashed a guileless smile at both Amba and her high and mighty governor.

“Don’t you listen to her,” said Mitta, “Khujjuttara is *supposed* to be the humblest of slaves in this household but she knows exactly what’s going on in the minds of everyone around her and, even though Lord Ghosaka is the Minister of Finance for the kingdom of Vamsa, I have a suspicion that she understands the ins and outs of business and taxation, production and consumption better even than he does – when he thinks no one is looking,” he confided to Amba in a stage whisper – “he frequently asks her what she thinks about this or that policy, or what to do about such-and-such a debt from abroad. I don’t know how she does it – the girl can’t even read!”

“I just go to the market and keep my eyes and ears open. You don’t have to be that clever to see what’s selling and what isn’t, and why.” She winked at Amba, conspiratorially.

“She also remembers all the prices things were and compares them to what they are now; *and* she recalls all the conversations she has with the traders, and what they promised in the past... This girl is quite an asset.”

“You hear that?” She nudged Amba in the ribs, “You’re sat next to an asset, you are.” She chuckled at her own joke and wrapped her arm, ungainly but loving, around Amba’s thin and thread-bare shoulders.



As the regal procession made its way through the countryside, Mitta the chamberlain and Khujjuttara the slave-girl did their best to take Amba’s mind of her current sorrows and her anxiety about whether the soldiers would manage to find her

sister, or not. Khujjuttara had managed to get her to recount in great detail all the events of the night that had just passed as well as a lot of the history of the family and why she and her mother and sister had been alone on the road to Kosambi.

“So you really got to meet some kinnaris, eh? That must’ve been a treat – are they still around?” Amba was very pleased that at least one person seemed to believe her story about meeting the three beautiful sylphs. “Well, I’m not sure if they’re nearby but I certainly can’t see them close to us now. I think that’s understandable, though,” She said in her serious and thoughtful way.

“Why’s that then?” inquired her new friend.

“Well, it’s not very nice to say but they told me they didn’t like to be around humans very much because a lot of us smell very nasty to them; especially the ones who behave badly – they really stink...”

“I like that!” erupted Khujjuttara, highly amused at Amba’s description. “I think that makes a lot of sense, if you ask me.”

“Have you ever seen them?” asked Amba. “You know, fairies, I mean kinnaris and spirits, yakkhas and devas and those sort of things?”

“To be honest, I’m not all that sure. Sometimes, out the corner of my eye I think I see something moving and then it’s gone; or a glimmer of bright colour; or, y’know, when a few leaves rustle on a bush and all the rest is still, it feels like something or someone’s there. But I’ve never seen them properly like you did, not to have a regular conversation, like. You and your sister must be real special.” Khujjuttara paused, realizing she’d unwittingly brought the conversation round to Tamba once again.

Mitta had assured Amba that, once the soldiers of the King’s detachment had found her sister, they would catch up with them very easily, as they could travel much faster on horseback than the whole caravan of elephants and wagons, palanquins and foot-soldiers could. Amba’s eyes kept searching the road behind them, looking for signs of the approaching troops but nothing appeared as all the hours of the morning came and went.



Even though this was the cold-season, and only just past the shortest day and longest night, still the power of the sun in the open sky was great. The burning light sucked moisture from the forest and the fields around them, rendering the air tangy with humidity and the pungent aromas of fuming earth.

The sun reached its zenith just as the King and his cavalcade passed through the main street of the humble village that was the next area of human habitation along the high-road. The locals knelt in awe by the roadside their hands pressed together in añjali,

or they hid in their shacks and houses as the glorious apparition of the convoy flashed and flowed before them in the midday heat.

Beyond the limits of the village, three or four bow-shots past the last of the homesteads, a well-worn track into the forest opened up on their right, which was the south-eastern side of the road. Not far into the woods there was a broad glade, grassy and open at the centre and rimmed with full-leafed, shady trees. At the far end of the clearing the track continued, soon curving round the left and disappearing from view.

The captain of the King's guard loudly called a halt as the end of the train of people and animals entered the open space. In a well-practised series of manoeuvres, a collection of portable pavilions and shade structures, mats, cushions and a low throne for His Majesty were dispersed around the area beneath the trees. A gentle murmur of instruction and discussion filtered amongst the members of the royal household as all the regular arrangements were set in place.

Amba watched the whole performance with great fascination: the burly soldiers with their weapons and helmets; Her Serene Highness Queen Vasuladatta and the other jewel-bedecked queens and grand ladies of the court; the dignified courtiers and ministers of state; the scurrying cooks and servants; the chattering maids; the great grey elephants and their glittering howdahs, draped with embroidered baldachins; the snorting oxen, moist in the heat of noon, glad now to be free of their yokes to graze the open meadow for a while – it was a magical scene. Amba had got so used to the hardships of the road, to being thrilled at the most modest of comforts and at anything at all to go with their daily rice, that for a moment she was breathless with wonder at the enticing aromas of the food that was being prepared and the sight of all that now surrounded her.

The spell was broken as she saw the clutch of soldiers, who had been bearing her mother's body all morning, making their way with the litter to the path that led out beyond the grove where they had halted. During the journey thus far the body had been carried, out of respect for the dead, close to the front of the procession, just after the elephants of King Udena and the queens. Amba had not been able to see it, as the wagon she had been in was closer to the rear, among the yeomanry and staff of the court households.

She saw Mitta conferring with his employer, the Treasurer, Lord Ghosaka, as well as with a brahmin priest whose protuberant belly – exceeding even Mitta's in circumference by a noticeable degree – stood out proudly over his dhoti and was matched in its glossy rotundity by his gleaming, freshly-shaven pate.

The priest did not look happy or the bit least holy, come to that; nevertheless she quickly guessed that he was being asked to perform the funeral rites for her mother, Sita. He seemed to be finally agreeing, after much persuasion by word and gesticulation of the Minister and his chamberlain, and just as it was clear that things had been

decided upon, Amba heard Khujjuttara say, "Looks like the grand poo-bahs have got themselves sorted at last – let's go and find out what's up."

Khujjuttara heaved herself off the tail of the vehicle, in her own form of clumsy exactitude, and pivoted round to help Amba down in turn. Mitta came up to them and beckoned Amba to his side. "The men are going to carry your mother's body to the burning ground, just around the corner there. They will gather the fuel they need from the forest and make a proper pyre for her. The er...holy priest of His Majesty, Rev. Maha-Baka, has kindly offered to recite the scriptures and the sacred verses for Lady Sita – you need have no fear that things will not be done properly and according to custom. His Majesty, King Udena was insistent," and here Mitta's face formed an expression which mixed equal measures of appreciation and surprise, "that your mother be treated as if she had been of a noble house of Vamsa and that you be cared for as if you too were an honoured daughter of the court. He's taken quite a shine to you – and that's rare, let me tell you – it must be something to do with a strange dream that he had this morning. It affected him very strongly; I'll tell you about it later."

Now that they had stopped for a break and were all going to rest here, to wait out the heat of the day, Amba felt sure that this would give the soldiers who had been looking for Tamba plenty of time to catch up with them. Her eyes kept straying to the gap in the trees that led to the main road – ever expectant, but catching movements that always turned out to be a branch waving in the wind, or a troop of langurs leaping through the foliage.

Khujjuttara prepared them some food while the firewood was being gathered by the men. At first Amba was not interested in eating – she was far too anxious for that – but her new friend managed to coax her into accepting a mouthful or two and, once the flavours sparked upon her tongue, her belly growled with approval. She was ravenous, for, apart from the fruits that she had begun the day with, provide by her ethereal friends, the kinnaris, she had not had a decent meal for days, even weeks.

Just as they were finishing the last of their lunch, a troop of cavalry rounded the turn from the highroad. Amba's heart leaped and she ran to see if any of the men had the slight and tawny figure of Tamba on the horse with them. Her eyes flicked from each to each but her sister was not there.

"She was nowhere to be found, Captain," their leader spoke, above the puffing and snorting of his horse. "We searched high and low, and every village round there – not a sign. If she was there, well, now she's vanished."



Khujjuttara came up behind her, put her hands on Amba's shoulders and said, "Come on young miss, we've got to get ourselves ready for the ceremony." She turned

Amba around, forcing her gaze away from the soldiers and away from the hope that they had carried.

“Can’t go to a funeral with grubby threads on, now can we?” she carried on, “now let’s take a look and see what we got in the baggage.” She hustled Amba along to another of the wagons, in which many of the household stores of the Minister Ghosaka were being carried.

“I’ve got my bundle in here somewhere, and we should be able to find something nice ‘n clean for you too.”

Before long the two of them were skirted and draped with fresh sarongs and shoulder-wraps (Amba’s folded double as she was so small for adult sized apparel) and Khujjuttara had managed to cajole some beautiful flower garlands and incense from some friends among the ranks of servants in King Udena’s retinue. Queen Vasuladatta – with whom King Udena had eloped from her father’s palace in Ujjeni many years before – was amongst the caravan and she had brought with her many ladies-in-waiting and maids. The royal concubines also had their own clusters of slaves and helpers so, even just on this journey, Khujjuttara had managed to make some new friends, strengthen connections and to earn a few favours among them.

They rejoined Mitta and the huffy priest and made their way to the lane that led beyond the main clearing. It made a few twists through the forest and then opened out once more but, whereas the place where the party had set up to eat lunch and rest for the noon-day heat had been a charming and peaceful space, this area had a stark and threatening feel to it. Despite the bright light and warmth of the sun, Amba shivered.

They had built a pyre at the centre of the clearing, a spot that had plainly been the site of many cremations in the past. The ground was bare and baked all around; charred butts of firewood were scattered here and there; families of crows sat perched on the high snags of trees that had long-since died. No one was interested in gathering wood or cutting down anything in a charnel ground, who knew what spiteful spirits and ghosts would come along with the timber?

Sita’s body had been wrapped in a fresh white muslin sheet, with the sarong she had been wearing and Amba’s old shawl arranged neatly around her. She lay without a coffin on the top of a rectangular stack of logs that had been piled up by one of the elder soldiers; they had no official ‘aggi-rajā,’ a pyre-chieftain with them so he had been seconded to the job.

Mitta had arranged for some of the court women to dress Sita and to arrange garlands of fresh flowers all about the bamboo bier. One or two of these ladies now accompanied them, having taken care of the body and heard something of the story – that Sita had been the wife of the great merchant Kamanita of Ujjeni and now, having fallen on hard times, had been slain by the deadly bite of a banded krait – they stood by young Amba and beside the stout form of the chamberlain as the priest now stepped forward to begin the obsequies. Khujjuttara dropped to the back.

The portly priest, sweat gleaming on the bare skin of his brow, put his hands, palms together at his chest and began to recite at high speed what must have been verses of the Antyeshti, the sacred Sanskrit texts for the dead. It was scarcely possible to distinguish one word from another as the stream of lilting verbiage murmured forth.

“Dear departed! After death may the power of your sight be absorbed in the sun your soul in the atmosphere may you go to the luminous region or the earth according to your religious merit or go to the waters if it be your lot or to the plants assuming different bodies...”

“Incense and flowers! Come on girl! Make your offerings – my goodness, people don’t know anything these days,” he barked, his face now liberally bedewed with perspiration. “Hurry up, hurry up! We haven’t got all day.”

Amba stepped forward gingerly but was not sure where she was supposed to place the mala of blossoms and the incense sticks that were smoking with a sweet and heady fragrance in her hands. She glanced back at her dark friend, the slave, who, along with the two elder women who had joined them, pointed to end of the pyre where her mother’s head rested.

She scurried forward, as did the two maids and finally Mitta; Khujjuttara, it seemed, was not allowed to come near. The impatient priest then launched into another bout of accelerated recitation, sprinkling the pile of wood and Sita with some kind of holy water, walking round it anti-sunwise as he went.

On completing his third lap he flung the remaining water over the body – increasing his volume at this peak of the preliminaries – roughly took hold of the clothes enfolding Sita’s body, tugged them all off with a grunt of exertion and held them out behind him disdainfully at arm’s length. Fortunately one of the women, a brahmin lady by birth, had the presence of mind to step up and relieve the priest of this obviously (to him) distasteful burden. She deftly bundled these together as she stepped back from the stack of timber. The priest, now moving onto the next phase, reached for the burning oil lamp that he had brought with him.

With increasing speed of delivery and a matching slur of words, he raised the lamp to his forehead. Suddenly he stopped reciting with an abruptness that startled them all, as if he had been riding a charging elephant and it had gone from a full gallop to a dead stop in a heart-beat. He turned toward the small group:

“Come on girl, do your job – there is no son so it’s you who has to light the pyre.” This was the last thing Amba expected and she winced visibly at the idea. Nevertheless the sheer force of the priest’s demand and the need of the moment carried her feet forward. She took the small brass torch containing the bud of fire, then forcefully thrust the flame into the tuft of oil-soaked rags that lined the lower layer of the wood-pile.

“Om Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!” He pronounced the final invocation with great precision and perfect vowel sounds – drawing the ceremony to a close. He brushed his hands off, turned his back and strode away.

“I don’t think he’s accustomed to doing funerals without a fat tip from the deceased’s family, even though His Majesty did already reward him for taking care of this,” remarked Mitta.

“I think he’s upset ‘cos he had to wait ‘til the funeral was done before he could have his lunch,” countered Khujjuttara, although both of them could have been right. The two senior maids who had become part of the group now also excused themselves and left Amba, Mitta and Khujjuttara by the growing fire. Amba held on tightly to the pieces of cloth that had been worn by her mother, the last vestiges that she had of anything that been close to her.



The flames climbed rapidly up through the stacked branches, the whole assembly held in place by four stout pillars, one on each corner. Amba’s tears ran freely as the heat grew; the fire began to roar and the three of them had to stand back from the blaze.

She stared at her mother lying there, so still, when she had always been so active and in control; and clad now only in a single layer of plain cloth, to preserve her modesty, when she had always been so proud of her jewels and fine silks when they had lived in the palace in Ujjeni.

Part of her kept half-expecting her mother to suddenly sit up and jump off the heap; she half-expected too that Tamba might appear at this last moment, she looked behind her again and again to see if her resilient little sister would come charging around the corner... but no... Sita lay there implacably as the flames licked ever higher and wrapped her static form – the shell that she had once been – and Tamba was nowhere to be seen.

The sound and raging power of the blaze filled Amba’s senses. The leaping sheets of fire sprang and surged while the wood and the body they fed on made small and gentle shifts – stiff limbs reacting mutedly to the fury and roar around them. She became transfixed and a strange mixture of moods washed through her being: there was the terrible ache of sadness at the loss of her mother and the brutality of the flames; there was an odd exaltation and sense of power and with it an eerie feeling that she stood not in this charnel ground on the Kosambi road, but by the River Ganga near Varanasi, and that there was a man, some kind of yogi who sat amid the flames; then it was she who was surrounded by a wall of fire and though around her there were those

in deep distress, who screamed and wailed, she was not afraid, not even excited – her skin burned but she felt cool, so very cool...

“Is it always so sad for everyone?” She asked Khujjuttara.

“Not everyone; not all the time,” she replied. She took hold of Amba’s hand, closed her eyes and recited:

*“Man quits his mortal frame,
when joy in life is past,
E’en as a snake is wont its
worn out slough to cast.*

*No friend’s lament can touch
the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares
the way he had to tread.”*

“Where did you learn that from?” asked Amba.

“Don’t rightly know, to be honest, but I remember it from somewhere.”

“What does it mean? It seems odd... I never thought of things that way before.”

“But it’s true isn’t it? Everything that gets born has to die someday. Everything that has come together has to fall apart – stands to reason, doesn’t it? Can you think of anything that has a beginning and no end? I can’t.”

Amba couldn’t bring anything to mind – but then she didn’t try very hard, her mind was not in the mood for puzzles.

“It’s very sad you lost yer mum, and who knows where your sister’s got to, but, if you think about it, we’ve all got to go some time so, why get upset? –it’s only Mother Nature following her way:

*Uncalled he hither came,
unbidden soon to go;
E’en as he came, he went. What
cause is there for woe?*

*Though I should fast and weep,
how would it profit me?
My kith and kin alas! Would
more unhappy be.*

*As children cry in vain, to grasp
the moon above,*

*So mortals idly mourn, the loss
of those they love.*

*As broken pot of earth, ah! Who
can piece again?
So too to mourn the dead is
nought but labour vain.*

*No friend's lament can touch
the ashes of the dead:
Why should I grieve? He fares the
way he had to tread.*

Khujjuttara grew silent too, after reciting the final verse. She searched her memory to recall where she had learned those words of wisdom but it escaped her—unusually, as she had prodigious powers of recollection.

The strength of the consuming heat soon reached its peak and Sita's body was swallowed completely into the jaws of flame. It began to be hard to tell what were her limbs and what were branches; what might be her skull and what was a glowing burl. They felt the pressure of the temperature from the pyre and the sun that burned ever hotter overhead, now that it was early afternoon. Mitta put his hand on Amba's crown.

"Come, little friend, let's put all that cloth up in the branches of a tree so that some wanderers who might be in need can help themselves." For most people the cloth that had wrapped a corpse was taboo to use, or at least filled with the threat of being a vehicle for a restless spirit. Religious seekers and yogis, however, were outside of such constraints and concerns, so 'forest cloth' from such funerals as this was a regular source of what material they might need for their meagre robes.

They chose the nicest tree they could find in this unsettling, spooky place and carefully placed the small bundle of white and coloured cloth – the funeral shroud, Sita's old sari and Amba's own wrap – in the fork of a branch, easily seen from the central area of the burning ground.



As the three of them rejoined the larger group, they found everyone mobilizing – packing up the mats and awnings, tightening girths and re-yoking the oxen. Soon they were on the road again.

The following two days of travel brought them ever closer to Kosambi and down into the valley of the great River Yamuna. Khujjuttara did a grand job of keeping her young friend occupied with tales and discussions of a bewildering variety.

“You know so much about *everything*,” exclaimed Amba, after a particularly erudite exposition by Khujjuttara on how it was that birds could fly and little girls couldn’t, “you are going to be a great and famous woman one day!”

“I don’t think so, dearie,” she chuckled and grinned showing most of her gleaming teeth. “Three reasons: reason #1, I’m a slave and the property, just like that there ox and this here wagon, of the good Master Ghosaka; to be disposed of as *he* chooses, not *me*; reason #2, I’m a crookback – that’s where I got my name from, ‘*khujja*’ meaning ‘crooked’ – can’t hardly sit straight and I’m a bit lop-legged too, so walking isn’t that easy either; now what kind of a grand lady is going to have a gimpy body like this one?”

“Reason #3 is this,” she thrust out her right arm in front of Amba, who was flummoxed for a moment as to what the slave-girl meant.

“What’s wrong with your arm?” she finally asked, quite unable to guess what Khujjuttara was driving at.

“It isn’t my arm that’s the problem, girlie, it’s my skin – look! I’m as dark as monsoon mud – all the great and famous are fair-skinned or golden – like you are.”

“That’s not true. My little brother is much darker than you and the brahmin priest predicted he would become rich and powerful or maybe even a saint. His proper name is Komudi – white lotus – but he’s always been called Krishna ‘cos he’s as dark as the great god himself. He’s *really* black.

“So if he and the god Krishna, and all kinds of other famous people can be so dark and become great and powerful, I’m sure that you could too.” And, thoroughly pleased with her logic, Amba decided to remain convinced that her new-found friend, despite her many set-backs, would have her greatness recognized one day.



The last leagues rolled away beneath their wheels and soon they were with sight of the sparkling river and the towering walls of the city of Kosambi, ranked along the eastern bank of the Yamuna. Over these days she had become more at ease in the company of Mitta and Khujjuttara and they, in turn, had grown to love the sincere and kind, serious little child. She had also impressed the King’s physician with the rapid healing of the wound in her foot; only a couple of days previously it had seemed angry and painful, and it had caused her to limp and hobble around, now there was a distinct mark on her sole where the cut had been but the skin had knitted together well and there was no inflammation or infection.

“Well, well, well – young lady, you must be favoured by the gods indeed, I never saw a wound like this heal so swiftly and so thoroughly.”

“It wasn’t the gods, it was the fairies... I mean the kinnaris – they are the ones who fixed it, I told you before.”

“Humm, yers, well... very good...” the doctor mumbled, feeling it would not be very useful to argue the point. “Have it your own way. But whatever has done the trick, it has worked well. You, young lady, are as right as rain.”

Amba noticed both Mitta and Khujjuttara looking on with an expression of condescending indulgence on their faces; a look that said: “Yes, little girls will have their fantasies...” Catching them in this she set her small jaw and glared at them, “I wasn’t fibbing and you shouldn’t look at me like that. It’s true what I said about them, and the yakkha, one day you’ll see I’m right.”

The two adults found themselves surprisingly chastened and Mitta even realized he was blushing. They apologized for not taking her seriously and passed the remainder of the journey peacefully together.

When the royal party finally reached the river bank, they were soon ferried across and ushered inside the city gates. Amba looked eagerly around her as their wagon rolled along the rutted lanes to the Minister’s grand compound. Mitta took her hand and helped her down as they entered the courtyard of his house.

A bevy of servants appeared to look after the oxen, unload the bags and to receive their master home. Through the doorway also appeared Sundari, Mitta’s wife of almost 40 years.

“I’ve got a surprise for you,” he said to her, with a broad smile, “a little something that I picked up along the way.” Her curiosity was piqued. He brought Amba forward, his hand cradling her head, “Don’t be shy. My love, this is Amba; she’s an orphan. I think we should adopt her as our child.”

CHAPTER 7

A PEACEFUL PALACE



Savitri was content. Her little boy Krishna was growing up fast. He had now reached seven Rains and his formal education was just beginning; she had engaged a brahmin pundit, knowledgeable in literature and grammar, to teach him his letters and a skilled bookkeeper of their own vaisha caste, the merchants, to introduce him to the mystery of numbers and calculation.

The way he was now – his big and keen eyes fixed on the large slate where the mathematician had written up the number symbols, his brow furrowed and tongue poking out in concentration – was a far cry from the lonely and taciturn child he had been when his half-sisters and their mother had first departed.

That was nigh on three years ago now. At first Krishna had been desperately lonely. Even though Savitri had repeatedly been on the receiving end of the rough tongue of Sita for allowing Krishna to play with her daughters, it had made him so happy she had never had the heart to deny him this indulgence. In fact it was hard for her to deny him any indulgence; whenever he asked for anything or indeed had helped himself and had been caught in the act, he only had to look at her with those big, would-be-innocent eyes and smile with that apologetic yet unrepentant grin and, just like the god Krishna's own mother, her heart would melt and she would, once again, forgive all and allow him what he wished for. Even that famous time with the jar of sweet buttermilk:

"What *do* you think you're doing?" Savitri had barked, aghast at the sight of her son with one arm wrapped around the big earthenware vessel and the other buried deep inside it, his face smeared across both cheeks with the golden, creamy honey-sweet nectar from the pot.

"Nana told me the story."

"What story?"

“About Lord Krishna and the buttermilk.”

“And so...?”

“So I asked her, ‘What’s so special about buttermilk that the baby god Krishna would want to steal it?’ ‘Oh’ she says, ‘buttermilk can be *very* delicious, especially the way that Krishna’s mother prepared it. But I don’t think that it could have been half as good as Ujjeni buttermilk.’

“‘Why’s that?’ I asked her and she said, ‘Why, ‘cos Ujjeni’s got the best of everything and you live in the biggest and best house in it.’ So I asked her if the buttermilk that we had was the best and she said, ‘Best?! It’s the *best* of the best.’ So I came hunting here in the cool-room to see if I could find it – it *is* very good. Do you want some? There’s a bit left.”

A smile came to Savitri’s face at the memory. What could you say? The little imp was the centre of the universe but it never seemed to go to his head – that was one of the reasons that everyone seemed to like him. He had a natural majesty and confidence but he was never conceited or selfish.



Once Sita and her daughters had gone the atmosphere at Kamanita’s palace had become much more relaxed and easeful for everyone. The constant tension and imminent threat of argument between the two wives had evaporated. With the clearing of the air, local friends of Kamanita began to drop in to visit once more, especially those who had been friends of Savitri, as well as her own family for she too had grown up in fair Ujjeni.

Life became calm and steady and then, as the weeks and months went by and the rainy season gave way to clear skies and cool winds from the mighty Himalayan mountain ranges in the north, Krishna began to leave his quiet sadness aside. He played with the twins, Khamba and Khina, and the other children of the estate – those of the cook and the gardener – as well as the sons and daughters of the families that came to call on Lady Savitri. At times he seemed to have forgotten his two half-sisters, now gone who knows where, but occasionally the memory of them would rise up and his eyes would dew with tears.

One cold-season afternoon, he and the twins decided to have another round of off-ground He, the tagging game that they had been playing when the great argument had started all those months ago. They formed into a small circle of three, and Krishna began the rhyme that he and his sisters had always used when starting one of these games.

*“Amba, Tamba, Krishna too,
the one who will be He is YOU!”*

He counted the three of them off word by word but, when he reached the end of the rhyme, with his finger pointing at Khamba, instead of dodging immediately out of reach he stood there frozen as a hollow sob rose up and choked him.

“Are you all right?” The twins asked in unison.

By way of reply Krishna turned his back and surreptitiously tried to wipe his eyes. He then dashed off alone leaving the girls standing in the courtyard not quite sure what to do.



As he grew the initial suspicions and gossip about his ancestry began to dissipate. The cast of his features, particularly his large and beautiful eyes, were so like Kamanita's, and also his half-sister Amba's, that almost all who had known his father remarked on this. There was also a little wrinkle on the right side of his upper lip that matched one his father had perfectly – there really could not be any more doubt about his parentage.

This confirmation helped to settle in everyone's mind that Savitri was the bona fide lady of the house and Krishna was the true heir to Kamanita's great wealth and property. Also the boy was *so* black – far more so than anyone around, even the travelers from Kalinga and the Tamil lands of the far south – that his inky darkness became regarded by some as some sort of miraculous sign, rather than a social hindrance that also betrayed his mother's infidelity. Besides, everyone knew, in legend if not in life, of examples of the sudden appearance of a child of darker or lighter complexion than their parents.

Savitri settled into the role of the gracious lady of the manor and her character – which had become fiery and abrasive in the face of the conflict with her nemesis Sita – reverted to being mild and loving once again. She began to embody the sunbeam which was the meaning of her name, rather than the searing torch she once had been.

There was a regret in her heart that she had had only been given the opportunity to produce the first one of the 'five heroic sons' she had been prophesied to bear. Nevertheless, as these years had gone by, she had grown to love her single son wholeheartedly and not begrudge the absence of his brothers who would never now be born. She had even acquiesced to calling him Krishna, as everyone did, and not to try to keep using the name Komudi. She loved his eerie blue-black skin, his open and innocent manner, and she could even forgive him the incessant stream of pranks he played and mischief he got himself into, as he seemed almost determined to mimic the misdeeds of the great god, down to the finest detail.

As the wife of a man who had become a sanyasin, she was an 'ochre widow' – she could not remarry yet she would never see the man who had been her husband ever again – so her life had a lonely tinge. She contented herself, however, with the many details of running the great household and with her new task of educating her boy.

She had come from a much more humble background than this. She had been chosen as a wife for the great merchant Kamanita for her physical attributes that indicated she would bear him sons: 'a navel which sits deep and is turned to the right; both hands and feet bearing lotus, urn and wheel marks; hair that is smooth, except for on the neck where there are two whorls circling to the right.' Nevertheless, despite her modest upbringing, by now she had learned the part well and played it with ease. It was a good and comfortable, peaceful life; she could even exert all the pressure necessary on the house steward Kolita, to run everything exactly as she wanted, although he was technically still in charge until the boy grew to manhood.

She was well-contented with it all – everything had turned out far better than she could ever have hoped for – and then one day a ragged stranger appeared at the gate.

CHAPTER 8

THE UNSHAVEN MONK



Despite it being only an hour or two after sunrise, the day was already hot. Krishna had been playing with the gardener's son, seeing who could climb highest in the tangle of branches and aerial roots that spread up and out from the trunk of the great banyan tree at the end of the lawn. Soon he came panting and blowing into the shade of the veranda and headed straight for the water jar.

His mother sat deeper into the coolness of the flag-stoned patio on a mat strewn with some comfortable cushions. She and a couple of the maids had been watching the boys as they had scrambled and heaved their way from branch to branch; motherly concern mixed with its frequent companion – pride and delight at the untrammelled zest of the young.

"I am gasping!" Krishna exclaimed.

"I'm not surprised," Savitri responded, looking up from the embroidery she was half-heartedly attempting to finish. "You've been hurtling up and down the garden and clambering around in that tree non-stop for the last hour, and the day is roasting already."

Krishna had immersed the dipper, made of half a coconut shell on a handle, into the cool earthenware jar. He closed his eyes as he raised the cup to his mouth and was just about to pour in the delicious cooling water, when the air of the garden was jarred by a thunderous sound.

THWHOOOM! THWHOOOM! THWHOOOM!

His heart leapt with a sudden fierce excitement but his mother's face was wrung with an equally immediate anxiety.

"What's that noise?"

"Someone at the gate, I think, madam," answered the maid, not seemingly so bothered by its intensity and, to Savitri, its ominous boom.

"I wonder who it is." Krishna dropped the water scoop, forgetting his thirst and dashed out into the bright light of the morning once again. He ran at full speed around the corner of the grand house, through another colonnade beside a fountain and to the main gate of the compound. He found the family custodian, Kuvera (named after the Heavenly King who was the Guardian of the North and ruler of the yakkhas), doing his best to see the visitor off.

"Go on, get out of here, we have no need of your type around these parts. There's nothing you've got that the mistress might want and nothing she has that she'll want to part with for the likes of you." Kuvera had straightened his back and was filling the open gateway with his bulky form – as his Master, the great merchant Kamanita, had taken off five years ago, and what with the chamberlain Kolita being a bit on the old and frail side, he, Kuvera, was now having to play the part of protector of the household more and more.

"Who is it, Kuvera?" Krishna heard the voice of his mother over his shoulder.

"Just some scruffy n'er-do-well, ma'am – probably looking for a handout, don't you worry, ma'am, I'll set the dogs on him if he doesn't listen to reason." At this Kuvera turned to summon his two faithful hounds but, to his dismay, they were wagging their tails vigorously and were busy sniffing the hand of the ragged stranger and touching noses with the hairy little dog that stood by the newcomer's ankles.

Savitri came to the opening with Krishna and looked the visitor up and down. He was a strange sight; his long straggly hair was wound into a rough top knot and pinned in place by a pair of gnarly twigs. His face was weather-beaten, a bit scabby and laced with a network of wrinkles. His eyes were warm and bright, and seemed to convey three or four expressions simultaneously: the weariness of many ages, the restless mirth of a jester, the kindness of an all-forgiving grandmother and the cool wisdom of an enlightened sage – Savitri was very frightened.

Krishna stood there transfixed by this mysterious figure. As he looked up into this strange man's face he couldn't help but to be struck by the round bone earrings that hung from his lobes and the curious collection of patched rags that he was clothed with. He was leaning on a staff and Krishna could also now see that the man's right foot was badly lamed. The hairy dog – its coat as dust-laden from the hot-season roads as were the locks and robes of its companion – now trotted over to Krishna and began to make his acquaintance.



Savitri thought quickly; the last time a monk had come to their gate seeking for alms (or so it had seemed), she and Kamanita's other wife Sita had rounded on him and scolded him and had tried to shoo him away. Their husband had intervened, at first

wishing to offer him food, as is the custom of some people, to support those whom they considered holy spiritual seekers. To their horror it had turned out that that shaven-headed recluse had been, in fact, the gruesome bandit and merciless killer Angulimala in disguise. He had come only to threaten her husband with an attack on this palace but – for some unknown reason – the gods had protected them and the attack had never come. Nevertheless that night had brought perhaps an even worse disaster in that – again for some reason unbeknownst to anyone – her husband had decided to take up the life of a renunciant himself and had left her and the family.

Since then she had harboured a dread of all such people – holy men, ascetics, nuns and wanderers of every stripe. She did not trust them but she was also afraid of what they might do to her and her child if they were displeased. She even wondered momentarily if this might not be the evil brigand himself returned to complete his unfinished business, now wearing an even more ingenious disguise.

She decided to be cautious but brave, and asked him, “What do you want, Venerable Sir? How may we serve you?”

“Good morning, madam,” he spoke with a gravelly voice, in an accent that was definitely foreign but from where neither Savitri nor Krishna could say. “I’d like to come in and talk to you. I have messages for you and the boy.”

At this point he looked Krishna full in the face for the first time. Something in Krishna’s heart sang as their eyes met and he grinned up at his mother. She, far from returning his approving look, instead winced but, with a wag of her head and placing her palms together, invited the wanderer in.



They crossed the courtyard to the loggia that ran the length of the northern side of the main part of the palace. The walking staff of their visitor thumped noisily on the flagstones as he limped along and Savitri guessed it had been the sound of this hefty pole striking the gate that had produced the loud reports that she had first heard. As they walked she glanced across at Kuvera and he nodded that he understood her wishes; if this dubious character caused any kind of trouble he was to be given the bum’s rush forthwith, and Kuvera was to stay close by to keep an eye on things.

Savitri beckoned him over to a spread of low platforms that were arranged around the shady area. With a well-practised pivot on his staff he lowered himself down to the seat and arranged his legs comfortably cross-wise. She took the main seat a distance away from him but removed a cushion or two to make sure she was lower than the stranger – he seemed to be some kind of monk and monks could be very picky about needing to sit higher up than the likes of her, a mere house-holder.

She felt a bit out of her depth, as she often did now that she had to be the gracious lady of property and position, nevertheless she felt she should assert her role as the one in charge here. She asked, "Who are you, Venerable Sir? Where do you come from?"

"Ha ha! Good question milady – who indeed? Well, I've been called many names over the years, Mysterioso, Impervioso, but most people know me as the Samana Dusaka."

"Doesn't that mean...?"

"Yes – 'Bad monk' and people call me that as well! Ha! Good name, bad monk." His face folded into a chaotic flurry of furrows, he threw his head back and laughed from belly upward – his whole body shaking with glee at this great private joke of his.

"So you are a monk," said Savitri, doing her best to maintain her composure and her sense of keeping a handle on the situation. She had an odd feeling of being at the edge of an immensely high cliff and could see the rocks far below, teasing and threatening her that she might lose her balance and fall into the abyss at any moment.

"Yes, ma'am, I am a monk, been one for a very long time indeed."

"And where are you from? I can't quite place your accent."

"Where!? Ha – yes, that's a good one too," he chuckled again but, seeing that his jollity was not being appreciated or reciprocated by his host, he bottled his amusement somewhat. "Well, let's just say that I entered the story somewhere around Greensickness Peak, in the valley just below there, actually, in the Great Fable Mountains."

He said this with such a matter-of-fact assurance, as if everyone would know of such places, that Savitri could only cough politely and say, "Oh, very interesting," not wishing to reveal that these were regions she'd never heard of. Krishna too nodded his head as if in acknowledgement that he too was familiar with this location – he may have been only seven Rains old but he knew an awful lot about everything, and even when he really didn't, he was good at making it up, or so he thought.

As the small talk proceeded, a thought suddenly sprang into Savitri's mind. Perhaps the message that this Dusaka had brought was that her husband was now weary of the wandering mendicant's life and he wanted to find out if he would be welcome back at this, his former home once more. She started:

"Have you..."

But before she could get any further Dusaka interrupted, "No, my lady, I do not bring news that your husband of old now wishes to return here.

"I have met him, indeed I know him well, but you should know, once and for all, that he has no home here. This is the first message that I have come to bring you: You will never see him again – any of you." On this last note he looked right at Krishna, who was settled at his mother's feet, on the floor in front of her.

The small dark boy had had his large eyes riveted on the face of the monk. As he heard these words a wave of sadness crossed his heart; he knew the story of his father having become a wanderer, just like this ragged Dusaka, and rather than wishing for him just to come home, Krishna had, instead, nursed many fantasies of discovering that he himself was also of divine birth, and that all the powers and magic possessed by his holy namesake were found to be his too. Then he would go off alone into the wilderness, have many adventures and perform heroic deeds, he would track down his father in some remote mountain fastness, they would meet and smile to each other. His dad would say, "At last, you've come," and then...

Well, he wasn't quite sure if they would carry on as a duet of yogis in the mountains; or if he would bring him back to Ujjeni and reunite him with his mother; or if he would then track down Sita and his sisters and would somehow get everyone to live peacefully and happily together... he had never got that far but now, now he knew that all that had involved his father was lost to him.

Somehow both of them knew that what Dusaka spoke was incontrovertibly true. His voice was gruff but clear and, as he talked, it seemed as though all other sounds around them became muffled – the clamour of the street seemed further away than usual, the birds in the garden had gone quiet, as had the voices of the rest of the household, the people in the kitchen, the grounds, the other children about the palace – all had mysteriously receded.

"Kamanita has gone, and his journey will be a pilgrimage that takes him great distances, and through many lives and many worlds. He *will* find true happiness eventually but not here in this house, and not here in your life time. So, the first thing I have come to tell you both, is that, if you wish to know happiness, both of you will have to let him go. Do you understand?"

As he put this to them, and Savitri stared into his weather-worn face, it seemed as though the whole of the space they sat in dissolved into a golden lustre. At its centre was the shimmering oval of Dusaka's calm and gentle visage – his eyes spoke to them and they understood; they should give up hope but in that giving up they would be able to be at peace.



Once more the wanderer aimed his gaze at Krishna. They looked at each other for a while, as if in a staring match, as an ever-more slack-witted grin spread over the boy's face. The small bundle of dusty fur that was Dusaka's dog maundered across the colourfully tiled floor and began to lick Krishna's hand.

“The second thing I have come to tell you, master Krishna, (or Komudi, as your mother used to call you), is about some of the things that lie before you in this life – *if* you should choose a certain path, that is.”

Krishna leaned forward, intent of the strange monk’s words, unconsciously scratching the dog’s head as its companion spoke.

“It is difficult to evade the King of Death – as we all know – but it can be done. If you choose the right path, you may be one who is able to conquer him.

“Like you, one of his names is Kanha – The Dark One – yet, unlike you he is a merciless destroyer; he kills with glee. Another of his names is Maccu-Mara, The Killer.

“Whenever a life is taken, he has a hand in it. He fires the heart with delight and hardens it enough to enable the assassin to strike the blow, the snake to make the bite, to end a life. He rejoices at the snuffing of even the faintest flame of consciousness, in any living thing. That is his part; he is the lord of the round of birth and death – Samsara. And he is everywhere – yet still he can be defeated.”

Krishna is pop-eyed at the mystery and wonder of all this. He feels keen and already his heart rises to the challenge; he listens with bated breath. Savitri, in contrast, feels a fluttering panic rising within her; how can she change the subject, prevent her son from getting drawn into this madness, and how do we get this freakish charlatan out of here?

“Er, very interesting, this, er philosophy of yours. Fascinating, would you like to have a look around? I haven’t even offered to give you the tour. Even His Majesty the King has come and admired... Oh! But I haven’t even offered you any refreshments – how remiss of me! What kind of a hostess must you think I am. Lata, Ruki, quickly go and prepare fruit juice and some snacks for our guest. It’s such a hot day – isn’t it exhausting? Our cook is famous for his cooling juice drinks; he mixes the nectar of the kola fruit with some other foreign leaves – it’s ever so refreshing...”

Savitri’s plaintive voice seemed to be swallowed into the muffled silence – as if nothing in the world could or would hear her. She felt thwarted and frustrated but also cooled and stilled with the strange kindness that emanated from this disquieting visitor. She saw that the two maids had scurried off – followed, oddly, by the little dog – but the steady delivery of his rumbling tones carried on, as if uninterrupted.

“When the time is right – maybe ten years from now, maybe less, maybe more – if you set out from here you will have the chance to meet this King of Death and, perhaps, to learn how to evade him utterly, to conquer him.

“Where and how are questions that will answer themselves as you go along. Nevertheless, I assure you here and now that there is a charm, a mangala, the great mangala, which can defeat him, if you use it wisely. Use it wrongly and it will make your journey and all its troubles all the longer.

“One more thing,” he added, reaching up to dig deeply into the tangled nest of hair atop his head and, scratching vigorously – picking out and looking cross-eyed at

some small creature or encrustation that now sat on his fingernail – “one more thing,” now he pinned both mother and son with his stare. “You have put the lives of Sita, Amba and Tamba far behind you – they have wandered far from your minds. This is understandable but it doesn’t mean all is finished there.” Savitri felt a surge of dread at this but remained quiet, listening intently – what on earth was he driving at?

“It is true that Sita has gone, and she won’t be returning here,” Savitri exhaled audibly with delight; the steady voice continued, “but her daughters yet live and soon will flourish. You should seek them, Krishna, when the time is right; you were dear to them and they to you. And I tell you, before all your journeys are done you will have much to do together.”

He paused and, gradually, the rattle of the street traffic and sounds of the house welled into hearing once again. Krishna was open-mouthed and still a little dumb-struck by all that had been said. Savitri, meanwhile, feeling that the worst must be over now and that life might soon revert to normal, looked up and asked:

“Where are those girls? I’m dying of thirst, after all this talk. I’m sure you must be too.”

Just then, through the archway that led into the back area of the palace where the kitchen was housed, there swelled the sound of muted voices and subtle clinking of cups. Into the sitting area trotted the small dog with a tray of drinks held perfectly level between her teeth. Behind, and soon filling the archway there followed the cook, the housekeeper Gopali, the two maids, the gardener, his son that Krishna had been playing with, and Khamba and Khina too.

“Why, thank you, Tingri,” said Dusaka, helping himself to a cup of the cool dark beverage, “Now you should offer some to Her Ladyship,” With deft movements the small and hairy figure turned and trotted over to the mistress, skillfully rising up with her forepaws on the edge of the low platform so that Lady Savitri would not have to stretch for her cola-drink. All the eyes of the household were now fixed on this remarkable scene.

Tingri then carried the tray down to Krishna and, lastly, over to Kuvera who had not-so-subtly been standing guard at the far western end of the loggia. Duty done she carried the tray over to the maids, who had been the ones who had entrusted it to her in the kitchen, placed it carefully down before them, barked once and sauntered back to her travelling companion with a befurred expression of canine satisfaction on her face.

By this time Dusaka had quaffed his cupful; he heaved himself to his feet, nodded in farewell to Krishna and his mother, then to the household who were all still standing gob-smacked by the prodigious waitressing skills of the dog.

He strode across the courtyard; his staff pounding a rhythm on the stones as he swung his gimpy leg with a fluid familiarity. As he reached the gate he turned to bid a last farewell, his body now casting fierce shadows in the blaze of mid-morning sun, when the blue-black blur of Krishna came running his way.

“Excuse me, sir,” he said, “but you never mentioned anything about what might happened if I didn’t take up this quest.”

“Did I not? Well, you’re a bright lad and you could probably figure it out.” He paused, looking down fondly at Krishna’s expectant face.

“If you don’t take this up, you and all the others will just keep spinning on the wheel of birth and death, the wheel of habits, fears and desires, endlessly. That means being consumed with all the pointless obsessions that bedevil the world – property, wealth, romance, status, and even creativity – and that most beings in the world, and all other worlds, incidentally, are addicted to.

“In short, your life would be completely wasted.

“Bye bye.”

CHAPTER 9

AT THE MINISTER'S MANSION



ango isn't really a very suitable name, is it? Don't you think?"

"The colour is right, certainly, but I've never liked those fruit-and-flower monikers; what about 'Sama'? That means the same thing, 'golden,' but it hasn't got that fruity tinge to it. What do you think?"

Mitta was putting the question mostly to his wife Sundari but also with half an eye on their newly adopted daughter.

"Oh yes!" Sundari exclaimed "just right." Then, looking to the little girl, she said, "We have two other daughters – all grown up and gone away now – but they are called Ratana, 'Jewel', and Vajira, 'Diamond,'" so 'Golden' is perfect for you. You'll be our third precious one."

The two of them regarded the beautiful and serious face of their new child, waiting to see her response. Amba turned the name over in her mind – she'd never considered being anybody else, or rather being known by any other name than the one she'd always had but, looking into the kindly faces of her new parents, and always being one inclined towards compliance and fulfilling the wishes of others, she could only answer in one way.

"Sama is a lovely name." She smiled appreciatively, "Thank you very much, Sir."

"Now don't you go calling me 'Sir,' I'm your dad now." Mitta grinned and rubbed her head, "I'm only the chamberlain in this grand house, just a glorified butler, I'm not the lord and master – that's the Minister and the Duchess – you have to be polite to people like that, Lord Ghosaka and Lady Rohini, they're the quality here."

"Sama, Sama..." she rolled the new sound around in her mind and practised saying it to herself a few times. There were so many new things to get used to here but she liked it, and she guessed it would become easier to say and to remember after a while.



And so it was. When she had first arrived she had felt awkward and lonely but, as soon as she was about to get a serious fit of the dumps, Khujjutara's friendly chatter would bring her out of it. Or it would be one of the other maids or children of the great house that swept her up and got her to help with rocking a baby, weaving some decorations or going out to explore in the expansive gardens around the Minister's mansion. There was always something to do or to learn – so many festivals and processions, even trips to the Royal Palace – that four years went by and she was almost grown to womanhood, at least that's what her mother Sundari and the others kept saying to her.

Life in this crowded bustle of people had been so dense – there were household duties, accompanying her parents, or learning the arts of writing and music, garland-making or embroidery – that she had scarcely had a moment to herself. Her old life – the love of her sister Tamba and the sharp and energetic presence of her mother Sita, her mischievous little brother, the fly-away Krishna – was washed aside by the sheer force of the tides of this new world. Within a year or so of coming to Kosambi she had found, to her horror, that she had almost forgotten her other life completely.

Once in a while though, she'd catch an aroma from the kitchen that would remind her, or someone across the room would mention Ujjeni, and a flood of nostalgia would burst the banks of her heart, "I remember..." But it would soon pass and leave no trace, and she would busy herself with the next duty to be done.



The one link to the past that she stoically maintained was that, whenever they went to the temple to make offerings to the gods, or when they did a puja at their family shrine, she always included many prayers for her sister.

Even though her father kept trying to convince her that the chances of her survival in the forest on her own were extremely slender – especially since even the King's guards had not been able to find her – Sama clung fiercely to the hope that one day she would appear again.

"She's very tough, father, and she never gives up once she's started something, so I'm sure that she's managed to survive," Sama asserted, for the hundredth time.

"But dear, if she was truly as resourceful as you say then by now – how long is it? – four or five years, surely she would have been able to track you down, no?" He arched both eyebrows, which formed a broad and bushy grey bridge across the top of his round-cheeked face.

She didn't mean to be defiant, that was completely against her nature, but on this one point it was impossible to let go. She knew it didn't make sense but she was going to carry on doing it anyway.

Khujjuttara was always around when the family went to the temple and did their pujas, and she too had always noted Sama quietly reciting some extra prayers. She had rightly guessed what these were and, by way of helping out, she conspired to find, on most occasions, an extra garland or two and a few sticks of incense to palm to Sama for these surreptitious devotions and appeals.

Sama had always liked to visit the temples – she liked the sounds of the chanting and all the beauty of the ceremonies and shrines – but she found all the gods a bit confusing. There were images of Durga and Sarasvati, Krishna and Vishnu, sometimes the fearsome and bloody-tongued Kali or Vishvakarman the heavenly architect. There were Prajapati, Shiva the stern ascetic and Parvati, his lovely wife, so many in their different chapels and halls. It was hard to remember all the stories and how all of these great beings related to each other.

When she made her offerings and did her prayers she felt it best not to be too specific about whom she was addressing, and just asked with as much sincerity as she could muster, “Whichever of you great and noble beings, powerful gods and devas, are able to help look after my sister Tamba and keep her safe, wherever she may be, please, please, please may you do so.

“And if there’s any way that the two of us can be reunited, I don’t care what it takes or how much trouble it might be, I will happily pay the price. Please, oh holy ones, may my sister and I be together again before we die.”

She also clearly remembered the three kinnaris, whom she had met in the forest, the day her mother died, and the yakkha, Gumbiya who had sworn to try and help her, if at all possible. However, in amongst the shrines and stupas for all the great gods, she never saw any that were solely dedicated to the likes of her friends.

There were some that had fearsome, yakkha-like characters carved around the edges, or holding a plinth up from underneath, but never one that even had Gumbiya’s ruler Kuvera (otherwise known as King Vessavana) at its centre. Similarly, the kinnaris and other types of earth-spirit – naiads and dryads of the trees and streams – were occasionally carved or painted flitting round the head of the deity of floating on either side, but never did she find a place where they had a shrine all of their own. Thus she would make a special prayer to them by name, “...and may the brave kinnaris Pinkie, Garnet and Little Red, and the yakkha Gumbiya be well and happy, and may they too help Tamba and me to be brought together again; if that would be possible, somehow.”



One of the rituals of the household was that every rainy season the Minister, Lord Ghosaka, organized things so that a large group of ascetic wanderers, who normally lived in the Himalayan Mountains, came and stayed in some parkland that

the family owned in Kosambi, a short distance away from the mansion where Sama and all of them lived. It was an occasion of great activity; everyone had been abuzz for several weeks in advance, and regular groups of workers and hired help went over to the park to spruce up the huts they would use and to make repairs.

In the final days before they arrived, Sama and a whole crowd of the family and staff – led by Lady Rohini who directed operations with great care and precision – went over to deck the meeting hall and the gateway with garlands made of thousands of flowers.

They had to dodge the showers that came before the main monsoon, but the likelihood that all their fine work might be doused at a moment's notice was offset by the joyful carnival-like atmosphere and the sweet anticipation of the arrival of the holy men.

Sama often wondered if this was the park that her kinnari friends had told her was their dwelling place. On these rare days when she and other members of Mitta's clan and the Ghosaka family were here, her eye darted eagerly into the bushes and up into the trees hoping that she would catch at least a glimpse of her ethereal helpers – but she never saw them. Sometimes she caught a shimmer of something brightly-coloured or billowing at the corner of her vision, or so she thought, but when she looked full on, there was never anything there.

For some reason she didn't feel abandoned by her companions, rather she had the idea that they had had to go elsewhere, or that there was too much noise around, or the rank odours of ill-behaved people had put them off and made it unbearable to be there. She felt that they were somewhere nearby even now, and that they still cared for her, and that, if they ever could visit or – even better – track down Tamba and reunite them, then they certainly would do so.



On the great day that all the wanderers and yogis arrived, Sama was out there tucked in the crowd at the gateway to the park. Lady Rohini and Lord Ghosaka stood at the front, with their young son standing close beside his mother. He was a shy and sickly child, and somewhat overawed by the grandeur of the event.

Sama had witnessed this ritual each year since she had arrived and had always been excited and inspired by it. *These* holy men seemed a far cry from the pompous brahmin who had rushed through her mother's funeral all those years ago and also some of the temple priests she had seen. The men in this group – for there were other places where women wanderers gathered – had an aura of true calm about them. They did not just talk about sacred things; they actually *felt* holy to her as well.

To her surprise, when the new arrivals were greeted and offered garlands at the entrance to welcome them in, instead of receiving the gifts and the whole assembly of them processing through the flower-bedecked arch, the leader of the group raised the garland to his brow and then returned it to Lord Ghosaka.

The Minister was startled by this gesture and obviously didn't quite know what to make of it.

"Your Lordship, we must apologize, but we are not going to stay here this year. We will leave this place this very day and take ourselves elsewhere."

"But... but... you promised! You come every year... we've made all the arrangements..." he spluttered, upset but trying to remain respectful.

"Normally we would never renege on a promise – samanas do not do such things – but a very unusual circumstance has occurred..." he scarcely suppressed a smile that came rising, bubbling up within him. His face now shone.

"A Buddha has appeared in the world."

"A *Buddha*!? You mean a totally liberated, perfected, enlightened being?" Ghosaka was astonished at the idea. "I thought such ones only existed in legend, in the most ancient of scriptures. I can't believe that a Jina, a Conqueror of Death, walks this very earth in our lifetime!"

"This Great Being is indeed one who has escaped the nets of Mara, the King of Death himself – yes, this Buddha Gotama is such a one. That is why he is called the Blessed One, the Teacher of Gods and Humans. It is because such a person has arisen in the world, and is alive today, that we beg your permission to be freed from our promise. So we may all go and learn from him."

Ghosaka hardly needed a moment to digest this news; at once he said, "Well, of course you may go but how do you know this to be true? And, if it's true, can others go to see this great wise teacher also?"

"How we know is a strange tale if you wish to hear it; perhaps we should sit in the shade a while and I will tell you." The whole gaggle of family friends and servants had been following this exchange closely. At this suggestion they all moved inside the gateway and settled on the smooth rocks and paving stones of the courtyard, beneath the dense foliage of the area round the entry. The head of the group of wanderers, Naradatta, sat himself on a flat-topped boulder, in front of a thick-trunked tree, and began to speak. Everyone settled quickly and was soon caught up in the tale.



"As we made our way here, returning from the high snows of the Himalayas as we do every year, we came by a slightly different route than usual and, by this new road, we paused to halt at an ancient tree, a giant banyan not unlike this one I sit

beneath right now." He brought his hands together at these words and raised them to his forehead, as a gesture of respect.

"The thought occurred to me: 'this tree is so great in size, so aged, there must be some kind of mighty rukkha-deva who resides here. How good it would be if this were so and if he would provide this large group of us with water to drink. And, lo and behold, a spring of drinking water appeared. Then I thought the same with respect to water to bathe in and then, lastly, for some food for all of us to eat – and the great deva who dwelt in the tree provided food for all of us also by his magical powers.

"Then I thought: 'This is wonderful; this rukkha-deva gives us whatever we think of. I wish we were able to see him.' Then he appeared and he was of majestic and radiant lineaments, his raiment sublime and supremely delicate.

"One of the group of us asked him: 'You are of great power and might, rukkha-deva, how did you develop this? What did you do to get it?' But he was excessively modest and, because he felt the good karma had come from a very small act he didn't want to tell us. However, after a good deal of urging, he said, 'Well listen,' and this is what he told us.

"The tree-spirit was once a poor man who occasionally worked for the Minister of Finance of the kingdom of Kosala. This minister's name is Anathapindika and he is a long-time devotee and supporter of the Buddha. It is their custom, in the Buddha's training, to have a fast day once a week, when the householders follow the standard of the monks and nuns and only eat food in the time between dawn and noon.

"Now this labourer had also been a faithful follower of the Buddha for many years. He had lived a life of great virtue and generosity, always sharing his meagre possessions with his family and friends, furthermore he had trained his mind diligently in meditation. On this occasion he had been working hard all day in the forest and he came back to the main house in the evening as hungry as you would expect him to be. The Minister saw him and asked his cook, 'Did anyone tell this man that today was a fast day?'

"No sir,' the cook replied.

"Well, cook him his supper.'

"So the cook prepared him some food and gave it to him, however, when he sat in the house he thought: 'Hang on, on other days there's always a great uproar in the house – people chatting and eating and asking for curry and sauce – but today it's completely quiet. They've prepared food for me alone. What can this mean?'

"He found another of the staff and asked what was up. He was told that everyone else was fasting but that they'd forgotten to tell him in the morning; so he decided he wanted to begin the fast instead of eating.

"Then, because he'd worked all day and was hungry, and as he had exhausted himself, he fell ill during the night. The Minister heard of this, came to him and tried to persuade him to eat some medicinal food but, because he had made the promise to fast

until dawn, he refused it. And even though the Minister, with great kindness and determination, tried to persuade him to eat something, the noble labourer refused and, when the sun rose, he died even as a garland withers, and was reborn in great splendor and with much power, in that banyan tree.”



“When we first questioned the rukkha-deva about what discipline and teaching the Minister of Kosala was a follower of, he told us that he was a lay-disciple, an upasaka, of the Buddha Gotama. When we heard the word ‘Buddha,’ we too were startled and amazed: we knew that such great beings sometimes do not appear in the universe in many hundreds of thousands of æons. So, we knew this was why such a small act might have had such a great consequence; for when the object of devotion and faith is of great purity and potency then acts of faith and generosity toward that bring very great rewards of welfare and happiness for a long time.

“Thus faith arose in us that a Buddha had indeed appeared in the world; and now, with your permission, we will leave this very day and go to abide for the Rains at the monastery of the Jetavana with the Buddha Gotama, outside Savatthi.”

“How could I refuse?!” Lord Ghosaka responded, both impressed and inspired by the tale. “You all go with my blessing; but I must say I would like to go too. Can you wait while we make the necessary preparations for our travel?”

“I hope you understand, sir, but we do not wish to be delayed. The monsoon will be upon us shortly and the roads will become impassable. We will go now,” and he ever-so-gently stressed the ‘will,’ “and you may follow after.” Understanding well the great amount of fuss and flapdoodle that would accompany getting the Minister Ghosaka on the road, Naradatta, the head of the samanasa, made his point and, with a brief tilt of his chin and no further ado, the entire congregation of ascetics rose and left the park; not pausing even to receive a drink of water, or their alms food for the day.



The Rains came and went. By the time the wind had changed and the air was cleared of its muggy clamminess, Ghosaka had made all the preparations necessary and – bearing cartloads of offerings for the Buddha and his community, of robe-cloth, medicines and other useful items – he and his two wealthy friends, Kukkuta and Pavariya, set out on the road for Savatthi.

The wagon train was flanked by a substantial body of hired guards, and a number of the male staff had gone along too, but Sama and all the rest of Mitta’s family stayed behind. The party was gone for a number of months. Even though they only

stayed at the Jetavana monastery for two weeks, it was a journey of 200 leagues there and back and the gentlemen did not travel in haste. Besides, it was now the cold season and the most pleasant of times to be out and about in the world.



The big news that rattled through the mansion rumour-mill, as cold season turned to hot and even before the main group had returned, was that each of the three rich merchant lords had vowed to build a monastery for the Buddha and his monastic community at Kosambi. Apparently the whole group of wanderers who had been the annual residents in Ghosita's park had become the Buddha's disciples and all had already reached full enlightenment – or at least that's how the story went.

Sama listened keenly to the tales relayed to her by her bright-eyed and ever-present helper Khujjuttara, who had the ear of just about everyone in the house, and Sama was ready to believe whatever she heard:— If one of the masters said it how could it not be true?

Despite the fact that it was she who dutifully passed on most of the fascinating stories, her maid-servant was a lot harder to convince. She was wary and chary of all fads and enthusiasms and tended only trust hard evidence. "I'm not sure I believe all that tree-deva stuff," she looked sideways at Sama. "I have to see it with my own eyes before I'll swallow it myself: 'The poor labourer dying because of pure-hearted devotion then getting reborn as a super-duper deva on the strength of it' – sounds like a tall story to me."

Soon Lord Ghosaka was back in residence and, it quickly became apparent, that at least the story about the new monasteries was true. He was going to donate the park where the wanderers had been staying, while the other two wealthy magnates had acquired land outside the city walls and would be building their monasteries there.

As there were already a large number of monastic huts, or kutis, at Ghosita's park he was able to have the place well-developed within a short span of time. He built a new, somewhat larger kuti for the Buddha, in a particularly beautiful grove, with plenty of shade around it, and he increased the number of wells and bathing areas. He erected a dining hall and repaved some of the main walkways, he refurbished the meeting hall and, lastly, hung up a grand and sonorous bell as he thought that might be useful to gather everyone for such times as the Master was due to offer teachings to the community and to folks who came to listen from around the town.

Spurred by the beautiful work that Ghosaka had done, Kukkuta and Pavariya redoubled their efforts and, although those latter places were not quite so splendid, all three were complete and ready for use by the time the first thunderstorms that presaged the next Rainy Season arrived.



The ferment of anticipation at the Minister's mansion was now hitting a peak. Word had it that the Buddha and a large group of monks were on their way and should be reaching Kosambi the very next morning. The usually lofty and dignified Minister was striding here and there, giving orders and then changing them shortly after, with an expression on his long thin face of an intense happiness edged with a slightly frantic anxiety. The Duchess was doing her best to balance out his mood by being particularly calm and systematic about what preparations might be needed, and what not.

Sama was caught up like everyone in the energetic and inspired mood. They were busy making food preparations, flower displays, cleaning oil lamps and a hundred other tasks. A large cluster of the girls of her age lent their hands to loading much of the floral arrangements and votive offerings into some carts and then wheeling them along the streets to the park – now renamed 'Ghositarama.' Along the way they found that much of the town had also heard the news: that some great spiritual teacher had charmed or impressed the three richest families in Kosambi – apart from the Royal Household of course – to construct not one, but *three*, residences for him. He must be something special. There was expectancy in the air.

As word spread around the town of this imminent arrival, it was swiftly realized that this self-same teacher had indeed passed time in the area before – at least one who was known by the same name, the Samana Gotama, or Gotama Buddha.

He had resided at the old Krishna temple on the outside of town from time to time, it was even said that King Udena had deeded it to him in perpetuity but that – since this bestowal had raised such howls of protest from the brahmin priests, who claimed 'inviolable and sacred' proprietary rights – he had quietly rescinded the offering and let the established priesthood reclaim their ownership.

Many of the townsfolk had fond and inspired memories of visiting the old Krishna Grove, to listen to the Master's teachings in the evenings, or going to meet him and ask questions in smaller circles of dialogue during the days when he was around. Those who remembered him and his community of nuns and monks from before were thrilled and gladdened by the idea that they would soon be able to enjoy their sacred company once again. Those who had never made it out to the old ruined temple in the Simsapa forest beggared the patience of those who had, peppering them with endless questions about this great Master, his teachings and the way of life he espoused.

When Lord Ghosaka heard about these earlier visits of the Buddha to his own town, he had chuckled and cursed his luck at having missed those precious opportunities, "There I was, being so proud of my appointment as the Ambassador to Uttarakuru for all those years, all puffed up with my new title off in the scenic

mountains, meanwhile the rarest of saints and sages had come to camp in my old back yard – *and I never knew about it!* What a business, eh?”

When the big moment came Sama knelt by the roadside with Khujjuttara behind her and mother and father beside her. The silent line of monks paced steadily towards them down the dusty main street of the town, with a tall, broad-shouldered figure at their head who emanated happiness and peace in every gesture. Sama was filled with heart-pounding excitement and an utter stillness.

He paused momentarily as he reached the group gathered by the great gate. He leaned forward and Sama placed an offering of rice in his alms-bowl. Others around her did the same and, when the last offering had been made, the Buddha stood still and straight and recited a blessing – rejoicing in the good karma they had created by this act of generosity – then he smiled, casting his eye over the whole assembly there.

The Lord Ghosaka rose up and stepped forward, then bowed to the Buddha three times.

“Venerable Sir, may I offer this park to be a monastery for your Order, for the Sangha of the Four Quarters Present and Yet to Come?”

The tall, serene presence of the Buddha filled Ghosaka’s vision. The Master consented to the gift in silence and with a gentle inclination of his head; he then walked inside followed by the long train of ochre-robed monks, all shaven-headed and bare-footed.



That day was the first of many when Sama was blissfully happy. There were times of the year when the Buddha was present and times when he wandered the paths and forests of Jambudipa, seeking lonely places to meditate in silence and to enjoy the wilderness, away from human constructions and busyness. Other times he returned to Kosambi and resided for long periods.

She loved to help prepare food for the monks and nuns and to rise early to offer it in the morning. On those precious days when she could put food into the Buddha’s own bowl, at that moment there was no doubt in her mind that above all things she loved the good and all she really wanted in life was to be good – it was so clear.

From time to time she was able to go to the Ghositarama, the Pavariyarama or to Kukkutarama, to attend a teaching or be part of some special puja but usually her father was busy with the affairs of the household and the Minister’s numerous responsibilities. And, since Mitta didn’t share his master’s religious enthusiasm, with the arrival of the Buddha on the scene the Minister had been preoccupied with his spiritual aspirations and had passed more duties into Mitta’s care; there was thus no time at all now for such things as family outings.

He also didn't want Sundari or the other women of the household going about in his absence so, the long and the short of it was that Sama and her mother often had to stay home.

As ever, Khujjuttara seemed to slip through the net: "See, I'm a slave. I don't count, so no one sees me – sometimes that's a very handy thing." She chortled to Sama, her face alight with her broad and beaming smile. Thus, mostly for her young mistress's sake, she would go along to the Buddha's many talks, sidle in at the back, sit in the shadows and then come home having remembered everything the teacher had said.

"You're amazing!" said Sama, "How do you do it?"

"It's easy, miss, I've got a mind like sticky-sap – you know, the stuff they melt out of trees and make waterproof things with. It's sticky; people say stuff, it sticks in my memory and I carry it off with me. It's not a big effort but it also doesn't mean that I understand everything I remember. That's something else all together."

CHAPTER 10

Why Is EVERYTHING SO QUIET?



regular as the sun coming up in the morning and the changing phases of the moon, every day, Lady Rohini and Lord Ghosaka offered alms to the blind, the poor and all other kinds of unfortunate people.

Mitta had the duty of overseeing this distribution of food and medicines; it was a job he usually referred to as “My morning headache.” For, along with the food preparation, and the serving of the dozens of sick and hungry, there came a cacophonous racket of voices, the clanging of pots and pans and utensils, and a chaos of barging bodies coming and going; it was a noisy chaos.

One day Sama, who helped her flustered father with this daunting task each morning, casually remarked, “Dad, why don’t we do something to make this all a bit more organized and quiet?”

“What? I can’t hear what you’re saying...” Mitta replied, bring his ear closer to his daughter’s face; today the racket was particularly intense.

“I said,” she leant over, speaking as loudly as she could without shouting, “we should rearrange things to make it all less noisy and confusing.”

“Impossible!” Mitta grinned and threw his hands up in mock exasperation mixed with a genuine look of entreaty, “I’ve tried all kinds of things.”

“I think it’s possible – will you let me set it up differently tomorrow?” Again, Sama spoke directly into his ear which was now quite easy as she had grown to the same height as her adoptive father.

She had been a small and slight child when Mitta and Sundari had first taken her into their family but, in recent years she had grown and blossomed. She still had the doe-eyed, innocent face that had characterized her when she was young but now, at fifteen Rains, she was tall and full-figured, and carried herself with a dignified poise that belied her tender years. She also drew more and more admiring glances and outright stares from many people – these tended to discomfort her and she would blush deeply and scurry away if she felt she was being ogled ‘like that.’

Mitta looked at her askance, torn between dismissing her request as youthful folly, giving her the chance to prove herself as she so rarely took the initiative in anything, and the pressing need to deal with the day's ongoing collection of urgencies and crises.

"Very good!" He decided, "It's all yours, tomorrow – I look forward to seeing what you do."

"What?"

"I SAID 'I LOOK FORWARD TO SEEING WHAT YOU WILL DO!'"



A few days later, just before noon, Mitta was having his regular briefing with Lord Ghosaka. They were sorting through the various affairs of the large household for the coming period, when the Minister enquired, "By the way, Mitta, have we stopped distributing food for the poor and needy?"

"What makes you ask that, Sir?"

"I've been wondering, why is everything so quiet? Haven't you noticed? One of my great joys in life is hearing the commotion in the public refectory and knowing that this means that the Duchess and I are doing great good by providing for the blind and the sick and so on. I didn't hear a sound this morning or for the last two or three days; did the King ban alms-giving without letting me know? Did we run out of food to give away? What's going on? Why don't people keep me informed?" The Duke blustered, plainly aggrieved.

He was surprised that Mitta did not look the slightest bit apologetic or guilty of any infraction. Rather, he was intrigued that his chamberlain wore a self-satisfied smirk instead.

"My apologies, Your Grace, but alms have indeed been given as usual. There have been new arrangements made in the hall so that people receive the food and medicines without making any noise."

"Why didn't you ask me before you did this? And why did you only make these new changes now and not before?"

"May it please Your Grace," responded Mitta, trying to be as formal and polite as possible, "I didn't change it before as I didn't know how to. And I did not inform you of the change as, to be honest; I didn't believe the new idea would work."

"So, how did you happen to find a way just now?" asked Lord Ghosaka, becoming curious as to the cause of this odd turn of events.

"It was my daughter, Sir, who told me how to do it."

"Have you a new daughter whom I have never seen? Has one of your married children now come back to you?"

“If you recall, Sir, the little orphan girl whose mother died from the snake-bite. We adopted her as our daughter and she is now almost full-grown – she was the one who solved the puzzle of creating order in Your Grace’s refectory for the public.”

“How did she do it?”

“If you can spare a few moments, Your Grace, you may come and see for yourself.” Mitta smiled inwardly, both with pride at the practical intelligence of his daughter, and that His Lordship seemed pleased and interested in this turn of events, despite being robbed of the daily clamour that had delighted him so much before now.



Mitta led Lord Ghosaka into the hall by a side door and together they watched the even flow of the thin and ragged of Kosambi, the blind being led by their young grand- children. There were certainly still some conversations going on – silence had not been enforced by threat – but the procession through the hall and the passing out of food and other items was serene and orderly.

“I’m amazed,” admitted Lord Ghosaka, “it’s just as big a crowd as normal but without all the fuss and bother, the flurry and confusion – it’s marvelous!” He turned to Mitta, asking, “So, where’s the girl who put this all in place? I’d like to see her.”

Mitta called over Sama, who had been shyly hovering in a corner since her father and the Duke had made their entrance. “Sama, come here and be introduced to His Grace the Minister.” She nervously wiped her hands on her sarong, afraid that she might have some foodstuffs or other grubbiness tainting her person. She knelt before Lord Ghosaka and brought her palms together in reverential salutation, as she had been taught to do in the presence of the nobility.

“Get up girl, get up, you’ll soil your skirt if you kneel there. So, tell me, how did you get this all to work so smoothly?” Above all things the Minister was a practical man – he had to oversee the finances of the whole nation of Vamsa, after all – so he was eager to know how this particular conundrum had been worked out.

“It was really very simple, Sir,” Sama began, “firstly we put a fence around the refectory so that people couldn’t just wander about willy-nilly, it being an open-sided structure along three edges and just having the one wall where it connects to the rest of the palace. We then made a small gateway at one end and another small gateway at the other so, apart from the side entrance that Your Grace and my father just entered by, the only way in and out is the two gates. Only one person can pass through these at a time, and they go in through one gate and then out through the other. With this limiting of access, and with members of the staff here to serve food as the people file through, it all works very smoothly.”

“Brilliant,” said Lord Ghosaka, “I think from now on we’ll call you *Samavati*, because you constructed the *vati*, this fence that has bought such golden harmony.”

As he looked at the modest yet confident teenager before him, the Minister’s mind was suddenly cast back nearly a decade. The encounter on the highroad, when he had first met this girl so ragged and lean from weeks of hard travel, returned to him in vivid detail. He also recollected the strange dreams that both he and the King had had that night before the chance meeting.

A wave of compassion and empathy welled within him at the memory of the little golden-skinned child beside the corpse of her mother. Somewhat surprisingly, as an accompaniment to this feeling, there also arose a profound intuition of ancient spiritual affinities between them and the sense that she would one day be an inspiring guide whom he would be honoured to look up to. A mental image of the great golden wheel that the King had dreamed of, turning gently in the girl’s cupped hands, flashed before his eyes, and the realization dawned that this had meant the Wheel of Dhamma – the wisdom of the Buddha – nothing less.

“What’s more,” he said now turning away from *Samavati*, and addressing *Mitta*, “You know my wife and I are getting on in years – I am of 50 Rains and Lady *Rohini* is only five or six less – and our only son died the year before last. He was an infirm and weak child all his too-brief life. This great house has many people that throng its halls and gardens but it is empty when one has no child to call one’s own. With the permission of your adoptive parents, I would like to receive you as my own daughter; would that please you, my dear?”

Even though the Lord Ghosaka had always been seen by *Samavati* as one who simply issued commands and was duly obeyed immediately, she saw at this moment that there was a genuine question, and invitation in his kindly eyes.

Overawed, and not quite sure she was ready to respond in any way, she nervously glanced at *Mitta*, to seek some kind of clue as to what she should do or say. She had no desire to abandon her father and mother, the old couple who had been so generous and kind to her for the last nine years, but she was also very aware that she should not offend a high noble like the Duke.

To her surprise she saw *Mitta* nodding his round-cheeked face with great vigour. His assent to the idea, coupled with the open and sincere benevolence writ large on the Minister’s face, decided it for her, then and there.

“I’m honoured, Your Grace, I... I’m not sure what I should say other than: Yes, I would be very happy to be your daughter.”

Lord Ghosaka’s expression melted into a broad and gentle smile. “You can call me ‘father’ from now on – and there’s no need to feel you should be trembling on your knees when we speak. Come, I’ll take you to meet with your new mother – she will be very pleased to be blessed with such a bright and beautiful girl as yourself for a child and heir.

“Naturally I will arrange for you to have an appropriate retinue of maids and servants to... to well, to take care of whatever needs taking care of for a young lady such as yourself.” Samavati was suddenly struck by an awful thought, “Your G... er father... could I ask a small favour of you? I hope it’s not too selfish or greedy of me to ask – I know you will provide many maids and all the kind of help I might ever need but... could I ask if I might bring one maid with me – I’ve known her since I was small and she’s ever so good a friend and companion for me. She’s a slave-girl actually. I’m sure she wouldn’t be any bother at all.”

“So, a few dozen provided by the Duke and Duchess not enough, eh?” he teased, “who is this special friend of yours?”

“Her name’s Khujjuttara, father.”

“Khujjuttara! I might have known – she gets everywhere! She’s all over the palace half the time already. I end up chatting with her quite often myself – of course, you can bring our cheeky crook-backed savant with you. It’s probably her influence that caused you to be able to figure out how to keep the public refectory silent at the alms-giving. The woman’s a genius.”

“Um, one more request father... if it’s not too much to ask: Would you be so kind as to let my former mother and father come and visit me sometimes?”

“Of course, dear girl, we all live in the same compound after all,” Lord Ghosaka said with his gentle voice, and turned to Mitta, “You and your wife can drop in to visit Samavati anytime.”



One of the great difficulties of becoming the daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Uttara-Vamsa was that Samavati had to get used to being called ‘Your Ladyship,’ ‘Milady’ and the like. She negotiated most of her new staff down to ‘Ma’am’ and Khujjuttara was, thankfully, happy with her usual “Miss Amba.” This was unless there was some sort of official function going on, or if the Minister or the Duchess themselves were present, then she would pronounce the full title of her dear charge and with an abundance of relish: “Would My Lady Samavati care for another one of these little sweeties or has My Lady sufficed her self for the moment?” – often supplied with a wink or at least half a sly grin.

As the months went by Samavati often now felt as she had done when a young child in Ujjeni, when they had played in the fish ponds in the garden and she had been just too short for her feet to touch the bottom and to keep her nose above the surface. Tamba had been a better swimmer and had never been bothered by this, but Samavati had nursed an anxious terror that, once out of her depth, she would not be able to get back to safety and be able to breathe once again. It was the same now. She felt like an

imposter, as if she didn't really belong, and that one day her star would fall and she would be cast out into danger and poverty once more.

Lord Ghosaka was an observant and gentle man and he swiftly recognized what was passing through his shy and serious daughter's mind.

"You know that, once you were accepted as our daughter, you became fully and legally entitled to your new rank and wealth – it's all rightfully yours, you don't have to feel as if you are an intruder or a fraud."

"But I can't help that that's exactly how I feel. You and Her Grace, I mean, mother, are such noble and refined people. I'm just an orphan, a merchant's daughter by birth, a nobody. People bow and scrape to me now but I'm unworthy; they call me 'Your Ladyship' and I keep glancing over my shoulder to see who they are talking to – I forget that it's me." A pair of tears ran down her golden cheeks and fell onto her chest.

"Let me tell you a story," said her father, "although it's a rather long tale of a shaggy dog..." He put his hand onto her shoulder and led her to a broad couch that looked out over the garden. "You might feel bad because you are an orphan, a foundling who turned up on the road to Kosambi, but how would it sound to you if I told how, not only was I a dog in a previous life, but also how, in this very life, I was born to a courtesan of Kosambi and cast away no less than seven times as an infant?"

"To be honest, father, I'd feel it was a shaggy dog story indeed..."

"Nevertheless, my sweet it is all absolutely true.

"Once upon a time, long ago, there was a man called Kotuhalaka. He was married to a woman called Kali and they had a son called Kapi. They were poor and decided to come to this great city of Kosambi to find a way to make a living of some kind.

"Along the road they suffered from great hunger and the father wished to cast the child away, to leave it in the wilderness and to fortune; Kali would not agree for she loved her son.

"During the night the man snuck out with the child to abandon it but, when the wife woke, she demanded he bring it back, which he did. With this cruel deed the father set the wheels in motion that then turned for many long years after.

"The family reached the house of a certain herdsman. He saw that they were hungry and he gave them rice-porridge to eat. The husband, not knowing his measure, ate far too much and then, as he could not digest it, passed away during the course of the night.

"Now that herdsman had a female dog that was expecting puppies so thus it was that the man, Kotuhalaka, entered a new existence within the womb of the herdsman's dog.

"Near to that herdsman's hut there dwelt a great enlightened being and he was accustomed to take his meals at that house each day. The woman Kali stayed there as a helper for the herdsman and they regularly offered food to the enlightened one.

“When the pup was born the monk often shared the food from his bowl with it so the young dog became exceedingly fond of him.

“When the dog was grown it would follow the great monk back to his hermitage in the forest, snarling at any vicious animals that might threaten his master. He would walk with the master whenever he had to go about and, whenever the monk took the wrong path (which he sometimes did just to test the dog’s faith and wisdom) the dog would vigorously bark or tug his robe until he was back on the right path once again.

“That great monk’s robe began to be worn out and he had to go to make a new one. Being plentifully blessed with psychic powers he flew up into the air and departed in the direction of Gandhamadana to make the robe.

“The dog, not knowing that the monk planned to return, was heartbroken to see him go; he began to bark and howl until his master was gone from view and then he died right there. When he died, because of having helped the holy monk for so long and because of his straightforwardness and lack of deceit, he was reborn as a resplendent deva in the Heaven of the Thirty Three Gods. He was no longer a dog of any kind but, even when he whispered, his voice carried a distance of sixteen leagues and when he spoke in a normal voice he could be heard all over the city of the devas – 10,000 leagues in extent – through this very circumstance the deva became known as Ghosaka, ‘He-of-the-Voice.’”

At this Samavati, who had been listening intently, thoroughly caught up in the tale, gasped audibly. “It’s all true,” her father said, “listen on.

“During this very age the life of that deva ended and I was reborn as the son of a courtesan here in Kosambi.

“Now, owing to their profession, a courtesan will keep a daughter but she will discard any sons born to her, so she had me left out on a refuse-heap.

“At that time a worker for the Finance Minister visited that heap and found me there. He took me home and his wife cared for me.

“The house-priest of the Minister read the signs for the day and said ‘the next Minister of Vamsa will be born this day!’ Now that Minister’s wife was pregnant too and he thought: ‘If she has a daughter, this boy my worker found will be our son, if she has a boy, this orphan child must die.’ Later that day his wife indeed gave birth to a baby boy. So, for a thousand gold pieces, he purchased me from the workman and he had me placed in a cattle-pen thinking: ‘The cows will trample and kill him.’

“Now it just so happened that one of the cows was very protective of me and she stood over me to prevent me from being hurt, so the cowherd thought: ‘This must be an exceptional child’ and he carried me home.

“The Minister heard I was still alive and purchased me again from the cowherd, and cast me away once more in a burning ground. I was saved *again*, by a she-goat this time.

“Then I was cast away on a caravan trail and the oxen of the caravans protected me.

“Then I was purchased again and the Minister had me thrown down a precipice but I fell where some reed-gatherers lived and they rescued me after the reeds on the roof of their shanty broke my fall.

“Once again the Minister purchased me but now he gave up his idea to kill me but raised me together with his son, as he realized my life must be charmed and great indeed would be the bad karma if he succeeded in achieving my death.

“Later on when we had both grown to manhood, his mind changed once again, as he wished to ensure his son’s accession to the post of Minister. He bribed a potter to kill me but, by a stroke of luck, the Minister’s son had lost money gambling and, though I had been ordered to go on an errand, he asked me to stay to win it back for him while he went to the potter’s house in my stead. I had no idea what my foster father had in mind and the potter, fulfilling his part of the deal, killed the youth who came to him right there. When it was I who returned to the Minister, rather than his son, he lost his mind.

“In his final effort to do away with me, conceiving me as the enemy of his own son, although no such enmity had ever entered my heart, he conceived another plan. He told me to go to a distant village with a message for a certain business partner of his; on the way I was to stop and rest at the house of a certain merchant, again someone that he knew quite well.

“When I reached the half-way village this merchant gave me a fine welcome. When I was resting there, his daughter – who is now your adoptive mother – saw me sleeping and immediately fell madly in love with me, for she had been none other than my dear Kali, when I had been Kotuhalaka.

She has a ready eye and she saw the scroll I was carrying for my father, the Minister of Kosambi. She was curious and so opened and read it while I slept. It instructed the recipient to kill me forthwith so she swiftly wrote a new letter, saying: ‘I am sending my son to stay with you. The merchant Sona of Patali village has a daughter called Rohini, please levy taxes throughout the region and arrange for lavish gifts for them. Please also arrange the marriage ceremony.’

I felt a similar profound and immediate love for her too, so our wedding was a glorious and joyful event for us.

“When word of the marriage and the gifts got back to the Minister, my foster-father, he lamented ‘I am ruined!’ and came down with a severe dose of dysentery. He summoned me back to Kosambi with my new wife, seeking to disinherit me, if nothing else. Rohini, meanwhile, reflected that I should know what had transpired, and she told me that it was through her that my life had been saved and that all of our good fortune had come to pass. She now urged me, with great vehemence, not to go to Kosambi yet,

rather to wait until the Minister died through natural causes, for his illness was rapidly worsening.

“Despite my foster father’s bad feelings toward me I felt I should be with him in his time of difficulty so we decided to return to Kosambi instead.

“By the time we arrived my foster father was confined to bed. When I stood at his feet, he summoned the receiver of his revenues. He asked how much wealth there was in the treasury, to which the steward replied that there was at least 400 million gold pieces and the deeds for many houses, fields and villages. Now it was his intention then to say: ‘All of this wealth I do *not* give to my son Ghosaka,’ but he mumbled and what came forth was, ‘I *do* give.’

“Ever astute, my beloved Rohini heard this and, afraid he would speak again and reverse this statement, pretended to weep and wail; she burst into tears and she fell on him, striking the middle of his breast with her forehead. Displaying such signs of profound grief she extinguished all other sound; no more was heard from my would-be killer and very soon after he breathed his last.

“Once he had died, word reached the King and he asked if the Minister had had a son. A few of his staff sympathized with me and spoke on my behalf to tell the King I was the Minister’s adopted son and thus it came about – the King gave me this post of Minister and the dukedom of Uttara-Vamsa that went with it.

“At this turn of events Rohini and I reflected that, in truth, I had had an ignoble birth and that she had been born into relative poverty in the village of Patali but, through good fortune and the results of past good karma we had now reached this greatly ennobled status. We also considered the various acts of deceit that had been carried out along the way and, to make amends, we vowed to institute alms-giving at our home; expending a thousand gold pieces in offerings every day.”

Samavati had sat all the while, staring at the long, fond face of her adoptive father as the tale unraveled. When he reached the end tears once again came to her eyes but now there were tears of gratitude and compassion. Her own life had had but a fraction of the travails of the Duke; and how was she to have known that he had had such a past? She also wondered to how many people he had confided the whole sorry tale. She reached forward and took his hand; they sat in silence for a while together.

Then Ghosaka said, “Rank and status are a farce, Samavati, a comedy and a tragedy that worldly people live and die for. Please don’t make yourself suffer over it; your pure-heartedness, your kindness is immense and that is what really matters more. In terms of where each person ‘stands’ in life – we are all frauds and we all belong, my dear.” Thus reassured, she felt right at home once more.



The greatest blessing of Samavati's new life was that her adoptive father had great faith in the Buddha and made frequent visits to the monastery he had sponsored – the Ghositarama – as well as to those built by his friends, the Kukkutarama, which was also for monks and the Pavariyarama, where the community of nuns resided.

Nowadays Samavati not only had the chance to offer food into the alms-bowls of the monastics as they made their early morning rounds through the city, but she also had many opportunities to go in the evenings and to listen to the wonderful talks that were given for all who were interested to hear. The Buddha and his followers were very generous with the teachings – there was no inner circle or special favours for devotees, no teacher's closed fist for the initiated – no, all were welcome to come and listen if they were interested to understand their life and the world a little better.

It was also the case – and something she appreciated greatly – that the Buddha never sought converts. She never seemed to see any of the nuns or monks out on the street trying to persuade folk to visit their temples or to follow their beliefs. She guessed there must be some protocol that prevented them doing that yet which also kept the monastery doors open. Irrespective of the reason behind it, it was also that unforced openness which was the very thing that made one want to 'come and see.'

They were magical nights. She would join her mother and father, with Khujjuttara and a few other members of the household, they would all dress in plain white clothing and would troop down the street together to the Ghositarama. Sometimes they would bring offerings with them. Sometimes they would come impromptu and empty-handed; there was never any expectation that things would or should be given but if they had some offerings in hand they would present them to one of the attendant bhikkhus when they first arrived.



There was one special night that Samavati would always remember.

The rainy season had recently arrived and the dust of the streets had long since been turned to impacted mud. The group from the Minister's palace turned into the monastery gateway, having arrived at a brisk pace. There had been a couple of rain-falls that day already but another heavy shower looked likely, just at dusk. They scurried into the grounds of the monastery and took the path straight to the meeting hall. The deep reverberations of the bell called them in and let others around the grounds, and in the town about them, know that there would soon be a gathering and that the Buddha would speak to them tonight.

Samavati grabbed Khujjuttara's hand and pulled her in under the shelter of the roof as the first dense drops pounded down. Within moments the roar was deafening as the deluge thundered about their ears. "Just made it, eh Miss Amba; look at it come

down!" Khujjuttara exclaimed and then, hushing herself, moved with the others of her party between the rows of seated lay folk now gathering quietly in the shelter of the Dharma Hall.

There was a spot near the front that was informally reserved for Ghosaka and his family and the group slid into place quickly as the light dimmed and the downpour crashed around them. The clamour was short-lived, however, and after they had all sat in meditation for a while, there was just the sound of dripping from the thatch of palm-leaves at the eaves and the frog-choruses of a myriad of happy amphibians.

The light of the sky had by now vanished completely and the space they all sat in was lit by an array of oil lamps arranged on the evenly-spaced pillars. All was hushed.

"Everything is so quiet," Khujjuttara leaned into Samavati's ear, "even with all the frogs a-courtin,' it's like the silence is stronger than the sound..."

By way of response, Samavati gently raised her finger to her lips and wrinkled a smile at her companion. She closed her eyes again.

At a certain point the silence intensified and then there was the Buddha himself, walking gently through the back part of the hall, to sit on a raised bench, facing the east towards them. The monks sat in semi-circles behind him and beside his seat – there were no nuns present as they never left the Pavariyarama after nightfall.

A warm glow spread through Samavati as she listened as closely as she could, leaning into his words and the mellifluous texture of the voice that carried them so easily.

She was transfixed, but she could not pretend that she could understand all that he presented. His teachings were filled with homely examples and similes from kitchen and cattle-pen, from battleground and bath-time – everything in life, it seemed, could be used to learn from, if we could only read the lessons that were there.

Some of the teachings involved ideas that were unfamiliar, or states of mind she could not imagine, let alone say she'd experienced – what on earth, or beyond it, was 'the sphere of neither-perception-nor-non-perception'? She had no idea but she little cared. So many of his golden words went straight to her heart and resonated with the pure harmonics of truth – they were so utterly *right* – that the details she missed didn't seem to matter:— Here was a person who genuinely understood life and could explain how to live it wisely.

As she reflected on this hitherto unknown feeling of certainty, she felt the Buddha was finishing his talk and she sharpened her attention for his final words:

"Just as, when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slopes and fills the clefts, gullies and creeks; these being full, fill up the pools; these being full, fill up the lakes; these being full, fill up the streams; these being full, fill up the rivers; and these being full, fill up the great ocean; so too, for a noble disciple, these things – unshakeable faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the

Sangha, and the moral virtues dear to the Noble Ones – flow onwards and, having gone beyond, they lead to the utter purification of the heart.

“Furthermore, in the same way, it is in accordance with nature that, for one who is virtuous and follows the moral precepts, freedom from remorse arises.

“For one who is free from remorse, satisfaction arises.

“For one who is satisfied, joy arises.

“For one who is joyous, the body is relaxed.

“For one whose body is relaxed, happiness arises.

“The happy person’s mind easily becomes concentrated.

“One who is concentrated understands and sees things as they really are.

“One who sees things as they really are becomes dispassionate and detached.

“It is in accordance with nature that one who is dispassionate and not attached will experience the knowledge and insight of liberation.”

As the Buddha pronounced these closing phrases, his gaze momentarily swept the space around him. He seemed to be taking in the resonances of each and every being’s heart; the silence was complete.

At this moment Samavati looked deeply into his presence and, somehow, he seemed to go on forever – to be a doorway to the infinite – her confidence in his wisdom and purity of heart became unshakeable at that instant. He and she and all things were both totally present and, at the same time, to her mind’s eye, totally transparent. She knew her life would never be the same again.

CHAPTER 11

THE FESTIVAL AT THE RIVER



“Quick! Quick! Look who’s here,” Ant was very agitated. “Bee, Maggot – come and look – I swear it’s Amba but she’s twice as big as when we last saw her.”

“That can’t be her. She was a tiny little thing and it’s hardly any time since we left her with the King’s caravan. It must be her big sister, the one that got lost – or someone else all together,” replied Maggot.

“It was her *younger* sister that went missing – no, it must be her – I’d recognize those eyes and her radiance anywhere. Don’t you remember how bright and pure she was for a human? It has to be her but how did she get so big so fast – she’s a grown woman...”

“Duh,” Bee chimed in as she joined them up in the branches of a jambu tree, “human lives go by in a flash. Don’t you two ever pay attention? By the time 80 or 100 sun-turnings have passed, it’s all over for them – that’s if they haven’t been killed by one of their own kind or stricken by some gruesome ailment. Our lifespans are ten or twelve times as long – at least a thousand of their years – so everything has to happen faster for them. They have their mid-life crises when they are only 45!”

Ant and Maggot both were overcome by a fit of the giggles at this bizarre thought – this being an age at which an average kinnari would scarcely be trusted to be able to look after herself.

“It’s definitely her,” said Bee, “Come on, let’s go and say hello before she disappears on us.”



Samavati, still imbibing the exalted mood that she had felt during the Buddha’s Dharma talk, had suddenly realized, as they were all making their way out of the hall, that she had a very *unexalted* need to relieve herself. She was bursting, but had been so

wrapped up in the presence and the words of the Master, that she had simply failed to notice this.

“Hang on a moment, I need to go...” She tapped Khujjuttara to let her know and said, “I’ll catch you up at the entrance.”

She saw some other women making a bee-line from the side of the hall down a small path that led to a dense thicket with low bushes and a couple of large rose-apple trees. She surmised that they had the same need as her and knew that to be a suitably secluded spot, so she followed along.

Comfort regained she was just reflecting, as she picked her way out through the shrubbery, “I must get my father to provide some proper amenities for women visitors here,” when she heard the sound of voices above her head. She turned, looking up into the branches and was startled to see three familiar faces smiling down at her.

“You’re back!” she exclaimed, “I thought you had disappeared forever. Where have you been all these years?” Samavati’s three ethereal friends floated down to join her on the path. Their filmy garments of flower-gauze, with many ribbons and filigreed draperies, billowed about them in the humid evening air and then gently settled around them as they landed. They huddled around her and she held them all close one by one, taking in, as she did, the rich draughts of fragrance that each of them exuded – their own natural perfume that seemed to match, somehow, the colours that each of them wore. Tall stern Bee was still in her magenta-hued sarong and was adorned with jewels of garnet and amethyst; Ant wore the same type of holly-berry red kanavera petals, peppered with tiny rubies and carnelians – as she had before – and Maggot was a shimmer of fruity pinks, a band of rosy-quartz across her forehead.

“Where have you all been?” Samavati asked again, “It’s nearly ten years since I last saw you.”

“Here, mostly, to be absolutely honest,” offered Bee, “it’s easy to lose track of time – human time especially – we’d seen you being taken into keeping by the royal party so we figured you were in good hands, then we just came back here, to the park, and carried on with life as usual.”

“The biggest thing for us this last little while is that the Buddha has been coming to stay and the monks have been living in huts here all the year round. It’s a tremendous honour,” Maggot’s voice was hushed. “Of all the places such a great and holy being as he could stay in, he chooses to be here at Ghosita’s park.

“We came to live here a while ago, since the time Lady Rohini and Lord Ghosaka started inviting the wandering religious seekers to stay, because of the sacred atmosphere that they brought. Now it’s really something special to be here.”

“Yes,” grumbled Bee, “and for the tens of millions of the rest of the high and mighty – the deva-hosts of half the sodding cosmos...”

“Bee! Don’t talk like that,” snapped Ant, looking about furtively, afraid that her friend’s rude remark would have been picked up by one of the passing beings of the higher realms.

“Ever since the Buddha came here,” explained Maggot, “many of the high and *exalted*,” she gave Bee a sharp look as she stressed the word, “love to come and be near the Master and especially when he gives Dharma teachings. When such crowds gather, the likes of us earth-spirits are somewhat nudged into the background. It isn’t easy for us to draw close to the Buddha – even though he lives right here – as he is surrounded by other devatas of great influence. Each of the deva-monarchs has a retinue of a hundred or a thousand kotis of devas, all placing themselves in close positions to see the Tathagata – so it is sometimes hard for insignificant female spirits, kinnaris like us, get a chance to come near and listen.”

“But a koti is 10,000,000! If that many show up how is there even room for any people within the whole city of Kosambi?” Samavati was puzzled.

“Just like time is different for different levels of beings, so too is space,” Ant began, “but...”

“But it’s not *that* different,” Bee chimed in, “and so we have to tiptoe around and make way all the time, even in our own forest.”

“But it *is* lovely, isn’t it, Bee? You have to admit; to have the Master here and to hear his words even from a distance – what can compare? It’s better than the sweetest nectar of the Udumbara flower, that only blossoms once every three thousand sun-turnings.” Maggot grinned at her and raised a single eye-brow. Bee tried vainly to sustain her frown but broke into a radiant smile regardless.

“OK – point taken. But you, Amba,” she turned to the girl, “what have you been up to?”

At first Samavati did not hear the question as, at the mention of the presence of trillions of devas who gathered around the Buddha, she had looked out into the forest night. She blinked; and as if her vision were clearing after her eyes had been clouded by fog or smoke, she slowly began to discern that all around her, filling the atmosphere of the Ghositarama, and particular densely in the area where the Buddha’s gandha-kuti, was located, the little cabin perfumed by the mere presence of his nature, the space was filled with a myriad bright presences, shimmering with colours and textures that there were not even names for. The forest was alive, thrumming with the energy of a divine and wholesome beauty.

“Amba?...?”

“Oh...sorry, I was distracted. I have been here many times but I had never noticed this mass of holy beings.”

“Not all of them are *that* holy,” began Bee, “But if you’ve only been staying close to the human crowd and gone into the hall and back, or if you’ve just come and seen the forest in the daytime, it’s no surprise that you have not see us at all. We tend to keep

away from most people if we can – present company excepted – and the night and the early morning are our most active times. The brightness of the day is too harsh for most of us.”

“Have you not ventured into the forest here before?” Maggot asked, innocuously.

“This was the first time I had to...well,” and here Samavati hesitated, not wishing to get into a description of body functions that the flower-fairies probably had no conception of. “It was the first time I’ve been away from the hall and the crowds at night-time, certainly.”

“So that’s why you’ve not seen us – or the deva-host – until today. Anyway, what have you been up to, apart from doubling your size? It seems a lot has happened since we left you on the road. You’re practically full-grown; are you married yet?” asked Maggot.

“Married! Not yet!... but I will be sixteen next year. I’ve never thought about it but I suppose it will come eventually.”

Samavati then gave the three a brief account of her last ten years, ending with her adoption by Lady Rohini and Lord Ghosaka and, tonight, her new-found and joyful faith in the Buddha and his words.

“Wasn’t Mr. Mitta and Mrs. Sundari upset when you took off like that?” asked Ant.

“Well I hardly ‘took off’ – I still see them virtually every day – no, they were very happy as they saw this would ‘advance my prospects’ as they put it.”

“What does that mean?” asked Bee, suspecting that she knew already.

“Find a rich husband, I think, although that whole thing seems very far off and hard to imagine. But it is good, being close to the Duke and Duchess – they love the Buddha and his Sangha, so I can come with them on nights like this all the time. Mr. Mitta was not so interested. So I had to stay home and embroider – not so much fun.

“And they love me, my new parents, they truly do.” The talk of family stirred a question and she was shocked that she had not thought to ask it before. “Did you ever find Tamba, my sister? You remember – you were going to look for her again.”

The kinnaris each stared at the ground or away from Samavati’s face for a moment.

“We never found any sign of her, after that day we met, and to be truthful, we all thought it so likely that she had died in the forest, from exposure or hunger or wild animals, that once we returned here, we never went back. Sorry... listen, I’m sure she has been reborn in a beautiful place – she sounded like a wonderful person.” Bee did her best to sound authoritative and realistic, confident as well as compassionate, although it didn’t come out as well as she had hoped.

“We did make an expedition once, to see your brother Krishna in Ujjeni – he’s a colourful character, isn’t he? And he is doing fine. Quite the strapping lad these days, and his mother seems a nice woman – very protective.”

“Couldn’t you ask around?” Samavati’s brow furrowed and her voice was plaintive. She was pleased to hear the good news of her brother but her main concern now was whether Tamba was alive and, if so, where she was. “You know, couldn’t you talk to some of these other devas, ask them to keep an eye open.”

“Us! You must be kidding,” spluttered Bee. “It would be like the blacksmith’s daughter popping into the Royal Palace to ask King Udena if he could pass on a message to the cowherd’s son for her. We hardly get to meet with the great lofty ones at all; besides, most of the devas higher than us earth-spirits don’t have the slightest interest in the human world, other than the sort gathered here who love the Buddha and the other great holy human beings.”

“We’ll spread the word amongst the other kinnaris and the rest of our crowd – the park-devas, grove-devas, medicinal herb-pixies, the dwellers in forest giants and other rukkha-devas – but Amba...” Maggot took her hand, “please don’t get your hopes up too much.” They all stood there silently for a while.

“By the way,” the girl said, now uncomfortable with these sombre reflections, “I’m known as Samavati now – I was given a new name by my foster-parents.” She didn’t know quite what else to add – the silence of the forest was ringing in her ears.

A fresh round of chorusing from the frogs was just beginning, when a familiar figure came limping up the path.

“So here you are Miss, I had quite the run-around looking for you. Thought you might have come to grief or something. Who were you talking to? Yourself?” She laughed at her own remark, also quietly hoping that her mistress had *not* been having long conversations with herself in the bushes.

Samavati turned to indicate to the three kinnaris; as she did so they, as a body, floated back up into the jambu tree, waving goodbye. As she looked back at Khujjuttara it was plain that her friend was not able to see them.

Samavati smiled and dodged Khujjuttara’s question by taking her hand and saying, “Come on, quick, it looks like another shower is brewing – let’s get back before we get soaked.”



Now the Rains were just about done the rumour was out that soon the Buddha would be departing on his annual wanderings. The wind had swung to the north and the air was cool and dry.

Samavati caught her father's attention one morning, to check if he knew any more about this story. "Oh yes – didn't I tell you? So sorry my dear. I've known his plans for days – or at least that he said he intended to be going soon. Tonight's the full moon observance so he'll give a final address for the season and then, tomorrow he should be setting out."

Samavati's profound love for the teachings and for the Buddha himself had an unusual flavour to her; she cherished the opportunity to be in his company and to partake of his great wisdom, and that of his lay and monastic students, however, she knew she would not miss him when he was gone.

Before – when she had been in Mitta and Sundari's part of the household and had had to stay behind – she had felt an ache of longing and resentment that she was parted from what was good and pure, and what she loved. Now, since that magical night when she had understood the words of the Buddha so deeply and when she had re-encountered her flowery friends, all was different – she was delighted to be in the presence of the Master but she knew she would not miss him in his absence.



A fat golden moon rose over the high eastern wall of Kosambi. It coloured every leaf of the Ghositarama while it painted the floor of the monastery grounds in bright blocks of light and strange shadow-patterns woven by the tendrils of tree-forms overhead. At the end of the Dharma Hall the last few rows of the assembled crowd were lit by the glow, as were the other white-robed lay disciples who sat on grass mats on the forest's carpet of dry leaves, since the hall was not large enough to contain everyone who had come.

Many had heard that the Buddha would soon depart and were therefore keen to listen:— Who knew when such opportunities would come again? Life is brief and uncertain... Many were keen not to let the chance pass by, to hear the words of an enlightened master from his own lips.

The moon climbed and its tint changed from the soft glow of its rising to a cool and serene ice-blue. Samavati sat perfectly still as the Buddha gave progressive instruction. Firstly he spoke on the powerful positive karmic effects of generosity and of living virtuously, how these simple practices and principles led to rebirth in heavenly states. Such states were described to be experienced both in this life – with the happiness of an unselfish mind, and a heart free from remorse for any dishonesty or wrongdoing – and also over many lifetimes, with one's reappearance among the celestial beings in realms of great bliss and beauty.

He explained the danger, the degradation and defilement caused by the reckless pursuit of sense pleasures, and the blessings, the joy that comes from renunciation. For

when we chase after happiness through the things we see, hear, smell, taste and touch, the mind habituates itself to every experience, the exciting becomes boring and leaves the heart depressed and weary. The foolish mind then can only think of finding a change of flavour, or a stronger dose to provide the elusive happiness once again, and again... and again...

The blessing of renunciation, he explained, was that of pure simplicity; when we train ourselves to be content with little, we can be happy in all circumstances. It was not about torturing ourselves or making life deliberately difficult – no – it was to do with independence. It was about learning to live so that we might be free from reliance on the caprice of circumstance. The role of simplicity, renunciation, was to provide us with the skill of being at ease with it all, whatever happened – whether we had a lot or a little, in sickness or in health, and whether we were praised or criticised.

Then, when the Buddha knew that the minds of many there were ready, receptive and free from obstructions, were elated and confident, he expounded the teaching that was unique to him and to his Order: the Four Noble Truths, the truth of dissatisfaction – that we all experience discontent at some point in life; the truth of the origin, the cause of that dissatisfaction – which is self-centred craving; the truth of the ending of dissatisfaction – that the heart can be utterly free of that pain; and finally, the Way – the path that leads to this very ending of all dissatisfaction, the path of virtue, meditation and wisdom.

Just as a clean cloth with all marks removed would take dye evenly, so too, while Samavati and the whole assembly sat there, the spotless, immaculate vision of the Dharma became clear to her once again, and to many others. She understood: All that comes into being, has to pass away. The Dharma is the only abiding reality. It is the Ultimate Truth, which is not confined by time.



The Buddha sat silently for a while, after he had finished his talk, then, casting his eyes about the assembly, he asked, “It may be that some amongst you have doubts about the spiritual path and how to practice it – do any of you have such uncertainties? Are there any questions you’d like to ask?”

“Ask friends! Do not afterwards feel remorse, thinking, ‘The teacher was there before us and we failed to ask him, face to face.’”

At these words, at first there was silence – only the ringing of the crickets and the call of a gecko – then a well-dressed young brahmin, seated near the front, spoke up.

“Venerable Sir, you are one who has seen to the Beyond, so I would like to ask you: what is the best way to regard the world so that one will not be seen by the King of

Death?" The question hung in the air for a moment as the Buddha took it in. It was as if he was weighing it, feeling its heft, before he offered up a response.

"If, Mogharaja," the Buddha replied, "you view the world as empty; if you are mindful and give up all fixed views about 'self' – seeing yourself as a permanent and special being – then you will have found a way to go above and beyond death. Look at the world like this and the King of Death will not see you.

*"Knowing the body as false as foam,
Knowing it as a hazy mirage,
Knowing the barb in Mara's flowers –
Thus the wise elude Death's Lord.*

*"They who look upon the world
As unstable, insubstantial,
As bubble, mirage and illusion –
They're the ones Death cannot find."*

Samavati took in these verses, and the words that preceded them, and felt a strange understanding dawn within her. Although she now felt the quality of *being* so intensely, especially when she was around the Buddha like this, with that intense awareness came an almost eerie sense of insubstantiality... Her body and its familiar feelings and textures – and even her mind with its thoughts and perceptions – all were now clearly seen as being just fleeting patterns of nature, like the swashes of moonlight and leaf-shadow that played across the floor. She felt both more completely alive in herself than ever, and yet her body and her thoughts seemed not really to belong to her at all.

A cool and spacious quality filled her being. What the Master had been saying about evading the King of Death deeply entered her heart.

She thought, "The body and these thoughts and feelings are what's born and what dies; but if those aren't really who and what I am, what is left for Death to take?"

The question surprised her, even though it had arisen within her own heart, yet it also brought with it a wave of great happiness and a radiant, vibrant peace she had never felt before.

Somehow she knew that the silence of her own mind was the real answer to the question. Nevertheless, off in a corner of her thoughts there was a curtain that she still felt herself to be groping at, trying to feel her way through, like a child fumbling amid dense draperies in the dark, trying to come up with a sensible answer to her own mysterious puzzle. The idea then struck her that maybe this was something that she could ask the Master himself.

Her heart started racing as she tried to formulate exactly what it was that she wanted to ask, while she waited for the right moment to arrive but... In the end, being far too shy to speak up in public, she held her tongue and decided she would mull it over and see if she couldn't solve this riddle by herself.



King Udena stood by the window of an upper chamber in his palace. It was a breezy spot. Whatever cooling movements of the air there were that might spring off the River Yamuna, that ran north-south below the ramparts, they were sure to be felt at this spot – one of the highest to be found.

It was now midway through the hot season and any shred of coolness was welcome. If truth be told, however, the main reason that the King was up in this aerie was that it afforded him a clear view over the palace courtyard and the unique traffic that would pass through it today.

The sun having reached the asterism of the Great Goddess in its progress through the yearly cycle, this was the day when the daughters of all respectable families of Kosambi, who by custom rarely went out without their parents, would go on foot with their own retinue of maids and bathe in the River Yamuna. The other occasion when they ventured forth in this fashion was for the annual display of ball games in the park, to do honour to the Goddess who dwells on the Vindhaya mountains.

The time-honoured path that this procession of young femininity would take ran right through the palace court. King Udena reflected that he did not know which of his honourable ancestors had instituted this aspect of the rite but it was a practice of which he thoroughly approved.

He had been watching for a while as various large and small groups of girls had passed below him, he and the cluster of male courtiers who were with him chatting and joking all the time. As the procession went by they kept up a banter of would-be-jocular remarks, praising and fault-finding, as men are inclined to do at such times.

He had just taken a swig of a cooling beverage when his eye caught the emergence of the newest arrivals from the shadows of the colonnade around the courtyard. He looked down at the crowd of black-haired maidens now advancing across the flagstones. The sounds of their eager conversation and the tinkling of their jewellery rose up to him but everything seemed suddenly to grow quiet.

His stare was frozen upon the girl at the front of the group. The cup slipped from his hand and spilled as he clumsily pushed it aside and he leant forward to grip the balustrade.

"Who is she?" His voice had lost every trace of bravado and vulgar humour. "Who *is* she? Doesn't anybody know?"

"She is the daughter of your minister Ghosaka, Messire; Samavati by name, I believe," one of the lords-in-waiting at his elbow provided. "She's quite a looker, eh?"

The next thing the man knew was that there was a fierce pain in his mouth and that, for some reason, the ceiling was spinning above him. The King had resumed his place of surveillance, meanwhile, watching closely until the last hint of Samavati had vanished from sight.

"I've never seen anyone so beautiful in all my life..."

"Pardon me, Your Majesty," chimed in the court minstrel, Pañcasikha, knowing what had just happened to the last one to offer a comment but deciding to risk it anyway, "but I believe you have."

"What do you mean?" The King's brow furrowed and his voice dropped to a suspicious growl. "You dare to question my judgment?"

"Not at all Sire, it's just that you have met this girl before – perhaps you don't remember..."

"Please, enlighten me; I have no memory of being in the presence of such a one before – I believe I would recall it, if I had, don't you think?" He flexed his knuckles again, just to encourage the minstrel to be respectful in his account.

"Samavati is now of sixteen Rains, that's why she's taking part in the festival at the river this year, Messire; when you met her it was a full ten years ago, so she was but a child then.

"Before she was adopted by Lord Ghosaka, she was the daughter of his chamberlain, Mitta and his wife Sundari. They in turn had adopted her after she had been orphaned and found on the road to Kosambi, far away in the wilderness. Your Majesty, she is the golden-skinned girl of whom you dreamed, and then caused to be given protection at that time."

"The golden girl... well, well."



The King acted at once and sent for his Finance Minister that very morning.

"Ghosaka – I have seen your daughter and I wish to establish her as my wife and Chief Queen; Her Serene Highness, Queen Vasuladatta will surrender her position – she's past child-bearing age by now anyway – and she will assume the role of a senior consort."

"My p-p-profound apologies, Your Majesty," Lord Ghosaka responded after a long and anxious pause, "but I...I cannot send her to you..." So thunderous was the look on his ruler's face that Ghosaka's words disappeared into a mumble.

"Don't you dare defy me! Do as I say and bring her – now!"

Lord Ghosaka trembled visibly, but with a deep breath and bolstering his posture he replied, “Your Majesty, it would not be right for us to give away a young girl like her in marriage. She is very innocent, for all her physical maturity, and when a maiden like her is given away, people are afraid that she will be abused and maltreated.”

This was possibly the bravest, or most foolhardy act that the Duke had ever performed; but he loved Samavati so much, and he was only too well aware of the fickle moods of his monarch, so he could not in good conscience just submit to the Royal Demand.

The King was angry and without further words dismissed his minister, ordering his guards to accompany him to his house immediately, to throw Lady Rohini and Lord Ghosaka and all their staff out of the gates and to seal the minister’s mansion against all entry.



The King ached to see the golden beauty of Samavati once again. The bathing area, where the daughters of Kosambi had repaired to, was beyond the city walls, at the base of a gully just upstream from the palace. To his torment, those same cooling breezes that had been so soothing, now wafted to him the sounds of hundreds of female voices, but all of the women themselves were concealed from view.

His mind hunted feverishly for some Royal Excuse whereby he could casually wander in amongst them, in their state of mass *déshabillé*. He knew, to his regret, that certain religious observances were ranked far higher in import than any royal prerogative. He felt he could easily override the discomfiture of the mob, but he feared the power of the gods and goddesses; and to disgrace the sanctity of the city’s noble virgins at their ritual bath would probably cause him to be cast down and torn to pieces by his own hounds, or some other such grim and luckless end.

“Sing me a song, minstrel, I am smitten and am being denied the one I long for. Make it spiritual, for this is a day dedicated to the Goddess Sarasvati, but not *too* spiritual – you know the kind I like.”

Pañcasikha picked up his vina and tuned it carefully, then he began:

*“Lady, your father Timbaru great,
Oh Sunshine fair, I give him honour due,
By whom was sired a maid as fair as you
Who are the cause of all my heart’s delight.”*

*Delightful as the breeze to one who sweats,
Or as a cooling draught to one who thirsts,
Your radiant beauty is to me as dear
As Dhamma is to the Arahants.*

*Just as medicine to him who's ill,
Or nourishment to one who's starving still,
Bring me, gracious lady, sweet release
With water cool, from my consuming flames.*

*The elephant, oppressed by summer heat,
Seeks out a lotus pool 'pon which to float,
Petals and pollen of the flower,
So into your bosom sweet I'd plunge.*

*As an elephant, urged by the goad,
Pays no heed to pricks of lance and spear,
So I, unheeding, know not what I do,
Intoxicated by your beauteous form.*

*By you my heart is tightly bound in bonds,
All my thoughts are quite transformed, and I
Can no longer find my former course:
I'm like a fish that's caught on baited hook.*

*Come, embrace me, maiden fair of thighs,
Seize and hold me with your lovely eyes,
Take me in your arms, it's all I ask!
My desire was slight at first, O maid
Of waving tresses, but it grew apace,
As grow the gifts that Arahants receive.*

*Whatever merit I have gained by gifts
To those Noble Ones, may my reward
When it ripens, be your love, most fair!*

*As the Sakyan's Son in jhana rapt
Intent and mindful, seeks the Deathless goal,
Thus intent I seek your love, my Sun!*

*Just as that Sage would be rejoiced, if he
Were to gain supreme enlightenment,
So I'd rejoice to be made one with you.*

*If Sakka, Lord of Three and Thirty Gods
Were perchance to grant a boon to me,
It's you I'd crave, my love for you's so strong.*

*Your father, maid so wise, I venerate
Like a Sal-tree fairly blossoming,
For his offspring's sake, so sweet and fair."*

Pañcasikha allowed the resonances of his final notes to fade gently. With eyes half-closed he lowered his beluva-wood lute; a pregnant silence shimmered.

"The sound of your strings and your song blend well, minstrel, neither prevails excessively over the other." King Udena pulled a fat golden ring with a large ruby from one of his fingers and tossed it to Pañcasikha. He caught it deftly, touched it to his forehead and pocketed it securely in a single fluid motion.

"I am fortunate to have such artistry in my court... I'm not so happy with all those adoring paeans for that Sakyan monk – I don't think much of him, in case you didn't know – but your words of gratitude for the girl's father do make me realize I was being hard on the good Duke. Ghosaka's a noble sort and he's only acting as any decent father might."



When the sun fell behind the western bank of the river, the grand gathering of bathers all packed up and headed home.

Samavati was shocked to find her mother and father sitting with disconsolate expressions outside the barricaded gates of her home, along with a crowd of the Minister's employees.

"What's happened to you all?" she asked, "What's going on?"

Her father explained, "The King saw you today and declared that he wanted to marry you. When we refused to give you up, he had us turned out of our home, and he has had the doors sealed. We have always wanted you to marry well, and to become a queen is of course a glorious thing, but you are still so young and have been with us so short a time."

“Father,” Samavati drew closer to him, “you have made a grave mistake. When a king commands, you should not say, ‘We do not give.’ Rather you should say, ‘If you would like to take our daughter, with her retinue, we will happily give her to you.’”

Lord Ghosaka was at first startled by Samavati’s response – he’d been trying to protect the girl after all. He was forced to conclude now that, above all things, Samavati was kind and compliant, and when one in authority expressed a wish, what could any good and well-behaved person do but assent?

Lady Rohini looked plaintively at her husband but neither of them could fault the innocent logic of their doe-eye daughter. It also seemed remotely possible that, perhaps, she actually *wanted* this and welcomed the turn of events, rather than was meekly submitting to it. So they shrugged, signalled each other via an inclination of their eyes and a wag of the head, and acquiesced.

“Very well, dear daughter, of that is your wish, we’ll do as you say.” Thus Lord Ghosaka sent a message to King Udena then and there that he and his wife consented to the match.



The marriage took place very soon after and Samavati had the ceremonial sprinkling conferred upon her. With this anointment she officially became Her Serene Highness, Queen Samavati of Vamsa. The women of her retinue from the Minister’s mansion all came with her so, to her great relief and delight, she was able to bring her beloved Khujjuttara as well.

“Thank the Goddess that all the fuss and kerfuffle are done with, eh, Miss Amba – sorry, I mean Your Serene Highness.” Khujjuttara smirked and plumped up some cushions in the lounge area of the harem building that they had all been granted.

“This is a nice place though, isn’t it Khujj?” Samavati plunked herself down; picking off bits of jewellery and piling them on a side table. “The Rains will come soon and cool things off – then we should be pretty comfy here. Don’t you think?”

“Actually,” Khujjuttara said quietly, still looking away and adjusting some of the furnishings, “I thought the Duke and Duchess said it right Miss, when they expressed their worries, but this *is* a step or two up, I do grant you that. But even if it weren’t, we’d have to like it or lump it.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s a serious thing to come and live in a king’s household, Miss. You’ve been invited to enter and you’ve accepted it. But now that you’re in, you know, you can’t leave it.” Khujjuttara’s normally hearty voice dropped to a quieter pitch. “Unless Himself decides to take you somewhere, Miss, you’re in ‘ere for good; and from what I hear, he doesn’t like the Buddha very much either, so I’m sorry, Miss, but I reckon you’ve made your last trip to the monastery.”

CHAPTER 12

A RIVAL ARRIVES



et again Samavati had to adjust herself to a new living situation but at least this time, she reflected, she didn't have to change her name, although she did have to get used all the 'Your Serene Highnesses' and the pomp of life in the court.



The year before her marriage had been the sweetest and richest of times. She had gone to visit the Ghositarama several days each quarter of the moon and, from time to time, the other two monasteries. There had been a vast and delightful range of teachings that she had received from the Buddha as well as from the great nuns and monks – wise and experienced guides such as Uppalavanna and Khema, leaders of the nuns' community, as well as Sariputta and Maha-Moggallana, Revata and the kindly Ananda who were most eminent among the bhikkhus.

She had also spent many delightful hours with her elfin friends; they in turn had introduced her to other kinnaris – family of theirs – as well as many other sprites, pixies and rukkha-devas who lived in the monastery grounds and in the quiet recesses of the Ghosita mansion gardens.

Samavati had been in heaven – at least she felt she had found a heaven here on earth – but now this was all lost to her. When she had first been married to King Udena he had wanted to spend every waking hour in her company and to pass every night at her side. Now, a year later, his attention was somewhat divided – he seemed to have many other affairs to attend to and he often invited her to take her ease at night and rest by herself in the harem, rather than in the royal bedchamber.

His distraction by other matters and his passing of the night hours with other companions – junior consorts or concubines from the harem – did not, however translate into much more in the way of freedom for Samavati. At first she had taken to

wandering the palace grounds at night, and was able to meet up with her kinnari companions once in a while. They even introduced her to a venerable naga couple who lived in the palace lotus pond – a large pool which also served as a reservoir for the royal household during the dry times of the year.

When the King had heard about her night-time jaunts, however, he had quickly put a stop to it, expressing concern for her safety to his Queen's face but grumbling about the fickleness of women and telling stories of Queen Kinnara of Varanasi, wife of King Kandari, as well as Queen Kanha who had five husbands but yet contrived to have an affair with a lame ne'er-do-well.

He also didn't allow her to go out and about in the palace grounds during the day, as he didn't want her to be drawing the attention of the many soldiers and courtiers who populated the palace. He wouldn't even allow her to spend much time with her father at court, saying, "When an older man adopts a voluptuous teenager as his 'daughter' you can never be sure exactly what he has on his mind." Samavati was faintly aghast at the suggestion of any improper motive on behalf of her beloved father, but she did not demur.

Her last resort had thus been to go out in the dews of dawn; to rise early, while all the world was still asleep, and to enjoy the silence of the garden, with its fresh scents and cooler air, and this was all her joy for the few weeks that it lasted.

She had promised not to venture forth unaccompanied but she had learned to leave Khujjuttara snoring gently in her usual place, on a mat by her mistress's bedside, and would take Rani and Chandra along instead. It was not that Samavati would or could deliberately engage in subterfuge, but she had noticed how, on the first day she had taken these two of her ladies-in-waiting with her – once they had settled into a small gazebo at the end of the garden to watch the dawn and to listen to the chorus of songbirds – within moments the two, who perennially chatted long into the night, had fallen fast asleep and become utterly deaf to the world.

That morning she had had long discussions with Bee and Ant and had heard from them some snippets of the teachings that the Buddha had been giving since she had been away. It was wonderful to listen to their account – fragmented though it was and filled with each correcting the other along the way – but this had ended all too soon as well.

"Who are you chatting with, Ma'am?" asked Rani – blinking thickly, trying to accommodate the bright light of morning.

"Oh..." mumbled Samavati, "...it doesn't matter... You dropped off! And look at Chandra – what time were you two up 'til last night, anyway?"

These pre-dawn walks had become a regular routine, but soon the gossip-mill had begun to turn and she realized that Rani and Chandra couldn't have always been quite so oblivious after all. One morning, when she had returned a little earlier than

usual to the main buildings of the harem, she overheard a couple of the maids as she walked by the lattice wall of a verandah.

“Has anyone seen Ma’am yet? I’m wondering if we should get breakfast going...”

“Off with the fairies, still, as far as I know. I think the ‘Serene’ bit of her title should be changed to ‘Seriously Spacey,’ if you ask me...”

Not wishing to cause further discomfiture, or to spawn more rumours around the court, she decided to abandon her efforts to meet with her old friends – it all seemed to cause such trouble and, she also considered, “I should learn to be more content with what blessings I have – I’m Queen of Vamsa at the age of seventeen and I’m healthy and well fed. If the chance to meet my companions or to hear the Buddha’s words appears, well, I shall be glad – and if it doesn’t happen then I have the after-taste of goodness from all my blessed memories. That should suffice.”



“Where have all the flowers come from, Khujj?”

Samavati was surprised at the effulgence of blossoms spilling out of her maid’s baskets. Thick garlands of marigold, intertwined torques of tuberose and frangipani, sprays of roses, lilies and delicate violets from the mountains – the fragrance was intoxicating, their colours flared against each other and the sheer abundance of them took her quite aback. “It looks like twice as many as usual. Has Sumana got a sale on today?”

Khujjuttara had broad grin spread across her face but there was also a strange, unaccustomed softness to her expression.

“Not exactly, Miss, but it’s certainly been a special day,” she replied, lowering the over-loaded carriers carefully onto an inlaid table.

“Fact is Miss, on previous days, you always gave me eight masakas to go and buy flowers with. Well, every day I’d go to Mr. Sumana the gardener and buy four masakas-worth of his best, and then pocket the change for myself.”

Queen Samavati’s large eyes were now fixed closely on Khujjuttara, trying to read her expression but, even though there was some contrition there she could see that, for some reason the woman was, more than anything, excited and happy.

No feeling of anger or resentment rose in Samavati’s heart. She didn’t fly into a rage and yell at her, saying, “You wicked cheater! Give me back the money you’ve stolen!” Instead she looked her in the eyes and gently asked, “Why didn’t you take the money today?”

“Because today I met the Buddha. I heard his teachings. He answered all my questions; he took all the time in the world, Miss, just to answer me. *Me*, Miss, a hunch-

backed slave and a thief. I get it now why you've been so taken with him all these years."

Samavati's wonderment at the change that she was seeing in her friend now melted into a warm and joyful happiness. She smiled, but saw that Khujjuttara was not in any need of consoling or forgiveness for her misdeeds – the servant knew the nature of her mistress and that she was incapable of bearing a grudge.

"So, what happened? Where did you meet the Master? On the street during his alms-round? At the monastery?"

"No Miss, it was at the house of Mr Sumana, the gardener. See, he supplies the Duke and Mr. Kukkuta and Mr. Pavariya with flowers – has done for years – and he said to the gov'nors, 'You honourable gentlemen get to offer meals to the Buddha and the monks and nuns on all sorts of different occasions. I've served you a long time so I'd like the honour of offering a meal to the Buddha one day myself. Please let me have the Master come to my house, just for *one* day.'

"They told him that they'd be very happy for him to offer a meal and that it really wasn't up to them in the least where the Buddha and his community received meal-offerings – it was up to the monastics to choose which invitations to accept or not. They also offered to help him out with anything that he might need for the big day.

"So I got to Mr. Sumana's to pick up today's flowers, and he says 'I've invited the Buddha to be my guest and I'd like to use all the flowers I have to honour the Master. If you just wait, you can join me in helping to offer a meal to the Buddha and the monks, listen to the teachings, and then, when it's done, you can pick all the flowers you want out of what's here.' It turned out that that was just about eight masaka's-worth, so that's what I brought home."

A quiet delight welled up in Samavati's heart, to know that her longest-standing friend in the world now not only could appreciate the beauty of the spiritual teachings that she had enjoyed these last years but, more importantly, that Khujjuttara now understood the teachings for herself, and had therefore been benefitted by that same understanding.

"It was amazing, Miss. The Buddha's a warrior-noble, one of the high 'n' mighty as ever was, but he talked to me just like he does when the Duchess or Lord Ghosaka asks him about their problems. And I had all kinds of questions for him too – once I got started – and you know how suspicious and hard to please I am! But he answered every one of them, or he got me to reshape the way I asked it, so as to get closer to the truth. It was as if someone had set upright something that had been knocked down or had pointed out the way to someone who'd got lost, or like they had brought a bright lamp into a place that had been dark.

"I never saw anything like it, Miss; he's the real thing. I had my suspicions that he was just like the other priest-types – but he isn't. He doesn't want anything from

anyone – but if you’re interested to understand life better, he’ll help out. Simple as that.”

“You too have now drunk of the Deathless, Khujjuttara” – Queen Samavati smiled broadly at her friend’s good fortune – “you and I are blessed indeed among those who walk this earth.”



When Samavati had pressed Khujjuttara for more details of what the Buddha had talked about, she had marvelled at the degree of accuracy with which her friend recalled his words. They had started off with Samavati interrupting and asking questions and making comments. After a while, Khujjuttara had patiently said, “If you want to know exactly what he said, Miss, it went like this...”

She had then closed her eyes, settled herself on the cushions and started to recite. Soon Samavati was convinced it was almost as if the Buddha himself was speaking – Khujjuttara used his very expressions; the same pace and timbre was there in her voice as in the Buddha’s own. Even her friend’s rustic accent faded of its own accord and she spoke with the Master’s own Sakyan clarity. She did not, however, follow the Buddha’s usual style of long and intricate discourses – instead she retrieved single nuggets of his wisdom and presented them, one by one. When she began each new section of what she recalled, she intoned, “This was said by the Blessed One...” and when she concluded each brief teaching, she closed with, “...so I heard.”

When Khujjuttara finally paused, having reached the end of the things that the Buddha had said, she opened her eyes and looked at her mistress; Samavati was glowing and she was also inspired with a highly novel idea.

“Have the maids prepare the reception hall and tell everyone that all the members of my household – all the women of this harem – are to gather there this evening.” She gave no other explanation.

When Khujjuttara returned, the two of them spent much of the rest of the day together and, when sundown came, it was Samavati that said to her servant, “Come now, Khujjuttara, it’s time for your bath.”

“Hang on a minute Miss, that’s what I usually say to you – what nonsense have you got in mind?” She was intrigued at what Samavati was up to but also guessed that she understood.

“I want you to pass on the wisdom that you recited to me earlier today, but to the whole group of us. So, for that, it’s only appropriate that we should serve you and honour you, as you’ll be fulfilling the role of being a mouthpiece of the Teachings.

“The Dharma is the most precious of jewels, the most holy of qualities, so it’s only fitting that it should be treated in the most respectful and reverential of ways.”

Thus it was that the queen became the servant, helping her dark-skinned slave to have her bath in perfumed water, and then with her own hands she dressed Khujjuttara in finest garments of pure white cloth; a beautiful, delicate sarong and an upper wrap that was thrown over the left shoulder so that she was modestly covered when she spoke the Dharma, for in those days it was often the custom for both women and men to wear the little or no clothing on the upper part of their bodies – unless it was cold and one needed to wrap up to stay warm. By way of adornment, the well-to-do often bedecked themselves with necklaces and armbands, long and heavy earrings and the like. But on this occasion, in deference to her role as a speaker of the Buddha’s teaching, Khujjuttara declined to put on even the modest jewellery that she usually wore.

As evening fell, with all of Samavati’s servants scattered around the hall, a gasp of surprise rippled through the air as she walked in behind the white-clad Khujjuttara, who then ascended the raised seat that had been arranged as a throne for when the Queen was being formally attended there.

The horror felt amongst the assembly at this bizarre sight – the slave climbing on the throne with the Queen as her attendant – was then amplified by Samavati bowing to the ground three times, before Khujjuttara.

“Now we *know* she’s really cracked...”

“Err... Your Serene Highness, I don’t think it’s quite...” one of the junior concubines began, then petered out, not knowing what to suggest.

“What should we do!?” hissed Chandra agitatedly, to no one in particular.

“What we should do,” interjected Samavati, “is to pay attention while we listen to the Dharma.”

“Please, Khujjuttara, recite to us the words of the Teacher as you heard them earlier today.”



Up to this point quite a number, if not all of the women of Samavati’s retinue, had visited the Ghositarama at some time or another – mostly before they had come to the King’s palace when they had been with Samavati at the Minister’s mansion – and had heard the Buddha and the other monastics speak. Many had been very impressed and inspired but they had not been expecting *this* – to be listening to the words of the Master from the mouth of one of the lowliest slaves of the court. Nevertheless, something in the manner of the woman’s delivery – her astonishing composure and her serene expression, together with the stately diction now issuing from her mouth – soon caused a transformation of the energy in the hall.

Disquiet and caustic comments gave way to interest, then to wonderment. Soon every ear in that perfumed and flower-decked chamber was attending with an eager appetite.

“This was said by the Blessed One, said by the Arahant, so I heard:

“Even though a bhikkhu might hold on to the hem of my robe and follow close behind me step by step, if he is covetous for desirable things, strongly passionate, malevolent, corrupt in thought, unmindful, uncomprehending, unconcentrated, of wandering mind and uncontrolled faculties, he is far from me and I from him. What is the reason? That bhikkhu does not see Dharma. Not seeing Dharma, he does not see me.

“Even though a bhikkhu might live a hundred leagues away, if he is not covetous for desirable things, not strongly passionate, not malevolent, uncorrupt in thought, with mindfulness established, clearly comprehending, concentrated, of unified mind and controlled faculties, he is close to me and I am close to him. What is the reason? That bhikkhu sees Dharma. Seeing Dharma, he sees me.’

“This is the meaning of what was said by the Master, so I heard.”

When Khujjuttara had finished speaking and had opened her eyes again, she saw the Queen below her, the circles of finely dressed ladies, and the dozens of maids and slaves of the royal court. All had brought their palms together and, with a single voice, intoned “*Sadhu!*” three times over.

Samavati did not need to look around her or to hint; she bowed to Khujjuttara three times and every other woman in the room bowed with her, and with sincerity; the air rang with a quickened luminosity. Some had fully grasped the import of many of the teachings they had just heard, others had been simply inspired by the ideas, but even those with the most meagre of understandings knew that they had just been part of a sacred moment – something truly holy had happened – and so each and every one saw both Khujjuttara and Queen Samavati in a new, radically transformed way.

Lady Chandra then spoke up on behalf of all of them, “Friend, from this day on we would like to rely on you as our mother and our teacher” – this even though Chandra had been one of the haughtiest of the young kshatriyan ladies in the court. “Please go to the Buddha whenever you can and listen to his discourses, then come back and pass them on, explain them to all of us.”

She then realized that perhaps she should have checked with Her Serene Highness before making this bold request but, seeing Samavati’s face beaming at this idea, she put herself at ease once again.



Whenever the Buddha was resident in Kosambi – staying at one of the three monasteries – Khujjuttara would be dispatched to listen to the teachings and to bring them home to be shared with Queen Samavati and others of her harem.

Samavati had tried to get the King to be more interested, often using their increasingly rare moments alone together to raise the subject of letting her visit the Buddha or to have him come to the palace, but Udena would have none of it. All mention of ‘the Sakyan monk’ was treated with short shrift.

When Samavati voiced to Khujjuttara her sense of bewilderment about his attitude, she responded with, “But, surely you heard about *that*, Miss.”

“Heard about *what*? I’m rarely in the market for gossip Khujj – I never get to hear about anything much at all.” She chuckled ruefully. They both knew this to be true as the Queen never passed on any juicy tidbits about anyone else and, when someone tried to get her excited about some prime misdeed or scandal, she always smiled benignly and remained silent, so the ripe morsel regularly seemed to go quite stale, right there.

“You remember the story way back – about Angulimala giving up his life as a bandit and then becoming a monk?”

“Of course, he has been one of the great bhikkhus in Jeta’s Grove, near Savatthi, for years now – he is an Arahant and of great distinction – I’ve heard all about him.”

“Well, Miss, it seems that some years ago our Chief Minister – Satagira – was caught out by His Majesty when he’d pretended to have Angulimala killed. Well, when the bandit appeared as a monk and the Buddha vouched for his being on the strait and narrow, well, that seemed to settle it for everyone.

“But it didn’t for Satagira, ‘cos he looked doubly an idiot now, didn’t he? What’s more his wife, the Lady Vasitthi, admitted to plotting with Angulimala to kill him. So there’s Satagira; he’s lied to the King, been hoodwinked by his wife, she becomes a nun and then Angulimala gets off scot free into the bargain. Well, Lord Satagira, he’s really bent out of shape by all this, isn’t he? Especially when His Majesty then ups and rewards the Buddha for taming the bandit by donating the old Krishna temple and that forest out beyond the eastern walls of the city.”

“The Simsapa wood?”

“Yes, that’s the one. Well, at first a whole group of monks and nuns were settled out there but then His Lordship – Satagira that is – gets His Majesty’s ear, with a bit of help of the court priest Maha-Baka and his cronies. They put it about that Angulimala was still a robber, but that he operated out of Kosala these days; that the Buddha had pulled the wool over the King’s eyes by vouching for the bandit so that then Angulimala, in return, would keep the monasteries well-supplied with ‘offerings’ from his stock-in-trade – you know, robbing people and killing them.

“Of course there isn’t any hard evidence – how could there be? – just rumours, but because Angulimala lives up in Kosala most of the time now at the Jetavana, outside of Savatthi, he’s well out of the way and can’t speak for himself. So anyway, once

Satagira got this bug in the King's ear by starting the rumours, His Majesty's been less than eager to have anything to do with the Buddha.

"That's why the Simsapa forest used to be where the Buddha would stay when he was near Kosambi but the King then made some excuses and gave the old Krishna temple back to the brahmins. They had been burrowing into his other ear about their 'hancient and divine rights' to the old temple, and they weren't happy with all the Buddhist nuns and monks being around 'their' shrine, so all of the Buddha's disciples that had been living there scattered again until Master Ghosaka met up with the Buddha in Savatthi. Then he and his friends built these new monasteries for them here.

"When the Simsapa wood and the old Krishna temple was first given to the Buddha, Master Ghosaka was up ambassadoring in Uttarakuru for a few years; that was when I was quite young. By the time the family got back from the north the Buddha had apparently got wind of the King's renegeing on the gift, so he just stayed away. Until Lord Ghosaka invited him back again, of course.

"It's a bit of a sore point, you know, between the King and the Duke, but seeing how he's a financial whizz and the King needs him to take care of the books, His Majesty cuts him a lot of slack. But he won't have anything to do with the Buddha, not on his own accord.

"The King's a proud man, Miss, and jealous."

"Don't I know it," Samavati smiled gently.

"But he's sharp as a tack too – no mistake – and practical. If he's given good reason to respect the Buddha, or if he finds out that Satagira's duped him again, he might well tilt the other way."

"Let us hope so," Samavati agreed.



It was the full moon day that marked the end of the Rains and the beginning of the Cold Season. King Udena sat in his throne room, sharing a drink with his Chief Minister Satagira and waiting for the tax-paying ceremonies to begin – it was one of the most tedious events on the calendar.

"I fully appreciate that she's a perfect model of virtue, honesty and beauty – she's a veritable Sita, if not even *more* pious than the wife of Lord Rama of legend – and, yes, those are wonderful qualities in a queen and as an example to the court and the people... but, that's not always what a man wants in a *wife*." He took another hearty swallow of liquor from his goblet.

"Don't I know it, Sire? My own first wife – you remember, the one who took off and became a nun – she was just the same; beautiful, dutiful, virtuous..."

“ ‘Til she plotted to kill you, eh!? Ha!” King Udena was playful in his cups and gave Satagira a thump on his shoulder.

“...Er yes, well, what I mean is she was lovely and perfect in *most* ways and I adored her but... it all went cold after a while. She plainly could not return my affection so then her beauty began to pale and to leave me frozen too. Damn shame...” He too gulped another deep draught, with a doleful sigh for a chaser.

“The Queen doesn’t dislike me at all, or so she says... it’s just... Oh, here she comes.” Samavati and her attendants appeared beneath the archway that formed the grand entrance to the audience chamber.

She was conducted up to the throne beside King Udena and she smiled at him with her usual genuine and innocent gentility.

They greeted each other formally and she settled, cross legged, beside him. This was the third year she had participated in this ceremony with him and so was well-used to the form by now.

The heads of all the towns and villages from around the kingdom of Vamsa had spent the previous few weeks gathering the taxes for the year. They would all come on this one day, dressed in their best and bearing, along with the cash that was due, a quantity of the new rice crop for the royal granaries as well as some precious artifact that had been made by their local craftspeople. Often weeks or months of work would go into this latter aspect of the offering for it was well-known that, if some device or decoration, or some inspirational shrine-object tickled the Royal Fancy, there could be favours bestowed on the village in question that would benefit all for the rest of the year, perhaps longer.



It had turned into a very long afternoon – the King was bored witless and was, at this moment, inordinately glad once more that the Queen was patient and kindly, and interested in each member of the endless procession of 158 different boroughs and village districts that came to pay their dues and offer their handicrafts. The end of the line was now in sight so King Udena felt his spirits begin to lift; he also felt he could *really* use another drink but the protocol of the event required that he abstain until the final offerings had been made.

Up to this moment each of the submissions had been brought forward by the village or town headman – so it had largely been a string of pot-bellied, dhoti-wearing gaffers that the royal couple had received during this day. It took him a moment to register what was happening but, rather than yet another paunchy and bag-eyed yeoman bearing some ‘enchanted’ basketwork, here instead was a young village wench, a slender, black-eyed beauty. She was crowned by a thick coil of glossy ink-dark

hair decked with delicate jewelled trceries. Her ears and hands, her neck and arms, her waist, were all hung with the same finely-wrought filigrees of gold and silver. She approached the thrones and, before she bowed, she – almost accidentally – caught the King’s eye with the briefest of coquettish glances. She was dazzling.

“Now,” pondered the King, “this one’s got some fire in her...”

He cleared his throat, “Are you the headman? Must be an unusual village!” He flashed a look around the hall and just the right number of courtly voices chuckled at the Royal Jest.

“No, Your Majesty, begging your pardon. It is I who am the headman,” said a man in his late middle-age, who appeared from just behind the girl, a hopeful but quaveringly anxious look flitting across his face, “... of the brahmin village of Harittananda; this is my daughter, Magandiya.

“Since it is the custom to offer Your Majesty a small, special and unique specimen of local craft as a token of esteem – along with the submittal of rice and the gold coin that is our obligation – we of Harittananda felt that since our beloved daughter is the most unique and precious product of our humble hamlet, we took the liberty of presenting the, albeit temporary, magnificence of her ethereal beauty in lieu of some other more coarse, material gift. We trust that Your Majesty will not be displeased by our breach of protocol, or will consider us stingy or lazy on this account.”

The brahmin had been rehearsing this speech for weeks and now breathed a half-sigh of relief that it had all come out as planned. The other half would come when he found out how the King would respond.

Silence hovered.

“No, no displeasure at all...” the King could not take his eyes off the girl and she, in turn, risked darting another glance at his face. “But we *do* think that you are being stingy... why should her presence in the Royal Sight be only temporary? Eh? Hum...?”

“Errm...no reason, Your Majesty.”

“Exactly, so, in the spirit of invention that you have so, er... creatively employed here, we will keep the girl and you can keep the coin.”

“Why, Your Majesty, you are too kind; this is too great an honour.”

“Is it? Would you like us to reconsider? Hmm?”

At this, all powers of restraint were unable to halt a sharp flaring of the eyes and an intake of breath in Magandiya, even though the modest smile that was the image of meek daughterhood remained unwavering on her visage.

“No, No! Your Majesty – it would be the greatest honour for our dear daughter to enter your household.”

“Yet you look concerned.”

“To be truthful, Your Majesty, I feel a dowry worthy of your Royal Status would bankrupt not only me and my family but also my whole village as well...”

“You have a short memory, headman.”

“How so, Your Majesty?”

“We just awarded you several bags of gold and silver coin – if we are prepared to give you that for her, what does that say about any other expectations we might have had of you?”

“Your Majesty is too generous.”

“Apparently – but if you are wise you will not try to dissuade us of the habit at this moment.”

“Quite so...” mumbled the ecstatic headman as he withdrew backwards on his knees. The plan had gone completely as he and his wife had hoped. Magandiya looked up, gazing fully into King Udena’s face for the first time, and drank in the wolfishly besotted look she found there.

In her flush of relishing this she also seized the moment to glimpse how the young Queen Samavati had taken the exchange. In the fleeting instant that their eyes met, Magandiya was surprised to see only a benign and open friendliness; she’d been armouring herself against a blast of jealousy, and expected to see at least some anxiety. She was amused that all that seemed to be there was a dumb, doe-eyed docility.

The realization, “This is going to be easier than I thought,” washed swiftly through her mind, leaving behind it a delectable aftertaste.

For her own part Samavati was more surprised than hurt, or threatened, when she saw in the elegant woman’s eyes an unbridled hate, an ill-will of vitriolic strength.

“Now, girl” – Udena reached forward to take the young brahmini’s hand, “come here, then we can get the rest of this splendid ceremony over and done with.”

One of his attendants had rushed a plump cushion to the side of the double throne next to the King. Magandiya arranged herself in a posture of becoming humility blended with an alluring charm. She gently leaned herself so that her silver-laced shoulder rested against the King’s thigh and his hand could caress her midnight-black and thickly coiled coif.

“How would you like to be a Senior Consort?” he asked. He knew there would be no need for a reply.

CHAPTER 13

KRISHNA AT PLAY



o sooner had Dusaka left the compound than Savitri started to babble nervously and critically about him being a madman and disgusting, and how such wayfarers were a scourge upon society.

Krishna pointed out that he must have been someone special since he seemed to know all about them and to have inside knowledge about their possible futures.

“How could he be a rogue if he knew all those things about what might happen to me? And he knew Amba and Tamba too, Mum. How can you say he’s mad and bad?”

“We’re one of the leading families in Ujjeni, *everyone* knows us! He would only have had to ask a few people at the market place – or at one of those toddy-shacks where the drunken disreputables gather – and he could have found out everything he needed to know in order to try to impress us, “she countered.

Krishna was far from convinced, “What about his dog, Mum? It was pretty clever with that tray of cola cordial – how do you explain that? He must be magical to be able to teach a dog to do something like that.”

“You’ve seen conjurors in the park doing much better tricks than that! Don’t be silly – he’s just some charlatan like all the rest of them, a vagabond who’s up to some mischief or other. Such ‘holy men’ are all false and greedy; I don’t know exactly what he’s after but you can be sure he just wants to dupe us in some way, to get something out of us. He’s got no more magical powers than I have or our steward Kolita. Now, what would you like for lunch?”

Refusing to be side-tracked, and with the inexorable persistence of a self-assured seven-year-old, Krishna, carried on, “So, what’s a ‘mangala’ Mum? He made a lot of that, didn’t he?” Savitri now set off walking briskly out of the loggia where they had been sitting, while the dark and shiny boy padded behind her down the corridor.

“What is it, Mum?”

“It’s just a lucky charm, an amulet of some sort.” She strode along as if trying to leave the whole discussion behind in her wake. “What he’ll want to do – you’ll see – is getting us convinced that there’s some special sacred lucky charm that he has for sale, and that if we buy it we’ll be safe and happy forever. It will be some grotty little scrap of cloth, some dried up animal part, a complicated formula to recite backwards, or some bizarre procedure we have to follow – and it will only cost us the price of this palace and three-quarters of your father’s fortune.

“One man I heard of swore that he was protected from all harm as long as, each day, he saw a red fish, heard the words ‘full grown,’ touched fresh cow-dung, and carried around the foot of a dead rabbit. Do you know what happened to him? He leaned too far over the river-bank trying to see his daily red fish swimming there and he fell in and drowned. Not *that* auspicious and lucky, if you ask me.”

Savitri felt she’d finally settled the issue as they carried on through the halls and corridors for a while in silence, but when they reached the kitchen area for her to sort out lunch, a quiet voice behind her rose to her ear.

“Mum, can I have a dog?”



The ancient city of Ujjeni straddled the River Carmanvati. Just beyond the northern perimeter of Kamanita’s palace there was a bend in the river which was a popular place with the towns-people for doing their laundry.

One of Krishna’s favourite pastimes was to sneak out of the palace grounds and to accompany Gopali, the housekeeper, and her daughters Khamba and Khina, down to the ghat with their oversized bundles of all the family’s washing. His excuse was that he liked to ‘help’ them but it was, more than anything, an opportunity to get out of the confining walls of the palace and to chatter with Gopali and the others as they pounded the cloth on the beating stones, and rinsed their laundry in the chill river waters.

As he was usually the only boy there – the male dhobi-wallahs had their patch a little further down-stream – he also enjoyed showing off and doing his best to charm all the womenfolk who were gathered on the steps with their wash. In between carrying occasional bundles over to Gopali at her scrubbing slab, and collecting freshly laundered items from her – and liberally splashing and teasing his friends the twins – he kept up an incessant flow of questions and conversation. One of the local sports was to reckon, unbeknownst to him:— Would he ever pause for as much as a count of ten during the entire time that he spent there in the mornings?

His mother was well-aware of these supposedly secret trips out of bounds but she trusted Gopali as a guardian since, even though she was young, she was reliable and a watchful sort. And the boy needed to find some outlets for his energy.

Not long after the visit of Dusaka he brought the subject up, when they were all by the riverside. Khamba and Khina were busy spreading out the long strips of cloth that comprised the sarongs and dhotis to dry in the morning sun, so it was Gopali whom he was grilling on the question.

"Why does my mother hate the wanderers and monks so much? I think they're really interesting. What's she got against them? This monk came to see us the other day and she was so upset about him. I liked him even though he *was* very odd. You remember – the one with the clever little dog and the big earrings."

"How could I forget? Your mother," said Gopali, folding an embroidered sarong in her hands and twisting the two ends in opposite directions, "she's never liked that sort of fellow at all. She's okay with the brahmin priests, they get married and have children just like ordinary people, but monks like that character who came last month – she's never thought much of them.

"They're not family types, see, and so they don't have children – don't even have girlfriends on the sly, at least the proper ones don't" – she winked at Krishna mock-conspiratorially. "The nuns are the same – no husbands, or boyfriends for that matter – all that lot prefers to live outside the usual way of living with others. They prefer to keep it simple – not like us lot." She smiled and looked over at her daughters, busy at their tasks on the bank at the end of the steps.

"What *are* you doing Khamba?" She called out, seeing the girl carefully draping some cloth at a particularly unsuitable spot. "It'll tear if you put it on that thorn bush and the wind picks it up – take it up the slope to that grassy patch – that's it, good girl."

"So, why do they want to live like that? Surely that's not much fun – I thought everyone got married," Krishna carried on, insistently.

"Not everyone, by no means," Gopali replied, as she wrung another length of dhoti-cloth, "but it's the ones that deliberately chose to live a life like that, that treat everyone as sisters and brothers, they're the ones that rile Madame Savitri. It's like they're going against everything she sees as real and precious – being a mother, having and raising children – to her that's the spirit of life itself so she looks at those monks and nuns as nature-haters, life-deniers."

Krishna took all this in thoughtfully, which is to say he paused for a few seconds before he fired back, "But that doesn't make sense. Dusaka – the monk who visited – he seemed really happy. He didn't look like he hated anything." Khamba and Khina had rejoined them in the shallows of the river and Krishna absent-mindedly squirted them with water, using a technique he learned recently from Hari and Govinda, two of his classmates studying with the pandit and the bookkeeper. They deftly splashed him back, with a synchronized two-pronged blast, and left him dripping.

“Another reason,” and again Gopali eyed him slyly sideways, “is that it was a visit by such a one about five Rains ago, that caused your father to take off, and to become one of them into the bargain. It’s what we grown-ups call ‘a sore point.’

“Your dad was sure it was Angulimala in disguise but why on earth that should have made him want to walk away from you and your mother, and the rest of his family and all his wealth, is anybody’s guess, young Sir. Now, how about you test your strength and see if you can bring me over another couple of armloads of those grimies.”



The hours of the day that Krishna was obligated to spend at his studies – of letters and recitation with the brahmin, and calculations with the bookkeeper – were now greatly enlivened by the arrival of a kshatriyan warrior. Savitri had him hired to teach Krishna and his companions, other sons of wealthy merchant families of Ujjeni, the arts of weaponry and combat.

Before this old soldier, Ajjuna, had arrived on the scene the only sparring that Krishna had been able to engage in was some random wrestling bouts with Hari and Govinda, Rama and Sahadeva, and the verbal tussles he had had with his scriptural teacher, Maha-pandita Saccaka.

Krishna had been asking about what a ‘mangala’ was from whatever people he encountered, and he had received a great variety of answers on the subject: some said it was a kind of omen; some that it was the astrological auspices, the pattern of events predicted for a day; some said a lucky charm; some a protective mantra; some a kind of blessing; some a magical amulet... He had tried to get his teacher Saccaka to give him a definitive answer as to which of these things a mangala actually was – especially such a one as could defeat Death itself – but all the pandit had offered him was:

“I don’t say a mangala *is* a lucky charm, and I don’t say it’s something else. I don’t say it’s otherwise...hmm... I also don’t say it’s *not* a lucky charm *and*, of course, I don’t say that it’s not not one either.”

“So, should we believe in mangalas, Sir? Even if we don’t know what they are.”

“What do you mean, boy, you ‘don’t know what they are’? Don’t you listen? I just explained it to you. Of course you should believe in them.”

“But Sir, if I say I believe in a mangala although I don’t even know what it is or how it works – wouldn’t I be lying? So what is it better to do; say ‘I believe’ and tell a lie, or to say ‘I don’t know but I want to find out’?”

“Don’t be cheeky, boy. Write me out ‘All brahmins are wise and holy’ a thousand times, and your handwriting had better be good.”



Krishna's world became an easy tumble of days; his friends would arrive at the palace mid-morning and there would be a couple of hours of classes, up until noon when they would break for lunch and play or, if it was in the heat of the year, take a siesta in the coolest regions of the compound.

He and Hari, Govinda and Rama, together with the gardener's son Bhijjaka and Sahadeva formed an inseparable gang. Hours would fly by each afternoon as they climbed the trees of the garden, explored hidden recesses of the many palace buildings, occasionally set booby-traps to surprise Bhumija the gardener or Vishva who looked after the maintenance of the buildings, or (if they were feeling highly courageous) to provoke Kuvera the custodian.

Predictably, however, the most regular of their victims were the girls of the house – the twins Khamba and Khina, and Madhu and her little sister Padma, who were the daughters of Kuvera. If nothing else they were teased and heckled from afar, even if no more practical mischief was possible.

Whenever any prank had been pulled there was little if no doubt as to whom was to blame, and the process of being hauled before his mother, eyes dutifully if not shamefully downcast, while the air was turned purple with her wrath, became a familiar procedure to Krishna. In the most extreme of cases she would threaten him with retribution from Kuvera – or, somewhat more daunting, a disciplining by Ajjuna – for both of these men were seasoned former soldiers.

Yet, somehow, the whipping until the flesh hung off his bones remained only in the verbal realms and, once suitably contrite and avowing eternal commitment to good behaviour, Krishna would be released from the wrathful Maternal Presence. With penance having thus been exercised, and having taken the rap once more for his friends, the gang was again free to launch into business as usual.



Within a short time after Ajjuna had been first employed, Krishna forgot all else when in his presence and eagerly applied his copious energy to the arts of swordplay, weapon-care, archery and javelin. It was bliss, and the whole gang of nine-and-ten-year old boys soon came to worship their burly and battle-scarred instructor.

One of their great joys, especially when they were all sweat-stained from their exercises, was to slump in the shade of the great banyan at the edge of their improvised 'training ground,' that is the back lawn, and to ask him where his particular scars had come from. The warrior would then be drawn into the account of the war and the battle

in question that had supplied each gouge, impalation and gash. The boys were enraptured.



The group of them grew together with deep bonds of comradeship between them. Krishna knew these were the best friends anyone could have and he felt an endless delight in their company.

He fell into the role of leadership without any difficulty and, as he accompanied his mother to public events from time to time, she seemed profoundly proud that her dark little boy was turning into a tall and handsome man. By the time he was twelve Rains he was several finger-breadths taller than she and she glowed visibly when they met the other prominent families of Ujjeni. Without fail they would remark on how handsome he was, just like his father, and what a fine figure her son now cut: “He has the eyes of the kunala bird!” “You must be very happy; your son looks like the head of the family already.”

Long-forgotten were the whispers of doubt about his parentage and the aspersions that had been cast upon his mother; these were so long-forgotten, in fact, that there had arisen almost the opposite effect. The people of Ujjeni had come to so admire this charming and talented boy – who had now been adding the arts of music and painting to his other skills and achievements – that his mysterious and intense darkness had become a sign taken to be indicative of great blessings.

At that time, in the Ujjeni area, the usual social prejudices against darker skin, regarding it as being ugly and indicating a lower status, faded away. Krishna was so fine-looking, and almost divinely gifted and lovable, that there was a levelling of the social order in that region; somehow the usual biases and judgments lost their foundation and a greater tolerance and openness prevailed.

Savitri was glad indeed that others delighted in his qualities and she was relieved that all her efforts now seemed to be paying off. She had worked hard to steer him toward excellence in worldly skills and it seemed that his heart was committed solely to that dimension. He asked less spiritual questions than he had when he was younger, and as he had especially done after the visit of that weird sanyasin with the dog.

She had been concerned that, like his errant father, he would get the spiritual bug so she had exerted great efforts in manoeuvring him away from such pursuits. With the passing of years she felt she’d succeeded well.



The pranks and adventures still came thick and fast amongst Krishna and his knot of friends. As they all grew taller they continued to vie with each other as to who could out-run, out-climb or brave more risky feats than the rest.

In the multitude of escapades they had engaged with over time, where they taunted the men of the household and had teased the young girls around the place, they had tended to leave the adult women alone and to give them a wide and respectful berth.

This respect came after realizing that the men's wrath was mostly noise and bluster, but when they upset the women, or spoiled their work, the retribution was immediate and painful. There was also no regard whatsoever for rank – it was no matter that they were the sons of the wealthy – Gopali the housekeeper or Bhojani the cook, and even Nana the old ayah, would round on them and belt them up and down with a broom or a bamboo switch, or even the long staff that was kept for dissuading monkey troupes from raiding the kitchen stores – there was no weak and sloppy nonsense about 'boys will be boys.'

The lady of the house, Madame Savitri was almost alone in never having raised her hand to them. Thus a healthy respect and caution had been built up, and the women's territory had so far been avoided.

It was Govinda who had challenged him, when the day finally came.

"I'll bet you wouldn't dare to go and sneak a look at them all bathing. Krishna the God did it when he was young – he hid in the bushes by the river while all the gopis were in the water – he even stole their clothing so they had nothing to put on when they came out.

"I bet you'd never dare."

"How much?" Krishna riposted, a light flaring in his eye. "How about that new sword your parents gave you last birthday?"

"And what'll you bet?" asked Hari, "Are you going to risk something if you don't go through with it?"

"Sure," Krishna was finding himself eager to rise to the challenge, "how about my bow and quiver – which I've had for a year, it's true – but I'll stake my new vina as well. If I get cold feet, they're all yours, if I succeed in watching 'the gopis' bathing then your sword is mine – agreed?"

"Agreed!" Govinda was delighted as he felt sure not even the foolhardy Krishna would really risk the disgrace that would fall upon him and the scolding, nay the pounding he would receive if he were discovered.

"And what if you're found out?" Sahadeva was grinning.

"Well, I'll definitely need Govinda's sword then, won't I?"



Everyone in the household would bathe, customarily, in the hour before sundown. The women's pool and bathing jars – huge urns of water that one scooped from with a small dish and then doused oneself with – was set on the south-western corner of the palace, adjacent to the kitchen stores. It was open to the sky but it had a high wall all around it.

The roof of the kitchen store-room was arranged in such a way that water that rained upon it would drain through a number of slices, down into the bathing area below. During the monsoon this was an easy way to fill the main central pool and the three large jars around the room. There was a drain in the floor of the bathroom through which all the waste-water was able flow away.

Krishna had surmised this much from his forays, clambering onto the upper portions of the main palace buildings. He could see that the only viable viewing spot would be if he could get onto the roof of the food-store and then look through one of the sluices that were set along the edge, above the bathers. He had carefully waited until the weather had heated up and he could safely assume that – by mid-afternoon, during that deepest of lulls in energy that was universally experienced at that hour of the day – everyone in the vicinity would be dozing in the coolest spots they could find.

This was the moment he chose to move, like a flickering shadow in the fierce heat of the day, and to sidle around to the yard-side of the complex of buildings. He then produced a notched bamboo pole, about two-and-a-half arm-spans long, that he had carefully secreted by the kitchen area weeks before. He propped it against the wall scurried up barefoot with his feet gripping the sides of the pole and, in a few seconds, he was on top and had pulled up the pole behind him. He listened, looked, primed all his senses to check if he'd been detected but all was still. He crawled along below the rim of the parapet, which stood about a forearm's height up from the flat roof, and positioned himself on his belly at the end of the slope where the four sluices opened.

He wiggled from one end to the other, trying the view from each one, and decided that, given the expected angle of light from the setting sun and the positioning of the pool, his best bet was the opening furthest to the left.



Up to this point, through the weeks of planning and excited preparations, he had only looked upon this jaunt a big dare. Now as he lay there, waiting for the sun go down and for the key players in his plan to arrive, he was suddenly struck by an unexpected wave of feeling.

He was used to this mixture of intense fear and excitement – that was the essence of any adventure; the thrill of springing a trap, the success of a sudden attack, the fear of discovery, of failure, of punishment – but this was very different.

“What the *hell* am I doing?” he thought, “this is a horrible invasion of privacy; they *should* be angry and shocked if they knew I was here.” It had all been just a game, a test so far but something suddenly made him see his actions from the point of view of the women and girls of the household.

“What have I come to see here anyway,” he thought. “I’m just trying to show off by copying my namesake.” And he realized that, so far, he’d only ever related to the women in his world as providers of food, as people to charm and amuse, while the girls were simply annoying creatures who whispered to each other and snickered and giggled and who were to be teased or provoked at all opportunities...

“Why on earth do I want to see them with all their clothes off anyway? Just because they wouldn’t want that?...?”

These were strange and unbidden thoughts that ran through his twelve-year-old mind. He was now moved by a sudden sense of honour and responsibility. He decided that his bow and quiver and the vina were a small price to pay to preserve the dignity of the women who had fed and nursed and played with him all his life.

He was just turning, to work his way back across the flat roof and to try to make his escape before anyone arrived below, when he heard the sound of voices along the path that led to the bathing area’s door – right at the spot where he had scaled the wall.

He froze and clamped his eyes tight shut. The group began to enter the chamber below him, and more voices followed soon after. He recognized them all: Bhojani, Gopali and the twins, Madhu and Padma, Lata and Ruki the maids, and Nana the ayah as well.

The sound of their conversations and the vigorous splashing of water reached his ears. He was deep in the shadow of the parapet and, with his skin so dark, there was no chance at all he would be seen. He realized, with a sinking feeling, that no force on earth could stop him from opening his eyes.

This he did.

“Oh my...”



The lads, predictably, soon noticed that a change had come over the former captain of their devilries. He’d won the sword fare and square, that was obvious, but he also seemed to lose something else. They would be in the middle of archery practice when the twins would cross the yard behind them, with some baskets of flowers or an armload of grass-mats, and Krishna’s head would swivel like a weather-vane, with the bow and arrow still fixed in place.

When any suggestion of an insult or a jibe at little Padma or her sister, or especially at Khamba or Khina was made, Krishna’s face would mutate into a

concerned pout and he'd mutter something like, "That's not very gallant," or "Can't you be less vulgar?" And his friends would wag their heads in dismay.

Krishna, for his own part, was still as keen as ever on his studies of arms and combat, but he was drawn more and more to strumming on his vina and composing what he felt were eloquent verses, songs of pure affection and love.

He frequently tried to put all that aside, to be his old self, to carry on in the artless, jokey way he had always done with his gang, but it was often forced or out of step with the rest of the group. He tried hard to be the reckless prankster but something in him had changed.

It didn't help much when, during their 'spontaneous verse exercises,' Rama had plucked some soulful, rapturous chords and sung:

*"Khina... I wrote you awful songs
upon my vina...
Since I fell for you my teeth
have been much cleaner..."*

*Oh Khina...!
For a while you've been a...
... whole lot meaner.
But I've seen a
change, and now
I have grown leaner...
wasting away
as my love for you grows keener
Oh, Khina... for yooooou...!"*

"Very good..." opined the music teacher, "for an early attempt... could do with a little polishing up of the scansion, but good work – was it inspired by anyone you know?..."

The room erupted at this point, with Krishna's blue-black features blushing to purple in their inimitable way. The slightly gormless and disshevelled music master darted his eyes this way and that in search of the cause for the joke, like a daftly tufted bird watching for some grub moving in the grass around it.



Equally predictably, it was not long before others of the band began to notice that the local girls were possessed of qualities other than teasability or the capacity to be

frightened or disgusted by some many-legged or loathsome slimy creature. They had all begun to experience that bizarre tying of the tongue that happened when they had occasion to talk to someone they had known for years but, now that they found them attractive, the mouth dried up, the throat solidified and all that they could reply to an innocuous friendly greeting was “Guhh...”

By the time Krishna had reached fourteen Rains he and Khina had indeed become inseparable companions, and all of his friends had had various liaisons and romances of shorter or longer periods. Bhijjaka, the gardener’s son, was the only other one, however, who had settled into a steady partnership; he and Khamba now kept each other company all possible hours of the day.

Krishna felt he was basking in a warm radiance of pure love; it was a feeling that filled him most of every day now and it seemed that it was both wholly untainted as well as truly good. What greater happiness in life could there be than to spend each waking hour catching precious moments to share your thoughts with your beloved, to hear her concerns and dreams, to plan and fantasize your life together?

To be sure, they were very young, he and she only fourteen and fifteen Rains, but didn’t everyone say how strong and manly he was, how mature and noble in his bearing? In truth he felt practically full-grown already, the responsible head of his household and master of his world.

“Truly, happiness and joy are born from those who are dear to us.”

“That’s so true,” replied Khina, her fingers interlacing with Krishna’s as they sat together in their favourite, secret bower, a glade at the far eastern end of the garden in a spot between the outer wall and the trunk of an ancient mango tree. “This is perfect happiness, isn’t it? The two of us, like these hands of ours, bound together, fused as a single knot – an eternal knot.” Khina wove her fingers through Krishna’s to form an intricate pattern – the tawny gleam of her skin in the falling evening light interlaced with the ink-tones of Krishna’s own and their palms of even colour.

“Look at this pattern – it is the image of the single love that we are.” Krishna adored the sound of that and admired even more deeply the wisdom of his beloved. “Don’t the stories say” Khina mused:

*“Great is the joy of sweet desire:
No greater joy than love.
Who follows this
attains the bliss
of paradise above.”*

“We are blessed,” he reflected, we are truly blessed.”
Yet that was the moment that the axe fell and the knot was severed.



They had heard Khina's name being called by her father Vishva. They scuttled out of the shrubbery – for some reason feeling that they should emerge in different places although everyone in the entire palace, except perhaps Savitri, was well aware of their on-going trysts.

“Khina! Ah, there you are.” Her father came up to her and told her that all their family was meeting in a short while, up in her grandfather's chambers. Khina had little time to think about what this summons might concern. It couldn't be a roasting for carrying on a romance with Krishna as, if it had been, her father would not have been so matter-of-fact about seeing them both appearing from the bushes. He and her mother had seemed to be quite happy for her and the young Master to have a fling together.

Within the space of the evening the truth, more awful than any scolding, had come to light; it boded worse than ill for Khina and the nascent devotion that she and Krishna now shared.

The hard facts were that, back at the family's home village – far off in upper Koliya, beyond the great kingdoms of Magadha and Kosala – Vishva's brother was tending their estate. They had just acquired a further tract of land, fertile fields of the Terai, hard up against the foothills of the Himalayan mountains, and with three young children to take care of and another on the way they had requested that the twins return to Koliya and help look after the family of their aunt and uncle.

The sisters had both wept and pleaded, begging not to be forced to go but soon Khamba was persuaded when Gopali – who was conscious not only of Khina's liaison with Krishna but also of her other daughter's devotion to Bhijjaka – suggested that the gardener's boy might go with them to help protect them on the journey and, more to the point, since he was a strapping lad of sixteen now and Khamba at fifteen Rains, there was no obstruction to the two of them marrying first and then setting off as a couple to help work on the estate.

Khamba thus abruptly erupted from the well of despair that she had been occupying and burst forth into a fountain of enthusiasms.

“It's really a *great* idea! Don't you think Khi? Come on, you're always saying you don't want to be stuck here the rest of your life – well, here's your chance.” Khina was thoroughly unconvinced and balked and protested until, after long hours of tears, the cold bitter taste of reality had at last won through – she realized she truly had no choice. Family duty came first and, although she felt somewhat betrayed by her sister's sudden shift in resolution, she also could not imagine life away from her. They had never been apart for so much as a day since they were formed in their mother's womb together.

Kolita, as the elder of the clan, as well as Vishva and Gopali, felt sure that Bhumija the gardener would be happy with his son marrying into their family, since, although they all worked as equals on the household staff here, Vishva's family were of some status in their home territory and of considerable wealth and property. They wasted no time in suggesting the match to Bhumija, and it fell out just as they had suspected. He was more than happy to agree as, in addition to the attraction of some valuable land, he knew the girl and his son were in love and were indeed well-matched. It was also a great comfort to him as he knew that the marriage would help to continue his line, since his wife had died long ago when Bhijjaka had been born.



In no long time the wedding was arranged and Bhijjaka and Khamba were married. Khina and Krishna stole every hour they could together as the day of parting inexorably approached. These times were sweet and tear-stained. The strength of their love only made the tearing apart more agonizing but, of course, the dreaded day eventually came. On this occasion Savitri really did have to employ Ajjuna and Kuvera to hold Krishna down as the wagon bearing his beloved pulled out of the palace gates.

For months afterwards he proudly bore the marks on his arms where each of the old soldiers had gripped him and forced him back inside the building. They had held him to the ground while he wailed, cried and grieved the gross injustice. Ajjuna was sympathetic to his young charge's loss – he too had had his true love wrenched rudely from him – but, when he judged the moment right, he gave Krishna's shoulder a jerk and said, "Come on, you know how to be strong – let go."

Krishna saw such understanding and such power in that weather-worn face, battered by dozens of campaigns both in love and in battle, that Ajjuna's look reached right into this heart and, to his surprise, he found strength and solace there.

"When two great forces oppose each other, the victory will go," the warrior said, "to the one that knows how to yield. It's you against The Way Things Are, lad – what are you gonna do?" He raised an eyebrow; Krishna lay quite still now, struggling no longer.

"Let go... I suppose."

"That would indeed be wise."

CHAPTER 14

THE NEW GARDENER



ovelorn, forlorn, Krishna dragged himself about in a melancholy daze for weeks, after Khina left for the northeast with her sister and new brother-in-law.

He had little interest in his studies – not even in the wrestling or sword-play he had formerly loved so much – he even lost the taste for food and drink. His mother drove herself to near distraction, trying to organize and have more delicious and rare treats prepared, arranging outings or buying Krishna new clothes of fine and colourful cloth. She had the music master find him the highest quality of inlaid vina, had Ajjuna take him to the military manoeuvres; everything left him still depressed and dead to the joys of the world. Not even any of the doctors she had had look at him had been able to help one iota.

By the time six moons had passed she saw that her son, the irrepressibly ebullient and sprightly boy who bounced back from all ills and misfortunes with renewed vigour, was still gloomy and morose. She was at her wit's end to find some solution.

One evening, as the other boys were trooping home after their day's classes and exercises, she encountered Ajjuna packing up his hefty bundle of weapons and props. She had been muttering to herself in a fit of pinched anxiety and, almost as a continuation of her own internal dialogue, she bluntly put the question to the teacher:

"You're a man, you must have some experience of these things; how can I get my son to rise out of his gloom?"

"Well, Ma'am," he replied as he stuffed the remaining quivers of arrows and arm-guards into his bag and drew himself upright. He stood a full head and shoulders, plus a bit more, above Savitri. "Since you ask, let's put it like this, as it was a girl he lost that has dropped him into this funk, I'd say that the remedy's likely to be found in about the same place."

"What do you mean?" Savitri had been generally starry-eyed about her son in recent years and to date she had not properly appreciated that he could have fallen so

deeply in love so young. Indeed that possibility had not fully registered as, to her, he was still her little Mudi in most of her thoughts.

“He’s down in the dumps because he and the girl Khina were all eyes for each other. Begging your pardon Ma’am if you weren’t aware of that, but I only know as his friends give him grief about it all the time.

“If you said to him you were going to find a replacement, that would never work Ma’am – believe me – if you feel yourself in love with someone you swear it can only be them that you’ll adore forever. Again, excuse me Ma’am if I sound too coarse but I’ve been there too, when I was a lad like young Krishna, and you’d die a thousand deaths before you’d submit to accepting another in your true love’s place.”

He could see an interested and puzzled look upon Savitri’s face, and it was clear that her marriage to the great merchant Kamanita must have been one made out of a family arrangement, rather than out of love.

“I wouldn’t go so far as to suggest you trick him, Ma’am, but if you just ‘happen’ to employ a few more young girls on your staff, and if you make sure that they have plenty of duties that bring them into his chambers; or if you have any suitable, unattached young women on the staff already, you could just choose to reassign their jobs about the place. If you make it clear that you have no objection to their getting friendly with the young master – you might even put in an encouragement that they *do*, come to think of it...” Ajjuna ventured, glancing at Savitri briefly out of the corner of his eye, not being quite certain if the lady of the manor would approve of this tactic, “I’ll predict – even though I’m no astrologer or soothsayer – that within a couple of months he’ll be right as rain.

“That’s Dr. Ajjuna’s advice, anyway, Ma’am, for what it’s worth.”



It took Savitri a little while to digest such an approach:— He was after all just a little boy, really – but when she next looked long and hard at his brawny figure, draped with its mournful and hangdog expression and weighed down its with listless mooching manner, her protective maternal spirit kicked in and she decided she was prepared to try anything.

Over the following weeks she interviewed a few young women of Krishna’s age and, making her choices on the basis of their physical beauty and charm rather than their domestic skills, within a month three of them were taken on: Nanda, Kokila, and Ummadanti.

Dr. Ajjuna’s prescription worked perfectly.



A couple of years after Kolita's granddaughters and Bhijjaka had moved to the Koliyan territories, word came back that the estate at the foot of the great mountains was flourishing; Khina was now married as well and they could use more help with the development of the property. The particular request that reached Kolita from his son Raju was, now that they had built a grand new house up there, could the gardener Bhumija be spared? An added fillip was that Khamba had given birth to his first grandchild and it seemed that the new family was well settled there.

By the time this idea reached Savitri's ear it seemed to have gained a lot of momentum. No one seemed to care much how this change might bear on *her* life, nor to appreciate that she would be losing a first-rate gardener and such treasures were rare in the world, if the comments of the other wealthy families of Ujjeni were anything to go by.

Kolita was doing his best to mollify Madame's displeasure, and to make a case for Bhumija's transfer to the estate, but he was not doing a very good job of it.

"You see Ma'am, if Bhumija goes he'll awfully be helpful, and the long term will happen that, with things well going, well the estate will be populous and sorts of all kinds of people will be able to be Ujjeni, come to, that is, dwellers. They'll provide all the staff here you need... Ma'am..." Things always got a little tangled when the steward was flustered.

The mistress of the house was, nevertheless, very clear on one point:

"He does not go anywhere, Kolita, for any reason, until we have found a satisfactory replacement. No replacement. No move. Understand?!"

Kolita mumbled nervously.

"Do you understand?"

"Yes Ma'am."

"Then, so be it." She had been supposedly been running this house for a dozen years now or more, and still people tended to overlook her. She was reciting this grievance to herself as she left Kolita in the upper chamber, where the affairs of the palace were all conducted, when she heard a loud noise coming across the courtyard below her.

THWHOOOM! THWHOOOM! THWHOOOM!



Savitri descended the staircase and crossed the long loggia that was below the room she had been in. She saw Kuvera and Krishna chatting with someone at the gate; they were all smiles and Kuvera was welcoming the visitor in.

Savitri had had a profoundly sinking feeling when she first heard the sound of the knocking on the gates but now, for some unknown reason, she felt at ease – yes – even happy and relaxed.

The man who had arrived was middle-aged and weather-worn, and his head had recently been shaved. There were some rough and scabby patches of skin around his scalp and on his hands, but he emanated a tangible aura of benevolence and reliability. She felt strangely pleased to see him, although exactly why, she couldn't say.

"I heard that a new gardener might be needed here, Madame. So I thought I might offer my services." He inclined his head with a gesture of deference. "Was the news I heard correct?"

"Well, yes," Savitri responded, wondering if it had been some kind of precognitive intuition, that the fellow would be the answer to the gardener problem, that had made her so happy that he had come. "What a stroke of luck. Do you have much experience or qualifications?"

She examined his hands with the briefest of looks. A true worker would be thick-fingered and would bear the broken nails of labour. Charlatans always had slender fingers. This man's hands were comfortingly leathery, muscular and calloused.

"I've been tending living and growing things since way back, Ma'am, and have planted and nurtured in more different places and climates that you could shake a stick at. But you shouldn't take my word for it. If you give me a month's trial and you take a look to see what's grown and what's died, we can let that decide it for you. How does that sound Ma'am?"

"That sounds very good..."

Krishna was standing at his mother's side – he was now nearly a head taller than her and had a finger breadth or two over the visitor as well. He couldn't believe that his mother and Kuvera were being so civil when it was obvious to him who had come to call. When he heard that Dusaka was planning to stick around, for at least a month, he was happier than he had felt in a long while; he realized he was grinning from ear to ear.

As Dusaka hoisted his small bag onto his shoulder more securely, and a scruffy little dog darted in from the street to settle by his feet, he looked at Savitri and then Kuvera warmly in the eye and said:

"The disreputable monk who visited nine years ago bears absolutely no resemblance to the man trying out as your new gardener, does he?"

"Oh no," the lady of the manor and the gatekeeper replied in unison, "it's hard to remember exactly what he looked like but you seem completely different." Dusaka smiled with true fondness and sincerity, "And the dog doesn't appear the same either – wouldn't you say?"

“Oh yes,” they spoke again with a single voice, “it definitely looks like a very different dog, although it’s hard to remember exactly what they both looked like, it was so long ago that they came here.”



“What did you do to them? What have you done to *all* of them, come to think of it?” asked Krishna.

“Do? Me?...”

“Come on! Why am I the only one who recognizes you?”

“Oh, that...” Dusaka feigned surprise... “in the trade we call that ‘assisted memory loss’; on this occasion mixed in with a large dose of ‘all-is-right-with-the-world-ness,’ otherwise known as loving-kindness.

“The first bit is just a way of tweaking people’s perceptions – you can make yourself invisible to others in a very similar way – and it’s in a good cause, don’t you think?”

They were walking around the back of the palace now to the yard behind the kitchen where the gardener Bhumija lived and where all the tools for the grounds were kept – rakes and clippers, saws, axes and suchlike.

“The other part is just the natural friendliness of the heart – warmth of feeling, wishing someone well – if you turn it up strong it helps people to feel at ease. Everyone loves to be loved, eh?” Dusaka laid his walking-staff down and settled himself on a low platform under a broad neem tree that spread its shade over the yard at this time of day.

His dog Tingri climbed up beside him and laid her head in his lap. He scratched her dishevelled thatch and smiled at Krishna.

“You lost your earrings as well. I couldn’t figure out how you got them into your earlobes as they looked like they were solid rings of bone. After you were gone that was on my mind almost as much as everything else – ‘How did they get in there?’ – and now they’re gone again.”

“They come and go, like everything,” the ragged monk responded, and that was all the explanation Krishna was going to get.

“So...” his visitor asked, “how’s life?”

This simplest of questions opened a flood-gate of memories and stories, tales of the highs and lows, of his friends and romances, his studies and various escapades. For a long while Dusaka sat in silence, as it all poured out in an enthusiastic torrent from his young friend’s lips. When he reached the end of the recital, and had brought the monk up to date on all the different doings and achievements, the air hung still and warm between them.

“And are you happy?” Again, it was the simplest of questions but it had the opposite effect of the previous one. Krishna went very silent as he asked this of himself. It was something he wondered if he had ever really looked at before.

“In a way I am,” he began, “I’ve got everything I could ask for: a rich family that I’m part of; a palace to live in; I’ve been educated in all the arts and sciences, the crafts of battle; I even have a steady girlfriend, Nanda, one of the maids, who my mother turns a blind eye to but... no, I’m not very happy. If I really look. I have all the things that people say equal happiness but... The formula doesn’t seem to be working.

“I guess I feel trapped; trapped in people’s expectations and in obligations, I’m the only son, owner of a big estate. I’m ‘the gifted Krishna’ almost a legend, a great match for a fine bride... it goes on... but all this has been put upon me. My wishes are gratified but there’s a price I pay – I feel like I’m being duped or drugged – even my girlfriend, Nanda, jumped right in after Kokila and I had a big falling out, and before her I fell for Umma, but it turns out they’ve all been hired just to distract me. Govinda heard it from Ajjuna one night when he was in his cups.

“And all the education and the sports – it’s worthy stuff but it feels strangely like a baited hook. The bait’s delicious – even though she has been shoved at me, Nanda and I really have a lot of fun together – but it’s all so false. It’s like I’m in a game but I don’t know the rules. Or I’m being lulled to sleep, hypnotized like a snake that does the will of its charmer.

“I don’t know. I shouldn’t complain. I have everything so much better than so many people in Ujjeni. It’s just, I wish I had a better perspective. If I could just know the game, and the rules that it’s being played by.”

“I might be able to help you there.” Dusaka looked down at Tingri and tickled her head and, when she rolled over, her chest and stomach which she responded to with little whimpers of ecstasy.

“You can!”

“Don’t sound so surprised. What do you think I’ve come back here for? I am a good gardener but I’m not here just because I needed a job. Eh, Tingri – what *are* we here for?” The last words rolled off his tongue richer in the delicately accented manner that flavoured his speech, as if it was closer to the language that he and his dog usually conversed in. He continued, “I will never lie to you but you must be careful what you ask and you must remember that memory is unreliable.

“The wrong question, or one that assumes certain qualities to be real but which don’t exist in truth, these could bring you confusing or misleading answers, and not because I, or whoever is responding, consciously wishes to deceive you. Do you understand?”

“This very principle is what has kept your father spinning on the wheel of birth and death, even though he has met the Buddha of this age face to face. And he will continue spinning, if I’m not much mistaken, for a few billion years yet to come.”

“Billion years!” Krishna was amazed.

“A few, yes. What’s the problem with that?” asked Dusaka.

“But, that’s an incredibly long time.”

“Long! Ha, you jest, my young friend. Suppose there were a mountain three leagues long, three leagues wide and three leagues high – one solid mass of rock. And at the end of each hundred year period that passed, someone would come along and stroke that mountain once with piece of fine Benares cloth. That mountain would be worn completely away before an æon had passed – so long is an æon, Krishna. And we have wandered from birth to death, to birth again through many hundreds of thousands of such æons.

“If there were four accomplished meditators, women and men each with a life span of a hundred years, and each day they each recollected a hundred thousand æons. By the time their lives had ended, there would still be æons unrecollected.

*“The heap of bones one person leaves behind
With the passing of a single æon
Would form a heap as high as a mountain:
So said the Great Sage.
This is declared to be as massive
As the tall Vepulla Mountain
Standing north of Vulture Peak
In the Magadhan mountain range.”*

Krishna took all this in as best he could but his mind was more than somewhat boggled by it all.

“What did you mean about asking the wrong questions? And that thing about assuming qualities to be real? What did *that* mean?”

“Truth becomes fiction when the fiction’s true; real becomes not not-real when the unreal’s real. Got that?!”



The long pleasant afternoons of the cold season soon became a memory, but these had been the times Krishna was most free to pepper the new gardener with his unrelenting questions. Even as the day’s heat grew to oppressive levels and it was hard to find a cool spot anywhere, the inquisitive teen would dog his master’s footsteps, even more faithfully than Tingri sometimes, and frequently he kept up the barrage while Dusaka lay on his side in some shady corner to rest through the worst of the burn.

He often asked about his family, his sisters and their mothers, about the whereabouts of his father, about the purpose of life and how it all worked, what was religion for and how did everything start in the first place... and on and on.

During the roasting stillness of one mid-afternoon, realizing he would get no rest again, Dusaka heaved himself up into a sitting position and folded his gammy leg under him.

"So, how far back do you want to go? To try to conceive, to figure out, the Ultimate Beginning, that will guarantee that your head will split into seven pieces or, at best, you'll go crazy."

"Maybe not that far back," Krishna smiled at the image of his own dark features bursting out in seven different directions with a perplexed expression still etched on the various bits of face. "But, how did we get here?"

"We? Here? Get? You'll have to narrow it down."

"Alright, how about just people? How did people come to be in this world, in Jambudipa, in Avanti. Where did we come from? How did we get here... And what are we supposed to *do* with our lives?"

Dusaka wagged his roughly-shaven head from side to side and muttered something in an odd language to his dog, who then sneezed and made some noises that sounded extremely like canine laughter. Dusaka chuckled too. "Let's just take the first couple of those for now, eh?"

"Let me tell you a story, although it's more than just a story – d'you know what I mean?"

Laying his walking staff across his body so it ran from his left shoulder and over his right thigh, Dusaka let his eyes half close while his voice shifted to a different register.

*"Generations four score hundred
Have followed since that time;
The folks were dark, not dark as you –
Echoes of the past come through.*

*The people walked and freely talked,
In dust they drew their marks,
All lived in but a single land
Sea-girt almost all round.*

*This cluster of the first of broods
Of what we call humankind,
Appearing in this world of ours,
In this æon at this time,*

*All thrived and grew but they were few,
Some lives were calm, some yearning
For eighty thousand turns of Sun
They shared, they fought, some learning.*

*Things always change; the earth grew cold.
The rains were sparse and few,
The kinfolk died, they all grew scared,
No gods came to their aid.*

*The continent on which all lived
Joined by a spit of land
The greater part of earth's dry ground
Yet all who crossed there died.*

*The only hope that yet remained
Was called The Gate of Grief
For those who'd tried to cross before
Had left none to return.*

*The clan of humankind had shrunk
To a few thousand souls
The land had dried, there was no green
The choice was: cross or death.*

*Now, at that time the sea had dropped
Below where it lies now
So word among the people was:
By wading and by raft,*

*By bloated goatskin filled with air
The brave could reach the shore.
The lush, fair hills that rested there
A mere three leagues away –*

*Not one day's walk for the full-grown
Were it a well-worn track –*

*But now the salt-thick waters brewed
And surged round sharpened reefs,*

*The rocks were rough beneath the feet
The currents treacherous
The islands barren of all life
The tides ruled by the gods.*

*For all it was quite simple:
If we don't go, we're killed.
So they waited for the season
When hope might be fulfilled.*

*It is the way of every tribe
That dwells quite isolate,
With generations hundredfold
Line after line dies out.*

*'Tis strange to tell, but truly so,
There's an ancestral drift;
So of this resilient clan
That's ridden all these years –
Eleven times ten thousand laps
Around life-giving sun –*

*All who then lived upon that shore
Sprang from a primal womb.
There was truly but one mother
For every wight that walked.*

*She could not know what we know now:
He life was plain, she birthed,
She cried, she laughed, she loved, she killed;
All unremarkable...*

*Yet from her daughters and her sons
Our life-line coils its fall –
Your sister Amba, it was she,
The mother to us all.*

*Cascades of karma down through time
Bring her to birth once more
Upon the shore by Gate of Grief
A new-born, bright eyed girl.*

*The moon is dark, the tides are low
The cold is at its worst
Propitiations have been made
Now is the time to cross.*

*The baby girl's close family
Is torn by dreadful doubt:
The father has a wounded foot,
And fever that grows hot.*

*The elder brother's not yet ten
Although a willing lad,
Another sister, who is three
Walks well but is still small.*

*Should they all stay and wait until
The man's lame foot is healed?
Or should some go while time is ripe
The rest to follow on?*

*The scouts have come and returned now,
"The way is free and clear
For everyone who's hale and strong
And not made faint by fear."*

*Father's asweat but his intent
Is firm and he speaks forth,
"I cannot go, my legs are frail,
I would be swept away.*

*But you are strong and so's our son,
Leave me, I will come soon."*

*“What of our daughter, Precious Charm?
She can not go with me.*

*Our boy, Bright Light, has not the strength
To bear her all the way.
If you will stay then she should be
Left with you in your care.”*

*They pondered this as they chewed on
Their last dried strips of buck.
The children nestled at their side
Are scared by what they hear.*

*The tribal leaders all declare
It is the hour to go.
A long and tear-dewed, silent look –
The choice has now been made.*

*The copper-coloured three-year-old
Howls out her little heart
As, babe on back and with Bright Light
Her mother now sets forth.*

*The man, Straight Arrow, tries to rise;
With all his will he holds
The small girl’s hand as all her grief
Crashes against the Gate.*

*‘Twas Tamba who was left behind
And you and Amba crossed,
And from her loins, in years that came
All races would emerge.*

*For that small band that crossed those days
While yet the seas were low
Became the bearers of the seed
That spread around the world.*

*Twelve lines survived in the great land
That was our place of birth*

*But only one escaped from there
The one that Amba bore.*

*Before she crossed she had no name
"New baby" had sufficed
But as the party came to land
"New Dawn" was given her.*

*The fever sprung from Arrow's foot
Grew worse, he writhed, inflamed,
Elders and cousins on the shore
Took care of Precious Charm.*

*The moon grew large, the season turned,
Straight Arrow soon succumbed.
The salt-sea rose; no more could cross,
They'd wait it out and see –*

*Perhaps the turn of years would bring
Low water once again
But tide had turned, the chance had passed
There was severance of the twain,.*

*As upon a raft that drifts
The children of New Dawn
Struggled to sustain the kin
On their peninsular.*

*A full ten thousand summers passed
And winter chills so cold
Yet they survived there nonetheless
Combing the fertile shores.*

*They inched their way, numbers still small
Along the warm sea-coasts
And, at last, to Jambudip
Where crisis fell once more.*

*A mount of fire in the south-east
Poured ash onto the world
All creatures choked, the plants fell ill
It was a deadly blow.*

*But death brings life within its wake
And from the ashes rose
A burst of growth before unseen –
The peopling of the Earth.*

*The hills and vales of Jambudip
Rang with ten thousand cries,
The seed spread north and west and south
The gods too, were surprised.*

*So here in rich Ujjeni, as
In all the lands of Earth
There dwell the bold descendants of
The Mother of all Birth.*

CHAPTER 15

WAR IN HEAVEN



ndlessly, and mostly patiently, Dusaka responded to Krishna's questions. Although it seemed that, for every perplexity he cleared up, along with each answer came another dozen mysteries.

The current hottest area of interest had, ironically, been stirred up by Rama. While he had ironically been named after one of the deified heroes of legend – the husband of the virtuous and beautiful Sita, after whom Kamanita's first wife had also been named – he was the most ardent of scientific types within the group of youths and he vigorously opposed the idea that people such as his namesake had ever existed. He was even more keen to launch into argument if anyone even so much as mentioned the names of any gods or goddesses, or spoke of devas, spirits or other invisible realms of any kind.

"For example," he began one day, when warming to his theme after Govinda, who tended to be the big joker of the group, had remarked that Ajjuna when nursing his most recent hangover, was as grumpy as an asura who'd been trussed up after losing a fight with the devas. "People say that in ages past there was a great war between the so-called devas and the so-called asuras – right?"

The cluster of boys lounging in the spacious reception hall overlooking the garden grunted their assent to this or wagged their heads in agreement. "Well, I've listened to the story-tellers who come from the far west with the carpet traders and gold merchants and, in *their* stories, it's quite the other way around!"

"What's the other way round?" Hari was doing his best to follow but thought he'd lost the drift.

"Good and evil – their tales, their *'religion,'*" and he let the word out as if it tasted sour and slimy, "has goodness being represented by 'Ahura-mazda' and it's the 'devi' who are evil – you see?!"

"See what?" Hari still wasn't getting it.

“That these so-called ‘deities’ are just random inventions, yagu-brain! Look, here in Jambudipa ‘deva’ equals good, ‘asura’ equals bad; in the west ‘devi’ equals bad, ‘asura’ equals good. All this, if you ask me, is the result of some half-remembered war between the Devi tribe and the Ahura tribe, or Deva and Asura, and the tradition of who’s called good and who’s bad just depends on which side of the Kirthar mountain range you happened to be born on. Isn’t it obvious?”

“What’s that funny thing up there?” Govinda pointed over Rama’s head with a shocked expression on his face. All the boys looked at the space above their friend but nothing was immediately apparent.

“Sorry, for a moment it looked like Vajrapani there, with a thunderbolt, ready to break Ram’s head into seven pieces.”



As was his habit Krishna had stored up this debate and then brought it to Dusaka to hear his take on things. He had kept his friendship with the gardener to himself and, as most of the boys had many other things to be occupying their minds these days – now that they had almost completed their studies and family duties were beginning to press more and more – it was not difficult to find time alone with his eccentric mentor.

“Rama’s talking rubbish, isn’t he?” Krishna offered, having just recounted their earlier talk.

“I wouldn’t say he’s so far off the mark, in some ways.”

“You can’t mean that! After all you’ve told me – that long history of the world, and the strange karma of my family – how can you say that there are no gods and spirits, no other worlds? Was that all just made up to keep me quiet?”

“If so, it didn’t work, did it?” Dusaka smiled at him; they both recalled the blizzard of questions that had followed Dusaka’s recital. “No, he’s close to the mark in that he only wants to believe in what he can see and hear and sense. Don’t you think that that’s worthwhile, to try not to be too credulous? Sounds wise to me. He’s just doubting that which should be doubted.

“Where he goes too far is to assume that, just because *he’s* never seen something, it therefore cannot exist, eh?” He fixed his eye on Krishna and held his attention, quietly waiting while this sank in.

“But everyone knows there’re gods and demons, ghosts and spirits; people go to the temples all the time. Not everyone who visits there can be wrong, surely?”

“And just because the jar is clearly labelled ‘SALT,’ it will make the soup taste good, even if it’s only sand that’s in there, eh? I don’t think so.”

“How can anyone know what’s true about the gods and spirits if nobody can see them anyway? If it’s wrong to believe in what you can’t see... what can you do?” Krishna was really knotted up now. Dusaka seemed to have carefully led him into the corner of a maze and then, as he often did, blithely abandoned him there.

“What can you do, indeed?” He then said a few words to Tingri at his knee-side and, as usual, the dog seemed to snuffle and bark some response as the two of them shared a private joke at Krishna’s expense.

He now noticed, when the wave of indignation had subsided, that Dusaka was looking at him a little strangely. He was familiar with a variety of odd facial expressions his mentor used. The network of folds and wrinkles around his eyes and mouth seemed to be able to display four or five distinct moods and messages simultaneously, but at this moment he seemed to be both glaring and staring into his eyes with a pronounced this-is-a-hint flavour to the mixture.

Looking... watching... seeing... what does he mean?...? Krishna searched and racked his brain, “Seeing! We can learn how to see! Beings in other realms...?! Is that right?” He had already guessed he’d hit the mark as Tingri barked sharply a couple of times as soon as he spoke.

“Very good. We don’t have to believe blindly, *if* we can learn to see for ourselves.”

Krishna was proud that he’d solved this particular puzzle so quickly, and he decided to not make anything of Dusaka’s tone that made it sound as if he had been addressing a four-year-old rather than a near-grown man of almost sixteen.



“Twilight is best, at dusk or the hour just before dawn. Here in Ujjeni the light changes fast – from day to night and vice versa – but still that window works best for beginners.”

Right now it was sunset and, rather than going to bathe at this usual time, Krishna and Dusaka were down at the far eastern end of the gardens. They were well-sheltered from the house by the large banyan tree that Krishna used to climb and by the thick shrubbery nearby. There were a few glades in that area that contained votive shrines for local spirits. He and Dusaka found their way through the paths to one of these – it was an open space, ringed about with trees and with the stone shrine set at the foot of a tall kapok.

“Have you ever noticed how,” Dusaka began, “when the air is quite still, sometimes you’ll see just a handful of leaves rustling on a branch? Just a few twigfuls astir when all about them nothing moves – you ever noticed that?”

"For sure. I've always just assumed it was a small current of air moving because," he added pointedly, "I can't see anything else going on."

"'Assumed' being the operative word," Dusaka put in his own footnote. "Of course, sometimes it *is* a mere twisting of the air – although that too is a small miracle in its own right but that can be a lesson for another day – at other times it is not.

"Look over there by the shrine, to the left of the monument – what do you see?"

"A bush – I don't know, an azalea?"

"This is not a botany lesson today. Don't look at the bush but don't look away. Let your vision relax so that you're trying but not trying, focusing but not focusing, directed but undirected. Don't think about it, but be undistracted. What do you see?" Krishna looked as instructed.

"It was blurry, but then things got luminous around the edges for a moment."

"Stay with that luminous quality – as the light of evening comes, that will get easier for a while." Dusaka was staring himself at the same spot, his eyes flicking from side to side or up into the branches now and then.

"Oh! What...?"

"What did you see?"

"Just for a moment where the leaves rustled, there seemed to be something moving at the edges of my vision but when I tried to look right at it, there was nothing. It was a faint blur of a pinkish colour. I think."

"Don't think. Relax your eyes again and look back at the same spot." Dusaka shifted his staff and rested his leg while he too brought his gaze to bear on the space by the small stone shrine, covered with the floral offerings of the last few months and wrapped with orange and red cloths that had been consecrated to the guardian devas of that grove.

Krishna was trying his hardest not to try but his keenness to succeed in the task kept creating a stress, an edge that made his mind too sharp. Despair and annoyance at failure would then well up and he felt his mood go flat.

"Oh well, I just don't think I..." Krishna's voice petered out. He had been paying attention but he had just resolved that it was not working, and that he might as well rest, when for a moment – at the very moment he gave up, in fact – he saw the distinct forms of three young female beings of a pure and delicate beauty. Their clothing had the opalescent sheen and texture of flower petals; one was very tall and stern-looking while the other two were smaller and benign. They were a blurred shimmering presence of magentas and salmon pink, of ruby-red and garnet and – for the instant he beheld them – they seemed to be waving vigorously and smiling at him. As if they had been trying to attract his attention for a while.

"Look! Oh... They're gone." His excitement at the vision had had the effect of immediately dispelling what he'd seen. For a few minutes he tried with intense effort to relax and be effortless again but he couldn't quite seem to find the balance.

“Dammit, how do I...?” He remembered Dusaka was at his side and, as he turned to look for aid from him, he felt his teacher receiving his frustration, taking it gently into his hands, rolling it up into a small ball and then tossing it into the air, for Tingri to play with.

“Very good, for a first try – I shouldn’t say it but you probably have something of a talent for this.” His complete non-reference to Krishna’s inability to refocus and his having been thwarted, coupled with the words of praise and affirmation, switched his mood from dark to light in an instant.

“Now you’ve got the basic knack it’s just a matter of refining it. The more you get the hang of it, the more you’ll see.

“Shall we give him the tour, Tingri?” The lame monk leaned down and tousled the dog’s head. The light was fading fast now and the noisy ringing of crickets was rising.

He leaned his staff over his left shoulder and eased the weight off his weaker foot. Reaching out his right hand, he took hold of Krishna’s left. His palm and fingers were calloused but his grip was gentle.

“Ready?”

“For wh...”

As if matching the rhythm of his breathing, a pulsing succession of images appeared before the boy: at first the three rosy-coloured devas were all he saw; they were then seen to be accompanied by a rich array of taller, shorter, frail and thick, gnarly, dew-bedecked and wider beings that seemed the very stuff of green- and tree-life, bloom and berry, of rock and river-water; then stately folk of brawny arms and steady eye, armour-clad women and men, yet bright and cool and strong; then spreading round on every side and up above him too, a multi-coloured grand array of faces shining, diadems and rings and bells with ribbons of every hue; the forms of trees and garden-earth fell into dim display as once again the host increased, the light yet brighter still; now human forms began to be quite lost in the parade of radiant lights and fragrances, the ringing songs, the dance; rank upon rank in tiers of light, diamond-hued and bold, the numbers grew, the space thrown wide; and grew and grew again; a radiance that would have burned an eye of flesh now filled his heart, infinities of infinities burst forth on every side; dimensions within dimensions; light multiplying light, celebrating itself lushly until all form was lost to him, his body and the garden – all was gone – for in that breath, now beyond the realm of space, well beyond nothingness, beyond infinity of mind and beyond perception, he was light of light, the stuff of life, he was the universe itself.

Dusaka released his hand. “So, now you’ve met some of the family.”



During the following weeks Krishna was indeed able to develop the knack and slowly became more adept at seeing and engaging with the various families of celestial beings in the vicinity.

The earth-spirits, being of the coarsest realm above the human, were the easiest to see. Once he had learned how to stabilize his attention he sought out the three devas whom he had first seen in the glade. When he returned to the shrine where he had spotted them he saw that they were in deep conversation with the rukkha-deva of the kapok tree in whose boughs they were all settled. He did not know why but there seemed to be an anxious tension in the air.

Despite this disquieting feeling, the three companions and their dryad friend all dropped from the branches and came to him wreathed in smiles – the air filled with a subtle mixture of earthy perfumes, as if Krishna was smelling for the first time ever what the fragrance of a flower truly was.

“You’re Amba’s brother, aren’t you?” Maggot chirped excitedly, at exactly the same time as Ant and Bee spoke too. “We’re so glad to see you, and now to talk...”

“Hang on, hang on. I’m very glad to meet you too. I’m not very experienced in seeing... er.... What exactly *are* you? Anyway, please speak at little slower and one by one, then I’ll be able to follow.” Krishna was grinning and absurdly happy to be having this conversation. This was not just some strange creation of Dusaka’s; this was he, by himself, talking with beings of other realms. This meant that, for absolutely sure, there was more to life than had met his eye so far. The world suddenly felt so much bigger once again.

“We are kinnaris, earth spirits who live close to the flower realm. We are not as solid as humans, but we are substantial enough to touch.” Bee then reached out and pressed her fist into Krishna’s chest, firmly but gently so he could feel the pressure.

“It also means we can be harmed by material things and are nourished by them too – so...” continued Bee, giving her kinnari-life-in-a-nutshell speech, “...on a bad day we can be shot with an arrow but on a good one we can scoff bags of pollen and drink our fill of honey-dew and nips of nectar-mead.”

“Bee!” Maggot chimed in, “don’t put him off already. We’ve hardly said hello yet.”

“We know your sister Amba; at least that was her name when we met her. She’s now Queen Samavati of Vamsa, and a very fine lady too.”

“A queen! My sister? How did she manage that? And what about my other sister Tamba and my second mother?”

The kinnaris brought Krishna up to date with what they knew, how they had had a lot of contact with his elder sister but that they had sad news for him about Tamba; both she and Sita had died on the road to Kosambi. The mother had never managed to reach the city and find out if his father, Kamanita, had resettled there.

"I've heard myself," said Krishna, "that my father will never come back here but I also don't know if he ever went to Kosambi again; as far as I'm aware he's still a wandering monk someplace. The gardener here – he's actually a monk too, of some sort – he knows a bit about what's happened to us all..." His voice tailed off.

"So they died..." He could not say that he felt a great sense of loss for his second mother, Sita, she had always been nasty to him as a small child, forever making some minor slight or a gesture of disfavour whenever she was able to, but to know he had lost Tamba forever brought tears into his eyes.

"I would have thought it would have been the other way round – Amba was always a bit on the weak side and Tamba – I just remember her as being so daring, but I suppose you can never tell."

"So," he wanted to change the subject, "what brings you all the way to Ujjeni?"

"To meet you, of course," Bee refrained from adding 'dummy.' "Or at least to see how you have been doing. We've come out this way a couple of times before but you could never see us until now. We want to keep Samavati up on how you are, so we make the journey. It's a bit more risky nowadays so I'm not sure..." Ant looked anxiously into Bee's face as she said this.

"What's risky? If most people can't see you, they can't do you any harm, surely?" Krishna asked. For, although this whole domain was new to him, he had a habit of trying to seem authoritative regardless.

"It's not the people," said Maggot.

"It's the asuras, and a band of rebel yakkhas who have joined them, at least that's what every deva seems to think," the tree-spirit joined in. "Rumours have been spreading about attacks in recent times – the word is out that a new war in heaven might be brewing."

"The rukkha-deva was just telling us," Maggot came closer to Krishna and he could see the traces of a genuine fear within her eyes. "We'd noticed that things were quieter, less folk around, but there were tales of random killings and destruction as well. We didn't see anything between Kosambi and here ourselves, but there was tension in the air and many bhumma-devas of all kinds were lying low."

"It's been the same here around Ujjeni," the rukkha-deva added, stepping closer to the group. She was a tall, elegant being adorned in strange filmy garments of grey-green, with edges and corners that bore spiky nubbins, just like the kapok tree's trunk, and mysterious ridged trceries worked from the fluffy white interior of her tree's fruit-pods. She picked up the story and continued:

"There were only rumours until we heard the news from the royal naga who lives here in the palace lake. She goes by the name of Samuddaja, she is the younger sister of Irandati; they were both born as naga princesses although she is now a queen, married to King Virupakkha, lord of the nagas himself. Princess Irandati is the beloved of General Punnaka, a mighty yakkha and the nephew of King Vessavana, you know,

Kuvera, king of the yakkhas and the Northern Quarter. Both the General and the King saw the wreckage for themselves.

“In the Heaven of the Thirty-three, above the realm of Guardian Kings, mighty Indra holds the throne. The capital of that beautiful land is named Masakkasara. Within the bounds of its vast and wide protective walls there are four parks: Nanadana in the east, Pharusaka in the south, Cittalata in the west and Missaka to the north; all these are places of great beauty with lakes and jewelled halls; gem-studded turrets stand upon the gates.

“There is yet one other, known just as The Great Park, and it lies outside the city walls, to the north-east. It has a gold wall surrounding it, with gem turrets atop its gates, 250 leagues it is around; in this park there are one thousand golden mansions and pavilions decorated with the seven kinds of gems – rubies, emeralds and sapphires, diamonds and pearls, amethysts and blood-red carnelians. Between this park and the city walls of Masakkasara, there lies a lake both vast and pure, its floor is all bejewelled. Or, at least, ’til recently it was so.

“Not one moon back Lord Indra went off travelling while his son, Prince Suvira was, as customary, busy at his pleasure through the night. The devas of the Thirty-three awoke that day to find The Great Park thrown to ruin – the gates destroyed, the jewels purloined, the lake all filled with filth; the thousand towered mansions and pavilions burned and smashed, the ground was strewn with dead and broken bodies.

“A cry went up – a wail of grief was heard throughout the land. The perpetrator of the raid was Vepacitti and his band.”

The dryad Alambusa finished her account and a dense uncomfortable silence filled the grove.

“At least,” Maggot began, “they *think* it was Vepacitti but no one is absolutely sure. An old supanna, one of the giant garuda eagles, came here to Ujjeni by the same way as us – at least we crossed paths when she spent the hours of darkness on a crag above where we rested, as we travelled here. She had just come down from the mountains’ foot, north of Uttarakuru and word there was that King Rahu, lord of the asuras and the most powerful of them all, denied any knowledge of the deed.

“I have no ready sympathies for the deva horde,’ he said, ‘nevertheless, by my word and surely as Yugandhara Mountain sits upon the Earth, I tell you I have had no part in this – and an evil bourn awaits all those who lie. Nevertheless,’ and she recounted that he had apparently chuckled nastily as he said it, ‘Pubbavideha in the east is a sovereign realm and its ruler, Lord Vepacitti, can do as he likes, can he not?’”



“Surely Indra would be strong enough to capture the asura Vepacitti – isn’t he the king of the whole Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods? How could they not raise an army that was capable of that? Aren’t they a lot more powerful than the asuras? Don’t they have the Buddha and the Arahants on their side?” Krishna was pummeling his mentor with questions once again.

“The Buddha, and all other wanderers,” Dusaka spread his arms slightly and bowed his head to indicate that he was including himself in this, “do not take sides, when it comes to fights. Even if someone wants to pick an argument with us: ‘I do not dispute with the world,’ the Master once said, ‘it is the world that disputes with me’; that is,” he added with a grin, “if there’s any contention going on in the first place.” Thunder rolled and grumbled in the distance, somewhere off above the Vindhaya Mountains to their south; it was that season of occasional storms just before the monsoon proper began.

“It’s not because the Buddha is weak-willed either, or that he never learned how to fight – if that’s what you’re thinking” – he cocked his head and Krishna cast his eyes down as that was exactly what had popped into his mind. “He is a warrior-noble by birth; he grew up learning how to fight, to lead an army, he knows much more about weapons, combat and strategy than you could ever hope to.

“It’s because he knows, and all of us monks and nuns of various types know too, that he can serve best by being a promoter of peace to all.

“One year there was a drought up in the north and, by the month of Jetthamula, the Rohini River was very low. The Koliyans on the one side and the Sakyans on the other both came to the conclusion that there might be enough water for one set of crops, but not enough for two so each had sent out work-parties to re-direct the flow.

“‘Our crops will ripen with a single watering,’ said the Koliyans, ‘let us have the water.’ The Sakyans replied, ‘So what do you expect us to do; go from house to house in Koliya begging for food from you? We don’t think so...’ And the dispute waxed hot, as they say. Soon the rival groups who wanted to divert the river came to blows and ugly insults were hurled back and forth: ‘You bunch of lepers!’ ‘You gormless yokels!’ – well, you get the general idea.

“Word reached the ministers who had commissioned the irrigation dams, they informed the royals and, next thing, both have armies lined up facing each other over the river’s diminishing waters: ‘We’ll show you what “lepers” can do!’ “Yeah right! Are you ready to get it from the “yokels”?’ And on and on.

“The Buddha got wind of the dispute and realized, ‘If I don’t go to them, these misguided people will destroy each other,’ and so he made his way to that very place at the river.

“Now, even though he was a Sakyan by birth and he could easily have wielded his psychic powers to guarantee success for his kin in a battle, he saw it was more

important for both sides to appreciate that the welfare and happiness of all concerned would best be served by learning how to abandon hatred.

“He used his psychic powers anyway, just to get the mob to listen, since it’s easier to get the attention of a bunch of angry soldiers by floating up into the air than by trying to start a reasonable conversation. Cross-legged he lifted off and then hovered over the centre of the Rohini River.

“‘What is this dispute about, my friends?’

“‘Water, Venerable Sir.’

“‘How much is a barrel of water worth?’

“‘Not much,’ replied both sides at once.

“‘And a barrel of the blood of warrior-nobles?’

“‘Every drop is precious!’

“The Master then let them digest what they had all just said, the foot-soldiers, the kings and generals that were ready for the fight, then he said:

“‘Is it fitting that, because of a little water, you should shed the blood of kshatriyas, warrior-nobles, which you agree is beyond price?’ They were all silent.

“‘Great Kings,’ he continued, ‘were I not here today you would have set flowing a river of blood. You oppress yourselves by living in such enmity. Please use the memory of this day to guide your hearts:

*“‘While in the midst of hate,
To dwell free from hatred
Is happiness indeed.’*

“To their surprise, the Sakyans and the Koliyans soon found that by the careful use of what water was there and by sharing all they had, both clans were able to make it through that hot season unscathed. Nobody starved and nobody was killed.”



Dusaka was tending some of the ornamental flower-beds, clipping dead or overgrown limbs of various bushes and tugging out the abundant weeds; each time he took hold of a plant he briefly bowed his head and muttered some verse under his breath that Krishna never could quite catch.

The Rains were upon them and the dry periods in daylight, when Dusaka could do his ‘actual’ work at the palace, were few and far between. He kept up a brisk pace while Krishna hung at his elbow. During these times Krishna had managed to convince his mother that he’d become fascinated with the arts of the garden and needed to study with Dusaka on a daily basis to absorb all he could. His classmates were also absent

these days as the rain kept most people indoors and the brahmin pundit, his instructor in arms and the music master habitually took this time of the year off to attend to other duties. It was also hard to speak, or sing and play against the roaring wall of noise that came with the frequent downpours, while combat training outdoors in the wet was impossible.

"You remember," Krishna was doing his best to keep up, weed-basket in hand. "Years ago you told me about a mangala that could defeat Death. Would that be a good weapon? You know, something the devas could use to beat the asuras if a big war was to break out?"

"How do you think that might help?" Dusaka stopped to spread the fronds of a bush that had just finished flowering and, reciting his verse, clipped a couple of dying branchlets at the base.

"Well, if Death was defeated then..." Krishna realized he wasn't quite sure what he thought might happen. "Well it's bound to be good for the devas somehow, isn't it? To have some kind of all powerful weapon, that must put them on top." He was on uncertain ground here, but such concerns rarely if ever caused his flow to slow.

"Death must be on the side of the asuras, eh?" Dusaka stood up and stretched his back, dropping a handful of plants and twigs into the basket Krishna held for him.

"They're the bad guys... aren't they? And he's the embodiment of evil, the Lord of Lies, and so on, so he... must... well you'd think..."

Dusaka was giving him a sample of one of his look-in-here-and-it-goes-on-forever expressions.

"'Fell Namuci,' 'King Maradhiraja,' 'The Dark One' – he goes by many names, many guises, he moves in many modes. Whose side is he on?"

"The Evil One is glad of any conflict and will stir up both sides – like a swordsmith who will sell to either faction for the sake of turning a profit – the more that beings fight, then the more firmly they are embedded, imprisoned in his realm. He helps turn the devas' sufferings, their tortures into violent reaction against the torturers. Then they *all* become his subjects.

"Generally he does favour the asuras – you were right there – but he's delighted to help the devas too if it means that, thereby, they remain committed to the values of samsara, the endlessly spinning wheel of birth and death.

"Either way he wins."

"So," Krishna probed carefully, "if there *were* such a mangala that could defeat Death, would it be any use in such a war?"

"Oh yes!"

"But how? If Death is on both sides how can he be defeated? And who would win then? I'm confused."

"Yes, it is confusing, isn't it!?"

Dusaka now struck out across the lawn with his purposeful limping gait; Tingri ran by in pursuit of a batch of interesting smells in the trees ahead while Krishna followed, chasing after the train of ideas as vainly as the tailing of his teacher.

“So, if you had a mangala that defeated Death, would it mean that, if he tried to kill you, he couldn’t.”

“That’s right, in a way.”

“So, this mangala, what exactly is it? I’ve heard they can be all kinds of things: a mantra, an animal appearing at a certain time, a diagram, an amulet and all sorts of other things – is it something like that?”

“Yes, in its own way.”

“So if I wore that or recited it or whatever, then if someone, Death included, tried to kill me, they couldn’t?”

“In a manner of speaking, that’s absolutely right.”

“Well, that would be great! A guaranteed life-protector... but it must take years of practice, right, before anyone could find such a thing or it must be something that you won at the end of a gruesome set of trials – something that would always protect the body from harm.”

“Not at all.” At this the gardener leaned his scabby head forward and rummaged around at the back of his neck. Krishna thought he was going after an irksome visitor that was causing an itch, or just scratching a patch of scurf. Instead he untangled a particular cord from the knotted agglomeration of beads and chains and strings that always hung there.

“There you go.” He had brought the sweat-stained and discoloured band over his head and he now held it out to Krishna. A small rectangular block of an indeterminate material – maybe stone, maybe clay, maybe even some kind of metal – dangled from it. On its front was etched an oddly-shaped human figure or perhaps it was the image of some deity.

“What is it?” asked Krishna.

“Just what you were asking about. It’s a mangala that will never let you be physically harmed.”

“Just like that?! You just happen to have a spare one on you?”

Krishna was deeply suspicious. This had all the marks of a practical joke or a tease that Govinda might pull on him – and he was prone to being easily duped.

“What kind of a wally do you take me for?”

“You don’t want it?”

“You can’t be serious,” for, even though he doubted it, Krishna saw the unmistakable you-are-now-being-tested look very clearly on Dusaka’s face.

“I’ll withdraw the offer if you don’t want it.”

“No! I mean... is it the real thing? You’re serious?”

“Serious as life and death – but if you want to know if it’s the real thing perhaps you should test it first.” He drew the long machete that he used for the heavier pruning from a scabbard at his side; taking it carefully by the blade he pointed the handle toward Krishna. The boy received it, wrapping his fingers around the hemp-bound grip, although he was not quite sure what he should do next.

Dusaka held the amulet in his hand and then, stepping back half a pace, he tilted his head to the left, then to the right as if to offer Krishna whichever side of his neck would suit him best.

The blade was in his right hand and his palm began to sweat.

“Go on then, don’t be a wally, try to cut me.”

“But...” Krishna’s felt a mixture of excitement that this might be a real magical charm, fear that he might wound his dear friend inadvertently by doing something wrong – like losing concentration at the fatal moment – but the dominant feeling was the irrational dread that Dusaka had been a raving nutcase all along and was now pulling Krishna into a swamp of his crazed delusions.

The steady look in Dusaka’s eyes and the wave of comforting friendliness that emanated from him eventually put Krishna somewhat at ease. He slowly raised the long knife and rested its edge on the man’s bared neck.

“We haven’t got all day, Krishna, there’s a shower coming. Try to cut me, or do you want to give it up?”

Pressed by Dusaka’s chirpy calm he leaned the blade against the sun-darkened wrinkles and folds of his neck. Gingerly he drew the blade along the surface but it made no mark and certainly drew no blood.

“If that’s what you call a sword cut, you’ll be dog-meat in any real fight. Come on – make a proper slice, if you can.” Spurred on by his taunt Krishna tried harder, and then harder and... not a mark.

“Take a swing and see if you can make a dent.” Dusaka was enjoying this.

Krishna tested the edge of the blade with his thumb and it was keen; bloody drops welled forth along the cut immediately. He felt compelled to go on.

“Okay, you asked for it.” He then felt the notion forming within him to surprise Dusaka with a real taste of his power. A fierce light burned up through his body and a murderous glee took him over: “It would just serve the arrogant old git right if I took his head clean off his shoulders,” he thought. “Wouldn’t that surprise him?! That would teach *him* a lesson for a change.”

He whipped the blade round and swung with every ounce of strength he had at the exposed flesh. The handle of the machete jarred in Krishna’s fist and the steel reverberated like a bell – it was just as if he had struck an iron pillar.

“Yaivy!!!” The blade dropped from his numbed fingers. The wave of deadly hatred fell away.

Dusaka cricked his head from side to side, popping a joint or two for effect.

“That’s better – good try,” he smiled at the shocked look on Krishna’s face.

“And I think you just had a visit from our friend, the Evil One.” He reached his hand forward with the amulet in his palm.

“You’ll be wanting to hang on to this, you know, to keep you safe.”

Krishna reached forward with his left hand as his right was temporarily out of action. In a state of startled wonderment he took hold of the charm and its scraggy cord. His right arm still tingled and seemed feeble, but he slowly raised it and bent the fingers until the mangala was nestled between both palms.

“Pick up your stuff,” said Dusaka, “come on, it’s about to rain.”

CHAPTER 16

LEAVING HOME



edroll on shoulder, Krishna sheltered below the wall, waiting for the squall to pass. It was one of those blasts of rain that came like a last hurrah just when you thought that the monsoon season was over and done with. It was still well before dawn so there was no need for him to hurry; he could be patient.



Safe in his dark cocoon under the bushes his mind wandered back over the last momentous months.

Every year, before the monsoon proper, the air would get tense and dense, everyone would be short-tempered and irritable for a few days and then there would come a brief thunderstorm, lightning would blast and frazzle the land around Ujjeni – even right overhead sometimes – and, when the rain passed, all would be calmer once again.

This cycle of tension and release in the weather had been a close match for the fights he'd been having with his mother. Krishna had not been slow to notice that their worst arguments were always just before a storm.

Over these last few days he had been feeling very content – since he had made his decision to leave – but before the rainy season he had been a tangled knot of frustration and bitter ire, relieved only when a storm briefly cleared the air.



“But what’s the point!?”

“The point of what, dear?” Savitri’s brow was furrowed in her customary expression of plaintive concern mixed with mystification, she felt out of her depth and wanted desperately to set her son’s heart at ease.

“You know, of anything... of everything! It all seems to be a senseless joke and not a very funny one either, at least as far as I can tell.”

“I can’t see, for the life of me, what it is that’s bothering you,” his mother was sincerely perplexed, “you have a beautiful home, you’ve had a fine education, good friends, soon you’ll be coming of age and all this property will be yours. What a wonderful situation for you to raise a family in – I can’t see how things could be better for you...” She pleaded her usual case, blanking out from her consciousness, as she customarily did, the glaringly obvious fact that her own husband had become similarly discontent and had walked away from this splendour of his own free will. Above all things she dreaded a similar urge being awakened in her son’s heart, hence her efforts to immerse him, throughout his childhood and adolescence, in all that was sweet and fine in life, and in what was distracting to his senses.

“There you go again, Mum, ‘the sacred cause of human propagation’ – do you really think that life can only be fulfilled by having babies? What about people who live honourable lives but don’t have children? Or the women who love other women, and the men who love other men – and don’t give me that ‘How-can-you-even-know-of-such-things’ look either. I’m not a child anymore! I know how the world works.” Krishna was, too, warming to his favourite theme.

“What I mean is, what’s the point of just becoming another fat merchant, covered in jewels and mired in dubious business deals, just so that I can die and leave a pile of money and a big house to some children who will throw it all away; or at least will grow up conceited and complacent, like I did. Inherited privilege and wealth just makes us lazy and stupid, Mum.”

Savitri was stirred with feelings of anger and helplessness – that he could be so ungrateful for all that had been done for him and that nothing she said seemed to get through. A tear ran from her eye and she wiped it hurriedly with the fine muslin wrap that was draped around her.

“But Mudi, what else can we do but fulfill our dharma – our path in life designated by our karma, our birth? You are a vaisha, a merchant, that’s your dharma, your duty, your inheritance; what could be wrong with honouring the gods by living according to their will, according to the proper ordering of the universe?” Again, she was truly at a loss to see what could be so wide of the mark or unacceptable about doing what everyone in the world recognized as being one’s role, being part of the human family.

He’d wanted to explain, in a way she could understand, how he felt an overwhelming need to know what was truly important in life and to find out what anyone could do that would really make a difference. They had been over this so many

times already that he knew, if he said it was about spirituality, she would just suggest going to more pujas and visiting the local shrines – and that just did not cut the mustard.

“You’ll never understand, Mum,” he grumbled, “forget it. I’m sorry I got upset with you. Please don’t cry...” His mood was melting away now and he felt bad that he’d brought her to tears again. “What’s for lunch today?”

She looked up and was won over by the genuine affection in her son’s beautiful eyes; her distress faded too. A weak smile rose to her face and she felt his reassuring hand round her shoulders.

A crack of purple lighting burst nearby and thunder boomed.



The biggest concern for all at the palace this season was not so much the friction between Savitri and Krishna but rather the advancing sickness of the steward Kolita. He had been the stalwart of the household for decades now and a much loved father and grandfather to many of the residents. Now his body was slowly wasting and his breath was becoming more and more strained. The days when he could rise from his palliasse became rare, and the stream of doctors and healers through his rooms seemed to bring little improvement.

Krishna was with Dusaka one afternoon, watching the rain through the doorway of the gardener’s little shed that also doubled as his ‘nest’ as he called it.

“Couldn’t we do something to heal him?” Krishna asked, “I mean, you must have lots of powers like that. You can do all kinds of things. Is there some way we could use this mangala to prevent Death from taking him?” Krishna tugged on the amulet that now hung on a sturdy golden chain around his neck.

“Different things work in different ways,” offered Dusaka, not very helpfully. “It’s yours now so, if you think there’s a way it can save Kolita’s life, then it’s up to you to apply it.” He turned his attention back to binding some waxed cord around the handle of a garden tool.

“You also want to make sure you don’t go around hating and resenting Death. Do you think bringing in more negativity usually helps a situation?”

Krishna’s silence answered his teacher’s last query but his interest was piqued by what Dusaka had said first.

“What d’you mean that we shouldn’t hate or resent Death? I thought Death was the enemy and to be defeated.”

“He’s only doing his job, in some ways, isn’t he?”

“There’s a story of a village, far off to the west of here. As a favour to them, for what reason I can’t recall, one of the high gods granted them a wish. They asked that Death would never visit their village again and the brahma god happily arranged this.

“During that year, as happens in any place, a young man fell from a high tree while he was picking fruit and broke his neck – but he didn’t die; an old lady grew sick and weak, she could no longer eat or drink – but she couldn’t die either; two young men got into a fight and wounded each other grievously, they had been stabbed repeatedly and their limbs were hacked to pieces – but they didn’t die, despite their dreadful injuries; and a young girl who had cut her leg suffered a poisoning of the wound that could not be healed but, although her whole body was rotted with infection and gangrene, she could not die – instead she writhed in unrelenting pain.”

Krishna was looking at the floor of the hut with great intensity, watching a line of ants moving their eggs, probably to avoid being flooded in their former home. Dusaka’s story was troubling and confusing to him.

“So, after one year, the villagers all came to the elders and begged for them to ask the great brahma to rescind the favour that had been granted. To their great delight and relief this was done and Death was able to visit the village once more.”

Dusaka paused as his story came to its end and the two of them listened to the rain. For once Krishna was silent and groped vainly for a question.

“D’you get it?” Dusaka asked, now putting the newly repaired trowel up on the wall-rack.

“Not really,” Krishna hated to admit. “I thought the aim of all this spiritual stuff was to defeat Death.”

“In a way that’s true, but do we have to hate something to defeat it? Do we have to destroy it? Is there some other way that might be the path?”

“A woman has a dream,” Dusaka began, launching into his teaching-story mode once more, “she dreams that she wakes up in her own bedroom but, instead of her husband, she notices that there’s a skeleton beside her instead – y’know, scythe over the shoulder, hourglass by the bedside, the whole collection – she shrieks, reasonably, I’d say, and leaps out of bed.

“She can’t get out of the door, or into a cupboard, so she ends up cowering in a corner, quaking with terror but there’s nowhere to go, no protection.

“After a while she hears a strange, sniffling, sobbing sound, it almost seems to be that there’s someone crying nearby. She looks up, with some concern, for she half-dreaded that the cowed skeletal demon would be looming over her, ready to dispatch her with a swipe of his ugly blade.

“She sees the figure in the bed is hunched over and, mustering all her will, she goes over to its side.

“It’s always the same,’ sobs the grim shape in the bed, ‘everywhere I go people take one look then – eek! – and they run and hide. Do they think it’s fun doing this job? How would they like it if they were feared and hated everywhere they went?’

“To her surprise a great wave of compassion welled up in her chest and taking a deep breath, saying ‘There, there, not everybody hates you,’ she reached forward to embrace Death itself.

“Now that was a brave act, but it was also somewhat forbidding, so as she stretched out her arms she also closed her eyes – fearing to feel the chill bony presence of Death’s body on her skin. To her surprise, as she closed her embrace, instead of the sharp ridges of bone she expected to feel, she was shocked to meet with... nothing.

“She opened her eyes again and the room, which had been dim and murky, was now filled with light, a spring breeze and early sunlight was pouring in the window, billowing the curtains – the bed was absolutely empty.”

Once again Dusaka inquired, “D’you get it? The killing goes with the job so, for Mara, evil is his good; that’s the curse of being born into that form. Do you think that’s a reason to hate him? Do you think something has to be destroyed before you can be sure you are not under its control?”

“Well, wiping something out makes it more certain that you’ll be free of it... doesn’t it?” Krishna had a suspicion that this was heading down the wrong track but the logic seemed watertight to him, nonetheless.

“Then what if, in the effort to get rid of or punish something, you end up creating more trouble for yourself. Is it worth it?”

“You have to take the rough with the smooth, don’t you?” The ground he was on was feeling ever more treacherous, yet he couldn’t see what Dusaka might be about to come up with to prove him mistaken.

“And what if,” Dusaka was speaking carefully now and even Tingri was giving Krishna the eye, “what if, by your very effort to destroy something, you ended up making it stronger?”

“That would be,” Krishna hunted for the right words, “errr... most unfortunate.”

Instead of his teacher blasting him for being wrongheaded again, or even cracking a joke with Tingri as he often did at such points, the sound of Krishna’s last words was allowed to hang undisturbed in the stuffy air of the hut. He turned his attention back to the army of worker-ants, conscientiously carrying their pale eggs to safety.



Just as the clear skies, interspersed with brief thunder showers, became superseded by the ever-present grey blanket of the monsoon, so too Krishna’s sporadic

spats with his mother mutated into an ongoing blanket of resentment and irritating grudge – like damp rough wool against his skin, that was too hot and itchy for comfort yet which he was somehow unable to shrug off.

“I’ve got to leave!” He was venting his almost-sixteen-year-old spleen to Dusaka once again.

“It’ll break your mother’s heart, especially if you’re thinking not to say goodbye...” he lowered his eyes. Krishna could not see if there was any recrimination there. He also wondered how Dusaka had guessed that he was indeed planning a secret departure one night.

“Tough! She’s kept me cooped up here like a kunala bird in a jewelled cage, trying to make me stupid and useless – another puffed up and overfed merchant for the glory of Ujjeni. All the rich clothes and ornaments, good food and pretty maids, and then paying them to visit my room at night. That was just a cheap trick to make me forget Khina, who I really loved....”

“You don’t seem too disappointed with the company of Nanda,” Dusaka levelled his gaze at his Krishna for a moment, giving him his don’t-be-a-hypocrite look. “And word has it that Khina’s very happily married to a Koliyan merchant and the mother of a little boy – who she didn’t call ‘Krishna,’ by the way.”

“I know, he’s ‘Little Kolita.’ But anyway, I really don’t care if it does upset my mother – she’s made my life hell, she deserves to suffer!”

At this Dusaka’s scabby eyebrow was raised half a finger-breadth, as if to say, “Really – is that so?”

“...a bit...” Krishna continued.

“And that will be sweet?” Now the cocked eyebrow was augmented with a sideways tilt of the chin.

Krishna felt a fierce flush of relish run through him at the thought of getting his mother back for all the wrongs she’d done him. “Right!” he answered with a flash of his eyes and with a vehemence that surprised even him.

Mara saw that it was good. Tingri snorted with disgust.



A few days after this exchange there had been a break in the weather. Krishna had expected to find Dusaka busy in the grounds taking care of what tasks he could while the rain held off – his friend was somewhat immune to discomfort, it seemed, but the work was always more pleasant when not having to wear a soaking sarong or with the garden debris doubled in weight by water.

He hunted around the usual corners but, not finding Dusaka anywhere, he headed back indoors. To his surprise as he passed the little shed in the kitchen yard where Dusaka lived, he saw that he was busy with something in there.

"What are you doing?" Krishna saw that the place was strangely tidy and that Dusaka's ragged blanket was rolled up neatly on the low platform that formed his bed. A water gourd sat by it and a couple of cloth-wrapped packages as well.

"What does it look like?" He answered.

"Like you're packing up."

"Cracked it in one!" The monk fired a big grin at him, "You're improving."

"Where are you going?"

"Where? Where is anywhere?"

Krishna hated it and loved it when Dusaka got cryptic like this.

"And as for 'going'..." he grinned again. "Just to Suchness; you know..."

Krishna didn't know, but he guessed that this was going to be the nearest thing to a straight answer he was likely to get out of him.

"What are you going to do?" He asked, really just to fill the silence as he stood there by the door feeling gormless as Dusaka bustled about, putting odds and ends away in the little room.

"I should ask you the same question, perhaps."

"Well, I've been thinking, actually," Krishna was now glad to have the chance to air the ideas he'd been nursing for a while. "There's this war that's brewing, you know, between the asuras and the devas. I've had this feeling that the mangala you gave me might be a very useful thing in the struggle. I'd be on the devas side of course – I've made a lot of friends here, the visitors who came from Kosambi, Alambusa the tree-spirit, then there's the royal nagas in the lake, Virupakkha and Samuddaja – do you think it's my destiny to help with the coming war? Should I be using the mangala to defeat the asuras?"

"The amulet I gave you is guaranteed to protect the owner from all physical harm. Death cannot destroy your body while you own it; if you think that's a good enough weapon then maybe you can help the devas win."

"I knew it!" Krishna was excited beyond even his usual enthusiasms. "I've been trying to see what purpose, if any, there might be to life, to everything. At least here is something I can really *do* – you know – that will make a *real* difference. This is great!"

"Sometimes," Dusaka tossed a bone that he'd been saving for Tingri down to the dog for her chew on the dirt floor of his hut, "we do have to leave the world we know in order to find out what's worth seeking. That's true."

Krishna wasn't quite sure if Dusaka was agreeing with him, he knew you always had to listen closely or you could leap to the wrong conclusions. "So, are you telling me that I *should* run away from home?"

"What do you think?" Dusaka smiled warmly and continued packing.

“If I set out on this quest, would you help me? Can I go with you right now?”

“I always travel alone – at least, that is, with respect to humans,” he smiled at Tingri who was giving the bone all the attention it deserved. “So you can’t travel with me, but I’ll be turning up from time to time, I expect; I usually do, here and there.”

Krishna knew it was a mistake to ask Dusaka if he had any predictions for the future, even though he had once said that Krishna’s business with his sisters was not done. Apart from that, questions about what might happen often gave rise to even more elusive and mysterious answers than his friend gave normally. He decided to try anyway.

“So, do you think I might be, you know, successful? Helping the devas and so on? And if the mangala does defeat Death, will that be the fulfillment of my spiritual journey? Don’t they say that defeating Death is the same as enlightenment?”

“There are different ways of defeating, or evading Death,” Dusaka rubbed the side of his neck and clicked a joint or two back into place, as if by way of a hint. “If you want to know about ending the journey then you should seek out the teaching of the Buddhas and the noble ones.” He settled on his low bench and his voice moved into a different register. The old monk began to recite:

*“When one sees with perfect wisdom
The Truths of the noble ones –
Dissatisfaction, (the disease),
It’s origin, (the cause),
Its overcoming, (the state of health),
And the Noble Eightfold Path, (the cure),
That leads to dissatisfaction’s end –
Then that person, having wandered on
For seven more lives at most,
Makes a total end to suffering;
All the fetters are destroyed.”*

As usual, Krishna was not quite sure what Dusaka was driving at but the resonant verses sank in and, as best he could, he took them to heart: “Once you really understand things, then, no more than seven more lifetimes – OK! Then enlightenment and eternal bliss....”

“One more thing,” Dusaka was now shouldering his bundle and had draped a cloth bag with a long strap across his chest. He picked up his staff and looked Krishna in the eye, the lad was now a good few finger-breadths taller than him. “The secret of the mangala, and how to use it and all its powers, is something that you’ll learn from a red-haired woman. Don’t forget. Bye bye.”



Down by the lake, now filled with blossoming lotus flowers, there was a small pavilion where Krishna liked to sit. Even if it was pouring with rain he would sometimes dash out there as he knew its isolation would grant him some solitude. It was also a place where he could chat freely with his naga friend, Queen Samuddaja, and what with his family and the house becoming an oppressive presence in his life he was drawn to spend more and more time with the celestials, as he had come to call them.

He hurtled into the shelter of the pavilion one evening during a downpour. Safely under the eaves, he leaned back and briskly shook the gout of water out of his hair. Once settled on the bench that surrounded the interior of the space, he crossed his legs, focused his mind and sent forth the message, "Noble Queen, Krishna has come to visit, are you free to speak?" He waited and, before long, a luminescent serpentine form emerged from the waters and glided delicately across the floor-boards towards him.

It rose up and spread its sparkling scaled hood, Krishna bowed forward and the ethereal being's head and his own brow gently touched. When he opened his eyes she had assumed a human form as she knew it was much easier to communicate through spoken words this way.

The naga queen's skin glistened with a shimmering, jewel-like array of colours and her body was draped with intricate strings of pearl and leaf-thin emerald. Her face was of an exquisite beauty, however Krishna was always slightly disconcerted by the slitted pupils of her eyes and her unblinking stare. He had met her husband, King Virupakkha, a few times but he was a naga of greatest significance, it seemed, and often spent time away from this pool, which they seemed to relate to as if it were some kind of rural retreat for them. Samuddaja often said how much she preferred to be here rather than in the royal court of Bhogavati, the naga capital under the Himalayas.

Krishna talked with her for some time and told her of his plans to depart the palace once he had reached his sixteenth birthday. When he had become an adult he would officially donate the palace and all his wealth to his mother and then go forth to help the devas in their impending war with the asuras.

"Dusaka, the gardener," he explained, and noticed that the naga placed her palms reverentially together when he mentioned the eccentric monk's name, "also told me that I'd learn how to use the mangala from a woman with red hair. He didn't say anything about it before he left but, years ago when I was small and when he first came here, he mentioned that I shouldn't forget my sisters. Well, it seems to me, Your Highness – and he, Dusaka, had one of those odd I've-got-a-message-for-you looks as he said it – that maybe it's Tamba he was talking about. She had reddish hair, that's how she got the name, and a coppery kind of tint to her skin. Of course I was very

small, so I might not remember perfectly, but everyone who knew her says the same." He was excited and wanted her to know his ideas and, hopefully, for her to be as optimistic as he was about the whole adventure – even better, to pass on some inside knowledge on this whole affair, if she happened to have any.

"But, Krissshna," Samuddaja spoke in a musical sibilant tone, "wasn't it said that your sissster had died on the way to Kosssambi?"

"That's what people *think*, but the kinnaris never actually saw her body. I think maybe she found a way to survive; maybe a pack of wolves adopted her, or a hunter found her and raised her, or maybe the nagas discovered her and decided to look after her and now she has become an enlightened sage..."

"It's true that her hair was thusss," Samuddaja reflected, "I remember when she used to swim in this very lake as a little girl, she'd go underwater and, when the sun shone from above her head it would be like a grand spray of auburn and copper huesss billowing round her in the water. Sssometimes I'd look up from below her and sssee her little body framed against the bright light, there would be a thousand red and russet beams shooting through the pool, amongst the lotusses."

These were fond recollections of many years before, but Samuddaja had to admit that she had not heard of anything since then that would suggest that Tamba was still alive, let alone where she might be. She told Krishna that she shared his hope, however, and she agreed it was possible that Dusaka had been referring to Tamba as the red-haired woman. She fixed her friend's eyes with a keen and sincere gaze.

"The venerable monk is a mysteriousss man, Krissshna; he's very wise and has much to impart but he seesss that we learn besst through our own discoveries. He also chooses his words very carefully. It's always good to think twice before you assume you are following the advice he gives. Mossst importantly he often reminds us that we usually learn better through our mistakesss than our successsesss." The naga queen's last words dissolved into a soft extended hiss and a quizzical smile creased her flawless features, as if she were remembering some precious, bitter-sweet and illumined moment.

Suddenly the two were alerted to the world around them by the sound of a crashing movement among the trees on the bank and some loud thumping noises behind them.

Out of the deep darkness of the woods around the lake two huge burly figures appeared. Krishna was at once alarmed, fearing they were about to be attacked by some demonic entities but to his surprise he saw that the naga was smiling sweetly.

The massive creatures – humanoid in form but blessed with long snaggly teeth, a bristly coating of hair, a slightly acrid reek and eyes of a dangerous scarlet – strode forward and, as gently as possible, came into the shelter of the pavilion.

"Excuse us Your 'ighness," said the first, "my name's Gumbiya and this here's Hemaka. We just came from your sister; she and the Gen'ral wanted you to know that

there's been more serious trouble and they asked us to tell you, 'Please don't go out 'n' about without an escort.'"

Krishna was amazed at this exchange but could plainly see that the Queen was not bothered in the slightest. She, in turn, could see he was bewildered by the visitors.

"Thesse good yakkhas must be soldiersss under my brother-in-law General Punnaka; is that correct?" She looked over to the two new arrivals.

They nodded, the one who had spoken adding, "Strictly speaking, Your 'ighness, I *was* retired but, what with the aggro that's been happening and the rumours of war again, me and a few others got called back into action."

"Sso, pray tell usss, what has now happened that the good General should feel the need to warn usss?" The serpentine queen remained seated casually, leaning on her straightened arm and directing her piercing eyes onto the huge ungainly pair. Part of her was ready to shrug off her brother-in-law's concerns as overly fussy caution, another part tensed in dread of more news of escalating harm.

"Up in Kosambi, Ma'am, you know north-east of here. Outside of town there's a forest with an old Krishna temple. Well, seems like there was a raid and a bunch of kinnaris got killed. Some rukkha-devas had their trees smashed down and they got done in too.

"One of the girls there I know pretty well – called Mahapa... -something..." – the forbidding, brawny message-carrier seemed genuinely upset as he groped through his memory, failing to find his friend's proper name – "...but goes by 'Bee' – both her parents got the chop and it looks like her little sister's got kidnapped. All the elder kinnaris who didn't get killed resisting, and a whole lot of youngsters, got taken prisoner and hived off who knows where."

This was all unsettling news and they sat silently together for some time as the naga queen and Krishna digested it:— So it wasn't just up in the heavenly realms that conflict was brewing, it was having its effect here on earth as well. It was very troubling too, to hear that Bee's family had been so brutalized.

Samuddaja then thought of something, "How iss it that you, a warrior-yakkha, should be sso friendly with any kinnaris? I'm surprissed that you would even know each other..."

Gumbiya, with a little embarrassment, recounted the events that had occurred on the road between Kosambi and Ujjeni. They were still reasonably fresh in his memory for, like kinnaris, time ran more slowly for yakkhas than it did in the human world. For him it had happened not that long before.

As he described the scene, and related how the woman had died, and that she had had a young daughter with her, and how there was supposed to have been another girl as well whom he never saw, Krishna was hit by a burst of insight.

"What was her name?"

"I can't remember! Those kinnaris are terrible for long and fancy monikers. The tall one who was the tough nut, she was 'Mahapaduma-...' and one of the others was something like 'Jambusyruv...'"

"No, the girl! What was the girl's name?"

"The little girl? – 'Amba' that one's easy too remember – she's a friendly character. I even felt sorry I'd had the idea of... you know... well, I was hungry!"

"So you were there when the three kinnari met my sister. That's great! Even though you did have it in mind to eat her. Did you hear that she's become Queen of Vamsa?"

As he had been back on military duties for a little while, and in close touch with the three kinnari friends, they had brought him up to date on the changes in Amba's life so her new role was now well known to him.

The news that Bee had lost both her parents and her little sister was very tragic. She was indeed a tough nut but such a loss would be hard to bear, even for her, moreover, she would not be the only one who had lost loved ones. Krishna and Samuddaja pressed the yakkhas for more details.

"Sorry Your 'ighness but there isn't a lot more to tell. Miss Bee, she told me that when she went to check on the Simsapa forest, you know, after the news of the raid, both her parents were dead near their nest and properly messed up into the bargain. When she went to hunt for her little sister, Minti, there was just a few strands of her hair tangled in the bushes, far across on the east side of the forest, as if she tried to make a run for it but had got caught. There were some splashes of blood as well.

"She's just a young hatchling, only ten or twenty sun-turnings old... I must say Ma'am" – the yakkha's already fearsome visage now twisted into an angry tangle of deep lines around his eyes while he ground together the spray of teeth that bristled from his mouth – "I'd like to get my hands on them that did this. Miss Bee's a brave soul, she stood up to the likes of me without a flicker, so I've been real upset seeing her so grieved."

"How did she know the hair and the blood were her sister's?" Krishna asked, more just to have something to say than because it might tell him anything new, also to help dispel the image of his friend being so distraught, and the pain that the dead and injured had all suffered.

"Well, those kinnaris are like flowers aren't they? Each one's got their own special scent. Their blood smells just like a rose or a hyacinth or jasmine, depending on which kind of flower they belong to, and they can easily tell you whose is which; just like a yakkha can tell whose war-club is whose from a good bow-shot away.

"So, even though it was way off from their nest, they knew right away it was Minti's. And her hair's perfectly white, like a sala-tree flower, like ice, so that was it, wasn't it, Your 'ighness. She was definitely a gonner. They took others too, but it was only adults that died there."



As if this news hadn't depressed Krishna enough, as the rainy season progressed and he tried to use his amulet to heal Kolita, it was plain that he was an abject failure at this. The dear old man became weaker day by day until he could eat or speak no more. Just before the full moon of the Katthika month he breathed his last and his son Vishva was officially installed as steward of the palace.

Krishna's resolve was now made firm. He knew that, if he had learned how to use the mangala properly, he would have been able to help Kolita – it had been a long agonizing trial for him and everyone, to be so helpless in the face of sickness and Death. He had to do something about this – he had the opportunity to learn the secrets of life and death – he knew this amulet had highly miraculous powers and so he really had no choice but to set forth and learn for himself what it could do, and just how it worked.

His sixteenth birthday had now passed, with the Komudi full moon and, with great pomp and ceremony, he had officially been made master of the house. Savitri was overjoyed that her son now seemed more settled in himself. She had no clue that his newfound ease had come from his firm but as-yet-unspoken decision to leave her and this whole life behind.

He had waited until the dark of the new moon and had packed up a few essentials, as he had seen Dusaka do. Now he sat below the garden wall, beyond the glade where he had had such precious times with Khina. Once he perceived that the shower had passed, he scooted up the notched bamboo pole he had secreted there in advance and hopped nimbly over the garden wall.



A smile began to creep across the face of the Hunter, like a patch of advancing sunlight melting the ice during the Eight Days of Frost. He watched the prey approaching the jaws of the trap but he carefully did not allow even a flicker of gratification to be exuded. For, even in utter stillness, the faintest scent of a flush of anticipation can cause the victim to balk before the snare is sprung.

As the gates of Ujjeni were opened with the dawn, and Krishna stepped out into the world, the Hunter permitted his grin to widen to its full and gruesome span. He knew the bait had now irrevocably been swallowed.

"Living beings," he mused, "are *so* gullible."



PART II

CHAPTER 17

THE ARROW



ver and over again, in as gentle a way as she could, Samavati raised the subject of visiting Ghositarama. Once or twice His Majesty had merely snorted contemptuously, dismissing the idea as abruptly as the air from his nostrils, but to her surprise, one long languid late hot season afternoon, her husband said, "You know something my love, I might be interested to go and listen to that Sakyan monk one of these days."

He was gazing vacantly at the ceiling of their chambers as they reclined together on a broad couch draped with muslin, cooling silks and freely strewn with cushions. Samavati's heart began to pound at once; her face lit up with delight at this unexpected turn in King Udena's humour. When she met his glance though, she realized that she should not overdo her expressions of enthusiasm as she could see that already he was startled, if not slightly affronted, by the swiftness of her reaction and the unfettered joy in her eyes.

In a single breath she was able to re-establish her composure, take the King's hand in hers and reply, "It makes me very happy that you have this thought. He really does give very good advice for all who come to see him. He has an amazing knack of being able to identify the cares of many individuals and to provide the advice that will be useful to them – whatever position someone may hold in society he offers helpful guidance on the use of their resources and opportunities, great or small. I'm sure you'll be pleasantly surprised at how valuable and practical his reflections on life are, even for warrior-noble kings." She squeezed his hand affectionately and Udena, at least momentarily, rejoiced in the happiness this small favour brought her.

What Samavati failed to realize was that the motivation for her royal husband's new found tolerance, and even interest in the Buddha's teachings, was more guilt that he had been neglecting her than any religious inspiration. He had been spending more and more time with the fun-loving Magandiya, who seemed to adore him with a

reckless abandon that he never found in Samavati. Yet when he was with his beloved, doe-eyed, serious queen something deep within him rejoiced in the goodness she exuded – he felt strangely more complete. Although, annoyingly, he was also frustrated that, in the same moment, he felt he could never really possess her – not as he could all the other members of his household, even the people of his country.

“I am lord of her body but not of her mind...” He chuckled to himself as this phrase came into consciousness. Ironically, it had been the very one he had used to defy King Canda Pajjota of Ujjeni when he had been imprisoned by him and that king had tried to force him to reveal the elephant-charming spells that Udena was skilled in. The memory of that intense encounter welled up in his mind’s eye:

“They say you have a charm for taming and controlling elephants; will you give it to me?” said Canda Pajjota.

“Certainly, but only if you will declare subservience to me.”

“Never!”

“Then I’ll not give it to you.”

“If that’s the case, I’ll have you executed.”

“Please do so; you are the lord of my body, not of my mind.”

Samavati saw the smile on Udena’s face and asked him why he was so amused.

“Oh, just an old reminiscence – that and the wry wit of the universe which keeps handing back to us the very things we’ve created.”

She too smiled quizzically at this more-than-usually cryptic utterance of her husband but she left it at that. As they lay there quietly in the heat of the afternoon, Samavati let her mind wander freely into plan-making for a visit to her beloved monastery.



As it turned out, King Udena’s ambivalent feelings toward the Buddha and his monastic community did indeed cast an acrid pall over the Royal Visit.

First of all he had objected to Samavati’s wish to go dressed in plain white clothing and, to his aghast horror, without any jewellery at all. Royal Displeasure had been expressed on both sides but, in her wisdom, Queen Samavati had deferred to his wishes and agreed to wear some modest earrings, bracelets and a plain gold necklace.

The Buddha greeted them very graciously and, to King Udena’s great relief, made no mention either direct or oblique of the Krishna temple in the Simsapa Grove. The King had been afraid that he would be put on the spot publicly and shamed for his off-handed rescinding of the gift he had once made.

As the evening proceeded, he grew more and more agitated, almost in direct proportion to the devotion he saw written on his dear queen’s face. There were

hundreds of people there, both monks and town folks, and almost every single one seemed fixed in rapt absorption in the words and presence of this Sakyan monk.

“Look at him!” Udena’s mind seethed, “He’s besotted with all this reverence – he’s relishing every moment of being at the centre of attention, and in the power he has over this bunch of fools.”

He turned to look at his wife beside him. In the soft light of the oil lamps that hung from the many pillars of the hall, her expression of radiant joy and serene peace irritated him beyond belief. Her eyes were closed and her hands raised, palms together at her heart, as were those of most of the assembly as they listened. The soft murmur of intuition that stirred within him, that scried the true innocence and purity of the occasion, was summarily swamped by the flood of his jealousy and pride.

“This is the last time,” he churned internally, “that I will be dragged along to *this* place.” He also felt aggrieved and belittled by theme of the Buddha’s teaching that night, which he attended to snatches of between his own disgruntled internal monologues. The Sakyan monk had been listing the qualities of a righteous monarch:– Well, what a coincidence! There just happens to be a king sitting here... And Udena was intimidated and felt put-upon by the daunting list of pious qualities: “A good king should display: Generosity, Morality, Altruism, Honesty, Kindness, Self-control, Non-anger, Non-violence, Forbearance, Uprightness.”

“Furthermore, one worthy of ruling the world should:
Govern by Righteousness.

Provide ward and protection to:

- Those in the Emperor’s immediate circle
- The armed forces
- Governors and administrative officers
- Royal dependents and civil servants
- Brahmins, householders, craftsmen, traders
- Town and country dwellers
- Religious devotees
- Beasts and birds.

Furthermore they should:

- Prevent wrongdoing in the kingdom;
- Distribute wealth to the poor;
- Seek advice from sages;
- And aspire to greater virtue.”

“Well, Your Holiness, now that you’ve let everyone know that you think King Udena is angry, immoral and violent. I think it’s probably time we took our Royal Leave.” It was a sign of the actuality of his forbearance that the vexed monarch managed to keep these as ‘inside-words’ and bottled his ire for the time being; this

restraint was probably aided by the fact that, all evening, the Buddha's tone had been warm and congenial, rather than bearing any hint of being judgmental or patronizing.

His mood had also been rendered tetchy by the passage of a couple of hours since he had had his last stiffener of honey-liquor, just before the royal party had left the palace to come to Ghositarama.

He fixed his resolve based on the reflection that:– At least it makes her happy. And, in the inexorable logic of delusion, he decided that, since he had been *so* patient and generous, he deserved a large drink when he got back as well as a night with Magandiya.



"I don't recall seeing those windows there before," remarked the King as he and Magandiya wandered through the gardens, enjoying the early morning dews. They were following a path through a part of the grounds that Udena rarely walked in – for some reason their feet had carried them here on this particular day.

"What's that, Sire?" His consort innocently replied.

"Those windows, along the upper hall of the Queen's seraglio; in fact I remember being glad that that was a solid wall as it faced the street and thus gave more privacy to the harem. I wonder who ordered that they should be put there."

"Perhaps the concern that those inside could look out was stronger than any anxiety about who should look in, Sire."

"Ridiculous! Why on earth would the Queen have any reason to watch the street?"

"Who knows, Sire, some people have odd tastes."

"What do you mean?"

"Well..." Magandiya coyly eyed the ground and then looked up, glancing here and there into the middle-distance. "... I have to say that I have noticed, once or twice when I have been in this part of the grounds of an early morning, that Her Serene Highness and most of her womenfolk gather at those very windows, just at the time that the Sakyan monk and his gang of greedy superstition-mongers come down the street, seeking their daily hand-out.

"I was sure she had your approval so I never said anything about it to you before, Sire. You know I make it my habit to cultivate sisterly love and respect in this household, nevertheless," and here she spoke with her most precisely clipped brahmin accent, "I have to say I find this practice of Her Serene Highness *most* peculiar."

King Udena shot her a sidelong look, keeping his silence for a few more moments as they walked along the pathway among the well-tended shrubs and trees. "Do you mean to tell me," he began, testing his suspicions and also wondering about

the motivations of his new Chief Consort, “that the Queen had those windows put in just so that she could watch that Sakyan and his flock walk by every morning?”

“It’s not for *me* to say, Sire, surely. I have as little respect for the Sakyan and his gang as you do – as I discern – but Queen Samavati is a lady of the highest reputation. Wouldn’t it be most appropriate to find out first if this is indeed her habit, and then to ask her yourself what has inspired this er... unusual gesture of her devotion to this object of such seemingly dubious worth.” She smiled sweetly.

At this point in their meanderings the two had reached a part of the main palace that stood separately from Queen Samavati’s seraglio. There was a small garden room that was open-sided, lying along the wall that was at right angles to the building they had just passed. King Udena took in the lay-out of this space, turned from the waist and surveyed the windows they had been discussing. They were clearly visible from this spot.

“Let’s sit here for a while,” the King suggested and settled himself down on a long low couch. As the rising light of morning filled the air, just as the birds edged into what patches of sun they could find to warm themselves after the cool of the night, so did Queen Samavati and her ladies-in-waiting and maids gather at the row of four large windows to meet the light of their spiritual master.

At a certain point all murmurings were hushed among them and, to his great chagrin, proud King Udena saw his queen and her attendants raise their hands, palms together, in reverential salutation facing the street below. On their faces a single expression of pure devotion – a devotion of a kind that he knew he could never command. He could not see beyond the palace wall from where he sat at garden-level but there was no need to guess that it was the line of monks, with the Buddha at their head, that were being paid respect to silently as they passed. He was enraged.

“You’d think it was enough that I have allowed her to visit that charlatan at least two or three times with her father Ghosaka – dammit, I even went once myself. But even that’s not sufficient, she has to go and knock holes in the wall just so she can watch her precious guru go by, and doesn’t even care that now half of Kosambi can stare into her chambers... What else does she expect to get away with!?”

“Oh, a lot more!” snapped Magandiya then sharply caught her breath, as if she’d accidentally let some secret slip.

“And what does *that* mean?” Udena turned to fix her with his gaze. “Is there something else that I should know? The concealment of another’s fault binds one to the same deception, so it will go badly for you if you know of some false dealings and you do not tell it now.” His voice was very cold and wreathed in more wariness than ever, yet he decided he would trust Magandiya.

“I shouldn’t say anything, Sire, because I have not seen it with my own eyes, but the stories are rife around the palace.

“The fact is that, for some time the Queen’s maidservant, that hunchback, has been going to listen to the monk whenever it’s been announced that he will give a talk. She goes along and, so it is said, memorizes all the words of the teaching and then recounts the contents to the Queen and all her household; every one of them, as you have seen, is devoted to that Sakyan.”

“This is not news to me – have no fear of having kept back a dreadful secret – I heard tell of this strange arrangement and have chosen to turn a blind eye.”

“I’m sorry, Your Majesty, but that’s not all there is to the tale. A few people also found it strange, and hard to believe as well, that an illiterate slave should be credited with such powers of memory and intelligence. So, the rumours have been doing the rounds that, when the slave goes out to the monastery, a veiled and plainly-dressed lady-friend goes along with her. No one says they have ever seen her face but, if that were a well-educated person and the slave was merely there as her attendant, that would explain a lot about how those talks get recollected.” She paused and felt her heart pounding; her skin was clammy with sweat despite the early hour.



King Udena barged into the Queen’s chambers without any announcement or formality. His wrath preceded him like a bow-wave and scattered all of the occupants of the women’s court as he approached.

“Kneel, woman! I want some answers,” he barked and Samavati duly sank to the floor before him.

“Who ordered these windows to be made and for what purpose?”

“It was I, Your Majesty,” Samavati replied, her expression a mixture of surprise, eagerness to please and an imploring for some reason for her husband’s fury. “I had them made so that we could watch the Master and his monks on their morning alms-round through the city, and so that we could pay our respects as they pass by.”

“So you admit it!”

“What’s to admit, Sire? We are not allowed to leave the gates to offer them alms-food, so to make some windows in order that we could see when the venerable ones walked past seemed the perfect and rightful middle way. Surely we are not at fault for wishing to honour that in the world which is noble and pure-hearted?” Her tone was so guileless, her countenance so innocent, her logic so seamless that Udena felt an immediate sense of deflation.

“Well... what’s this about your maid traipsing off to see the Sakyan every time he speaks and who is it that sneaks along with her?”

“I’m not sure what you mean, Sire. Surely there’s no offense in Khujjuttara coming and going freely – she’s a slave and thus below the laws of protocol. You

yourself, Sire, have forbidden my court women and I from leaving the palace without your express wish and we are happy to bow to that, but in no household in Vamsa would a slave be bound by the same restriction – by law she’s a beast of burden.

“If I have offended in allowing her to travel outside the palace it was only since I did not know your wishes – I apologise for being unaware of your desire in this.”

Again the sincerity and artless honesty of his wife disarmed King Udena but he rallied his umbrage at being cuckolded by a monk – at least by the fear of that – and snapped once more:

“So what is this I hear about some mysterious veiled lady who accompanies your maid on these evening jaunts? That’s not you, is it?!” He was getting desperate and hurtful.

“There is no one who goes with Khujjuttara – she’ll swear to it herself if you like – and if there was, I can’t understand how you could think that it might be me. I am your wife, you are my king, my ruler and my husband. You have ordained that I should never go to the monastery unless it was with your explicit blessing – how could I possibly go against your command?”

Udena was defeated. His wife, he knew, was as blameless and pure as the snows that shone on the far Himalayan peaks. That realization being clear, he still needed to preserve his orgul pride and to assert his authority.

“I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt this time but I want these windows to be bricked up; I forbid your slave to go to the Ghositarama without my permission and I do not wish to hear that Sakyan monk’s name in the Royal Presence again – is that clear?”



“You mark my words, Miss Amba, it’s that sly vixen Magandiya that’s put him up to this, or at least that’s led him on.” Khujjuttara had found her mistress by herself in a shady, little-used reception room that looked out over the inner garden. She had seen how solemn her dear friend had been since the King imposed his restrictions and now she had found her secreted quietly in this sad corner. Khujjuttara sat down next to the Queen and took the liberty of holding her hand. Samavati was grateful for this friendliness and leaned against her companion’s shoulder.

“I shouldn’t get upset, should I Kujj? And mostly I feel all right – you know: ‘All things come and go,’ and I truly understand that, but sometimes I feel this great weight in my heart and all the world seems colourless. Then this feeling that it’s so unfair to be treated this way wells up and fills me with its noxious fumes. It’s only for a moment but still...”

“Yes, but it *is* unfair miss – I mean, look – even in the old stories, if a queen has five husbands and then takes a boyfriend on the side, she’s condemned as ‘insatiable,’ on the other hand a king is told that he’s being a bit on the skimpy side if he’s got less than 16,000 concubines. There’s one rule for women and one for men and it’s always been like that.”

“Well, let’s hope it’s not like that forever, eh?” She squeezed Khujjuttara’s hand and smiled. “I never feel that sad or glum for very long these days but I do get waves of it rippling through and my mind goes off into bursts of fantasy.

“Just before you came and found me here I was moaning to myself, ‘Why doesn’t someone come and rescue me?’ Then this image flashed into my mind of a time when I lived with my mother and sister Tamba in that little house in Ujjeni I told you about.

“I had been gathering mangoes from our precious tree and had a shawl filled with all the ripe ones I could find. I was bringing them around the back of the house to the kitchen. Suddenly from on top of the fence, from the roof, the other trees around me, a big troop of bandhar – rhesus monkeys – dropped to the ground and surrounded me. They bared their pointy teeth and snarled, pressing closer and closer, eyeing the golden fruits and making vicious, nasty noises. I was terrified – there was no escape.

“Then ‘*Hyaaaah! Hyaaaah! Huht! Huht!!*’ Tamba came flying around the corner, my skinny five-year-old sister, like the avenging Goddess Durga, swinging one-armed from a tree-branch herself, brandishing a length of sturdy bamboo, her flaming hair streaming out in shocks around her as she pounced, ablaze in the morning sun.

“‘*Hyaaaah! Hyaaaah! Huht! Huht!!*’ Tamba swung the lathi at the crowd of startled monkey faces and thwacked the ground with it as loudly as she could. ‘Giddahtdahere! Go on! Get out! Out! Out!’ She pounded the paving stones again and again as the group of mango thieves scattered and the attack dissolved.

“The memory made me think: ‘Wouldn’t it be grand if some grown up Tamba were now magically to appear and wade in fearlessly, scattering all Magandiya’s wiles and spiteful threats.’ For I’m sure you’re right Khujj – I feel it when there are the rare occasions that I see her – she speaks very graciously and her smile is well-arranged, but I sense the presence of poison in her heart.

“Why do you think she hates me so? And what on earth causes her to be so harsh and rude when she talks about the Master?”

“I’ve no idea why she should be so set against the Buddha – you’ll have to find that out from her, I reckon – but as for you, Miss, she doesn’t hate you – a snake doesn’t hate the mouse it wants to swallow. I’d say what she feels is desire for what you’ve got – you being the Chief Queen an’ all – I reckon it’s just good old-fashioned jealousy, or more likely envy, mixed in with a healthy dose of contempt.

“That’s probably not a lot of comfort to you, Miss,” she grinned cheekily, “but that’s what I’d say is going on.”

"I've tried to make myself like her – the Master's teachings have such a strong emphasis on love for all beings – but I get blocked inside when I make the effort, I don't know what that is."

"I think it's your wisdom, Miss Amba, telling you, 'Let's be honest.' You can't *like* a toothache or a raging fever but you can certainly be accepting of it and not conjure up a gripe against it. Isn't that right?"

"I'd say," Khujjuttara continued, "if I understand the Master's teaching at all, that he's not suggesting we try to like the unlikeable but to find that place in the heart where we see that everything belongs – whether it's a headache, a fever or a scheming yakkhini, a she-demon that wants to take over your throne. It's all part of Nature. Then it's up to us to find a way to fit in with that."



"I have called you all here, to the palace of Vejayanta, to invite you to embark upon a mission." Lord Indra's clear rich voice resounded throughout the magnificence of the reception hall where a stately and colourful army of some two hundred celestial beings of various orders were gathered.

Five-coloured marble pillars sprang in lines formed like giant trees, laced and studded with the nine gems of the Bejaratana: diamond and ruby, cat's eye and garnet, coral and moonstone, emerald, and yellow and blue sapphire. Intricate patterns fashioned of these stones chased each other in lithe curlicues and convoluted flourishes across the surfaces of the towering columns, then burst over the vast arches of the ceiling. At their bases these designs merged and melded with those woven of sardonyx and lapis lazuli, malachite and opal that latticed the glistening plane of the floor.

Huge open bays framed the thirty-three sides of the hall. Each one's golden architraves and fretwork were coiled around by luminous emerald spirals, as if they were vines formed of some elemental order of being beyond both stem and stone. Every arch framed a unique vista of the heavenly gardens around the palace. Water sparkled as it fell from delicate fountains by the doors. The distant songs of gandharvas decorated the silence as the King of the Heaven of Thirty-three Gods paused. A heady blend of sweet fragrances filled the air.

"All the signs we can read," the King continued, "tell us that the asura chieftain Vepacitti was responsible for the destruction of the Great Park, outside this city of Masakkasara, and also for the raids, large and small, that have resulted in the deaths and the abduction of many beings."

The tall and radiant deva let his words settle for a moment, "This is of grave import indeed, not only because of the tragic loss and destruction that has already occurred but also – as you are all aware – Lord Vepacitti is the father of my beloved

queen, Suja and grandfather to my children.” Each of those assembled in that vast, echoing chamber took in this final fact, acknowledging now consciously the seriousness of what faced them, for almost all of them had unwittingly pushed this painful circumstance to the edges of their awareness.

“I do not launch this expedition lightly and my queen – in her noblest of gestures – has sworn to send no message of warning to her father. Similarly, my faithful children have agreed to set aside any filial devotion to their grandfather and have also sworn to remain silent. In turn I have not asked them to participate in the assault that we now have planned.

“Our aim is to launch a surprise attack with this small force now gathered here. By our efforts we will, it is to be hoped, capture Vepacitti and cause harm to as few of his asura subjects as possible. In this way we intend to decapitate the cause of the current strife and, having thus cut off its head, hopefully the cause of a greater war will be removed and the remaining body of asuras will resume their quiescent state. This is our plan.” His voice was cool and steady but the air shimmered like fire.

Lord Indra then rose from his central seat and began to stride through the solemn-faced beings spread through the cavernous hall.

“I will not join the raid-out of respect for my family – so the deva-host of warriors of this realm of the Thirty Three will be led by Generals Varuna and Isana.

“The Lord of Nagas – King Virupakkha himself – will go with his wife, Queen Samuddaja and her sister Irandati, together with four other nagas of great repute.

“The yakkhas have Lord Vessavana as their king and he will participate too.” At this the huge fierce-eyed yakkha-chieftain gently nodded his head in recognition. The group of nagas all raised their hands in añjali and bowed their heads in return.” With him will be General Punnaka – husband of Princess Irandati – with the seasoned warriors Gumbiya and Hemaka, plus Khara and eight others, strong in the arm and fearless fighters all.

“There will be these fifteen brave kinnaris – by no means as brawny as a yakkha or as fast and fierce as a naga – however these are kin of those who have been kidnapped and their keen senses will help to track the lost and the strayed.

“For weaving charms and spells these fair asparas and gandharvas have all stepped forth to risk their lives in this adventure. Rhamba, the leader of the dance and her brother Salassa, the comely youth, will head the twenty-five enchanters.

“Lastly, and most crucially, are these noble valahaka. In order to achieve surprise this raiding troop must travel in such a fashion as to remain unseen until they reach Pubbavideha – indeed until they breach the walls of Lord Vepacitti’s stronghold there. Thus these cloud-devas – spirits of cool-clouds, storm-clouds, and warm-and-rain-clouds – will conjure a great tempest from the west that will bear down upon and deluge Pubbavideha for three days.

“On that third day, wrapped in richer, denser clouds within the storm, will come our riders.” At this Lord Indra stretched forth his arm and swept it across the array of celestial beings assembled there, their faces firm in their resolve and keenly attentive to the words of the deva-king.

“Some of you are smaller and weaker than others,” he looked directly at the rosy cluster of Ant, Bee and Maggot and the dozen other kinnari delicately draped in their various hues, “but I look to those who are battle-hardened and sturdy to provide protection when it is needed. The valahaka will start the storm tonight – on the third day, we ride.”

“Be strong my friends, be brave and may righteousness prevail.”



Prince Suvira stood at the grand entrance to the hall, where it led out onto the marshalling yard. The celestial commandos were completing their arming and discussion of details when his father stepped up beside him. They watched General Punnaka, rudely fearsome in his brazen armour, straddling his Sindh horse with its golden ears and hooves of ruby. It was caparisoned with chain-mail of diamond-studded golden rings so fine it seemed as though some kind of sparkling quicksilver had been poured across the great beast’s back in a cascade that never reached the ground.

The yakkha general lowered one hand and offered it to the sinuous glistening figure standing by his knee. Princess Irandati, shining her own silver-scaled naga battle cloak and breeches, took the mailed hand and, with no apparent effort, was lifted to perch upon the pommel before her husband.

“They are a handsome pair, aren’t they, son?”

“Glorious indeed, father, as are so many of this small, brave company that you have sent forth.”

Lord Indra took in the scene of the departing troops and breathed in deeply – sighing to himself how sad it was that they were now pressed to fight and that, surely, not all would return alive. With that breath he noticed a strange and delightful perfume that he had never smelled before. It seemed floral but somehow it reminded him too of the freshness of morning sunlight; also, mysteriously, it evoked the holy atmosphere that surrounded the Buddha when he gave teachings to an assembly deep in the forest night, as well as a scent unique to Queen Suja’s hair...

“What is that fragrance you are wearing? I’ve never known the like of it before.”

“Oh father! This is wonderful stuff! I get it from my friend Pitipuppha – Rapturous Flower – you know he has acquired *such* a wealth of knowledge on these things – he’s quite amazing – he studied with the great Bodhisattva Utpalabhuti – who’s

also a parfumer – and knows all about fragrances, incenses, perfumes, ointments and aromatic powders; he’s mastered all human and celestial fragrances – ones that cure illness, remove depression, incite passions, produce joy, ones to extinguish passions, remove arrogance and heedlessness – you name it – he knows the source, production, application, efficacy and nature of every scent there is.

“He also studied with the Bodhisattva ‘Adorned with Fragrance’ himself – oh it’s amazingly spiritual and uplifting to hear him – you’ll love this – his teacher said he saw the bhikkhus light some incense and then contemplated the fragrance – he realized the aroma did not come from the wood, nor from emptiness, nor from the smoke, nor from the fire. There was no place it came from and no place it went to. Because of this his discriminating mind was totally seen through and he became enlightened. Isn’t that wonderful!” Suvira finally paused for breath.

“Well, it obviously makes you feel very happy.” Lord Indra looked at his son askant, slightly surprised by the enthusiastic flood of words that had issued forth.

“Oh yes, it is truly amazing father; not only does it evoke the favourite fragrances of each being that inhales it but it also makes the mind completely awake and bright. If you put just a little on, it’s like breathing lungfuls of the essence of life itself, over and over again. It’s spectacular!”

“And what is it called – this mysterious, magical brew?”

“Pitipuppha calls it ‘Amatagandha’ – ‘Fragrance of the Deathless’ – very fitting, if you ask me. Would you like to try some father?” Prince Suvira produced a small crystal vial from within his robes and proffered it to Lord Indra. The deva-king cautiously removed the stopper and inhaled the aroma with a single-minded attention. It was certainly enchanting – like the living heart of pure celestial flowers – but as he drew the odour deep within him he also detected a faint and yet strange forbidding quality. There was a subtle, sour festering that murmured below the rapturous light-filled bouquet.

“Thank you, son, but no thanks. I know something of the science of perfumes and – despite its glorious top and middle tones – its main theme of blossoms and light – there is something odd about its base note that does not appeal.” He handed back the tiny flask.

Suvira took a deep whiff himself and tried to discern the sour note the King of Gods had spoken of – it seemed as fully refreshing and entrancing as ever to him, so he pocketed the crystal vial and took his leave.



Magandiya was incensed. Far from the King having deposed Samavati from her position as queen and banished the Buddha from his realm, like some foppish dolt he

had buckled before that mooncalf's supposed innocence and all was virtually as it had been before.

Even the great risk and expense she had gone to, in bribing one of the persuadable ladies of her chambers to dress up in a veil and to shadow Khujjuttara to and from the palace, had reaped nothing. The King, like some credulous child, had simply taken that doe-headed and oh-so-innocent woman's word for it and had looked no further – it was too much.

She let matters settle for a few moons and concentrated on providing the King with as much companionship as she could of the type he most favoured. She knew he was suspicious of her motives so she did her best to feign as open and guileless an attitude as possible – even going so far as to apologise for having caused him to suspect Samavati of wrong-doing. She kept his cup filled and his cares at bay. She also contrived, with great skill, to be 'caught' staring at him with unabashed adoration when 'she thought' he wouldn't notice. This flattered the Royal Ego no end and re-established his trust in her.

Once she knew he had fully swallowed the bait she made her move.



"Watch out! Watch Out! It's a snake!" It was the middle of the night and Magandiya was screaming. "No, no! You can't kill him! Watch out..." She thrashed from side to side her hair loose and flying wildly. Her eyes burst open and she jerked her head this way and that looking for some movement, some shape in the dimness of the burning night-lamps, her gestures mazed and manic.

"What is it? What did you see, girl? It's just a dream." King Udena tried to calm her, sweating and distressed beside him.

"You mustn't go to the Queen's chambers tomorrow. She will certainly kill you! I saw it; I saw it all so clearly."

"What nonsense are you talking? That woman couldn't kill mosquito," he retorted.

"You'll think me mad or spiteful, I know Sire, but it was so vivid – I saw – she unleashed a snake on you and you are due to visit her tomorrow." Magandiya seemed genuinely fraught and tearful, filled with concern for her husband. He stroked her brow.

"Dreams are just fanciful projections – hollow echoes of the day gone by or the results of a badly digested supper. They never mean a thing." He tried to sound reassuring and confident but, as he spoke the words, he also recalled the intensely real dream that he had had of Samavati herself many years before, when she had been but a little girl.

“Here, have a sip of this – calm yourself and be still. Besides what would Samavati hope to gain should she succeed in doing me in?”

“That was just it Sire – after the snake had taken your life, I saw her install that Sakyan as her paramour and she reigned with him as King and Queen of Vamsa.”

At this repellent picture, Udena took a large draught of flower-mead himself and tried to still his own now anxious thoughts.



He always took his vina with him – the famous elephant-charming ‘hatthi-kanta’ instrument – whenever he went to spend a convivial day with one of his consorts or the Queen. A serving maid had carried it in for him and had laid it by the divan while he and Samavati spent their long luncheon hours chatting and nibbling their way through many tasty dishes. By mid-afternoon the King was in a genial but dozy mood and the night-horrors of Magandiya’s dream were quite forgotten.

Samavati was quite awake for she had not eaten as much as the other members of the lunch party and had refrained from the liquor altogether. She noticed the unfamiliar maid, who had carried in the King’s vina, lean over and gently remove a posy of flowers that had been decorously placed in the opening of the vina’s sound-box. The girl slid away and vanished behind some curtains.

Swiftly from that same hole in the vina there now emerged an angry and hungry cobra that Magandiya had secured there some three days before. King Udena was roused from his post-prandial drowse by the screams thrown up by voices all around him. He raised himself up onto an elbow – his garlands ruffled and his necklaces askew – and found the serpent inches away from his face, hood spread wide.

For a man of fifty or so he moved with impressive speed and grace. In a single fluid roll he flipped over to one side and swirled the bed-sheet around with his free hand to wrap the snake safely in a cocoon of muslin.

Without pausing in his movements Udena pulled his horn-bow from amongst the weapons he had laid at the foot of the couch upon his arrival. He bent its arc of legendary strength, strung it and notched a poisoned arrow on the string.

“Is this how you return my gifting you with the status of High Queen? What reason do you wish me harm, woman?”

Samavati now stood before the King, hands raised, palms together in añjali. “I promise you Sire, my virtue is pure and true – I have never wished you any harm.”

“And *this* is how such virtue is rewarded.” He pulled the string of the great bow and aimed the arrow at Samavati.

At that moment Khujjuttara stumbled forward, tripping over her own gimpy leg in her urgency to protect her mistress. She tried to plant herself in front of the Queen

but Samavati would not allow it. “No Khujjuttara, His Majesty wishes to shoot me – you should never obstruct or disobey the King.”

“Indeed,” he barked, “virtuous and compliant, obedient to the last – well, girl, you can stand behind her and so too can all the rest of your wretched conspirators.” At that all of the women of the harem, obedient in their terror, scurried anxiously to line up behind Samavati.

“This bow has put a single arrow through a line of twenty men before – so, without armour, it should do fine for the lot of you.” As they stood there in their trembling file, Samavati spoke to the women of her household. “My sisters, take refuge in Wisdom, Truth and Virtue – we have no other refuge. Cherish the same feelings towards our King, and to whomsoever it was that unleashed this snake, as you do towards yourselves. Be not angry with anyone.”

He raised the butt of the arrow to his eye and fired at Samavati’s heart. To his amazement the shaft flew to her left and missed her completely, penetrating a pillar near the end of the hall. He pulled another arrow from the quiver and aimed again. This time making doubly sure that his hand was rock-steady and the tip off the arrow was on-line. His anger was so intense that all he felt was the white heat of concentration.

He missed again. The arrow flew to the right and pierced a window-frame.

During this whole encounter, even though fear-filled sobs and cries came from a few of the court women lined up behind Samavati, her expression had not changed one iota. As the King notched a third arrow to his bow a small frown crossed her brow and she seemed to give a slight shake to her head – as if she was indicating “No, I don’t agree,” or “Please don’t do that.” In truth this was exactly what she had been doing for – unbeknownst to all those others assembled there – while King Udena had aimed his arrows, a large and bristly yakkha had loomed above him and had tapped his bow as he shot, now left, now right.

Gumbiya, who had come to do his duty and protect his mistress, was perplexed:– If I don’t help ‘er, what’s going to stop the next arrow? But she seemed insistent and so the yakkha, with deep misgivings, stepped back and let the third arrow fly true.

This time it was right on target but, as it neared Samavati’s heart, it rebounded as if it had hit a steel wall and, twirling gracefully end over end, it clattered to the ground at Udena’s feet. The sound of its fall punctuated an electric silence.

The King thought to himself: “That arrow that I shot was capable of piercing even a rock, and there was nothing in the air to make it turn back. But it rebounded and returned by the same path that it went. By all the gods, this senseless lifeless arrow knows her goodness but I, who am a human being, know it not.”

King Udena sank to his knees, put down his bow, lowered his head and raised his hands in añjali. “Please dear wife, forgive this proud and arrogant fool. I am humbled before your purity and your kindly heart. This miracle not only shows what a

confused and bewildered idiot I am, but it also reveals the true power of your virtue, your noble heart. Out of compassion, please use these beautiful gifts of yours to protect me from other follies in the future.”

Samavati, not wishing to claim credit for all that had transpired, humbly responded: “Of course I forgive you, Your Majesty, my dear husband, and please know that it was not me alone that performed this wonder. Sometimes when the truth of things needs to be defended, then our fr... then some of the great powers of the universe come to our aid as well.”

CHAPTER 18

THE BICKERING BHIKKHUS



ust after leaving the muster of the troops, Lord Indra entered the inner palace and sat upon his vast yellow-stone throne – the famous Pandukambala-silasana. At once he discerned that it was hot. This was a rare occurrence and it always portended some event of great significance:— Perhaps some mighty being was calling for divine aid or maybe there was a person of great spiritual virtue who was about to display their power in some noble act.

He had turned his mind to the question of who had caused the throne to heat up and – being of some spiritual skill himself – he was instantly aware of Queen Samavati's peril, as well as the depth of her own wholesome qualities. He had called Gumbiya to him and said:

“You have sworn to protect the Queen of Vamsa, the noble lady Samavati. She is pure of heart but she is also in great danger. Go with all haste to her side and provide any aid that is needed.”

The yakkha had swiftly made his bow and left the palace, pausing only long enough to catch his friends, the three pink kinnari, who were still lingering in the marshalling yard.

“I've got to go double-quick down to Kosambi and see if the Queen needs a hand, or a club. I dunno what's up but 'is Lordship seemed a bit fretted. I thought you'd all want to know if she was in trouble.”

“We were all going there anyway.” Said Ant, “to see family and to... say goodbye before we go on this raid – you know, just in case one of us doesn't come back.” She paused and all of them looked a little nervously at the intricate tiled spirals of the courtyard floor. It was the first time that the risk they all now faced had become fully conscious.

“Well, don’t just stand there like a spare groom at a wedding Gumbiya, get on your way!” snapped Bee, with her customary charm. “By the time you get there all the pollen will be gone if you don’t get a move on. We’ll follow as quickly as we can,” she added, seeing the endearing expression of concern written on his ugly, weather-beaten face.



They found Samavati in one of her favourite gazebos. She was quite alone, apart from the hulking presence of their yakkha friend. The three kinnaris crowded around her, glad to see she was safe and apparently unharmed, and made their greetings.

“I was just thanking Gumbiya for his kindness in coming to my rescue...”

“But she didn’t really need me – you should’ve seen it! And the look on the King’s face when the arrow lands *kerplunk* back at his feet – it was priceless – I nearly laughed ’alf me bristles off.”

Once Gumbiya had finished recounting the incident, Samavati smiled modestly. “The best part of it is that now the King has a lot more respect for the Buddha and his teachings – mostly out of his renewed admiration for me, but it’s real anyway – and he also allows me a lot more latitude to wander by myself. See – here we are in the evening dusk and I’m out in the gardens without even an attendant. There are the usual guards all around, as there always are, but over this last day or two I’ve been much freer than ever before.”

“But what about that mean, malicious consort of his?” said Maggot, “she seems worse than a dose of leaf-blight.”

“Or root-worms,” Bee wrinkled her nose in disgust, “aren’t you worried about her?”

“We’ve seen her about the palace gardens once or twice,” Ant joined in, “and you wouldn’t *believe* the stink around her... to be honest, Udena’s not exactly a night-scented jasmine but next to her he’s positively peachy.”

“What I can’t understand,” said Bee, “is how the King is so blind to her hateful tendrils – she’s like a strangling fig, or maybe a maluva creeper – she’s a murderous fawnguest if there ever was one...”

“Whatever her motives might be,” Samavati responded, “I am not prepared to cast public accusations in her direction, or onto her maids who might be drawn into her scheming. I do not fear or hate her. As for why the King apparently does not see her deceptions and machinations for what they are, well, my husband keeps his own counsel on this – perhaps he does not see it; perhaps he sees it and chooses to let it pass, for his own reasons.

"I sincerely do not feel concerned," she smiled warmly to the friends gathered round her and tried to reassure them, "and, besides, with the presence of the Buddha and his guiding influence – I feel that this city and my own person are more than well-protected."

As she said this their conversation grew uncomfortably still. The three kinnari looked anxiously at each other.

"You mean you haven't heard!?"

"Heard what?" Samavati was curious and a little alarmed by the tone in Maggot's voice.

"He's gone," announced Ant quietly, "he left this morning."

"We just learnt about it from the great elder Anuruddha, when we visited Ghositarama this afternoon," said Maggot. "Apparently the Master went through Kosambi on his alms-round this morning without any other monks. After taking his meal by himself at his kuti, he set his lodging in order then, taking his bowl and robe, and without informing his personal attendants, without taking leave of the other monks, he set out on his wanderings alone.

"When the bhikkhus found out he was gone they asked the Venerable Ananda what they should do; he told them, 'I have been the Master's attendant for many years, when he sets out like that he wishes to be alone – he should not be followed by anyone.'"

"But why? What would make him leave in such an abrupt manner?" asked the Queen.

"There's been a quarrel."

"A big fight, actually..."

"It's been going on for weeks..."

All three kinnaris chimed in with their impressions, creating a jumble of voices. Samavati wasn't quite sure who to listen to, so Bee took the lead: "You tell the story Maggot, you're best at remembering all the details."

Duly appointed, the small rosy figure settled herself, adjusted the quartz brow-band that she habitually wore, and began:

"It seems that there are two particular elders living in the monastery, one an expert in the Master's discourses, the other an expert in the monastic rules.

"One day the teacher of Discourses went to the bathroom and left a vessel there with some unused washing water in it. The other elder went in just after him and found it there. He asked the teacher of Discourses, 'Did you leave some water in the vessel?'

"Yes,' he replied.

"Did you know it's an offence to do that?'

"No,' the teacher answered, 'I didn't?'

"Well, it is, friend,' the expert in discipline said.

"If that's so, I am happy to acknowledge it – thank you for telling me.'

“On the other hand,’ the other monk said, ‘if you did it unintentionally and out of not being mindful, there was no offense,’” “Simple enough, you would think,” added Bee.

Ant shushed her and their friend continued:

“The expert in the Teachings went away thinking he had done no wrong. The expert in the Rules, however, went to his students and said: ‘This elder doesn’t even know when he’s committed an offence, what kind of expert in the Teachings is he?’ His students then duly passed this comment on to the students of the teacher of Discourses, saying: ‘Your teacher has committed an offence, although he’s under the impression that he has not.’

“When they told this to *their* teacher he was exasperated and critical, saying: ‘This so-called expert in the Discipline first said there was no offence and now he says there was one. He is a liar...’ When the expert in Discipline heard this, you can imagine how he felt.

“To cut a long story short, the monastery quickly split into two factions, the bhikkhus bickering and quarrelling, stabbing each other with verbal daggers.

“Naturally the Master heard about this dispute and went to each of the factions; he pointed out that, even if you felt sincerely that you had not committed any offence, purely out of respect for your fellow monastics who are learned and desirous of training, you should acknowledge the offence anyway. To create a split, a schism in the community he explained, is a very serious and destructive thing and it should not be caused to happen over such a minor, insignificant issue.

“He also gave many teachings over the subsequent days and weeks on how to establish concord; how acts of kindness by body, speech and mind, the sharing of all you have, how the respect for the monastic rules and most importantly, maintaining insight into the reality of things – all these contribute to the establishment of harmony.

“He told many tales of his former lives wherein argument, and doggedly holding to views, caused endless pain and sorrow, but all to no avail. The final straw came yesterday evening when the Master went to the hall where the squabbles were in full spate. He spoke to the bhikkhus with kindness, but with great force, saying:

“Enough, bhikkhus, stop all this quarrelling, wrangling, brawling and disputing.’ When this was said one of the monks spoke up saying, ‘Be at peace, Venerable Sir, please just go and enjoy the quiet of solitude. It is we who shall be known as those responsible for this dispute – there is no need for you to be involved.’

“Again the Buddha rebuked them, encouraging them to listen to his advice and to let go of their views, and again he received the same dismissive response from this monk. After the third time, the Master reflected: ‘These misguided men are obsessed. It is impossible to make them see.’ So he got up and went away.

“Then, early this very morning, the Venerable Anuruddha, being gifted with great powers of insight, discerned these reflections in the mind of the Master:

*“When many voices shout at once
There is none that thinks himself a fool.
The Order being split, none thinks,
“I too took a part in this.”*

*“They have forgot wise speech, they talk
With minds obsessed by words alone;
Uncurbed their mouths, they bawl at will;
None knows what leads him so to do.*

*“If you can find a trustworthy companion
With whom to walk, both virtuous and steadfast,
Then walk with him, content and mindfully,
Overcoming any threat of danger.*

*“If you can find no trustworthy companion
Then, as a king who leaves a vanquished kingdom,
Walk like a tusker in the woods alone.
Better it is to walk alone
There is no fellowship with fools.
Walk alone, harm none, and know no conflict.
Be like a tusker in the woods alone.”*



Samavati bade her celestial companions farewell and gave her blessings and good wishes for their forthcoming mission.

When she re-entered the confines of her seraglio the whole harem was abuzz with the news about the quarrel. It seemed everybody had heard about it.

With the warming of his interest in the Buddha, and in an effort to please Samavati, King Udena had sent Lord Ghosaka to the monastery to invite the Buddha and a group of monks to come and receive the offering of a meal at the palace the very next day. Once Ghosaka arrived at the Ghositarama he heard the shocking news that the Master had gone away. Prior to reaching the monastery had been a little concerned about how harmony might be sustained among the monks who visited the palace – for

he well knew of the ongoing arguments that had filled the air of the Ghositarama over these last few weeks – but this turn of events was more than he had bargained for.

Late in the afternoon Ghosaka had hurried back to the royal household with word on this crisis. He wasn't sure what the King would make of the news but he knew that his own daughter, the Queen, would want to know as soon as possible.

When he told her, Samavati seemed surprisingly composed and equanimous – mostly she was delighted that Udena had even had the thought to give her such a pleasant surprise. The opportunity to host the Buddha at the palace and to hear teachings from him after so long would have been much appreciated, but she wasn't upset or angry that now it was not going to happen.

When the King heard about the Buddha's sudden departure he met the news with his own blunt response but he was also secretly relieved; he felt frustrated that this gesture of Royal Goodwill toward his Queen was not to be realized, however he was also glad that he would not have to feel judged, scolded and outshone by his wife's beloved teacher – for always human beings are prone to projecting onto others the very attitudes that they themselves hold onto.



After some discussion between the royal couple, it was decided that the wise and eloquent elder Ananda would be invited to the palace instead – all the household seemed content with this idea and Lord Ghosaka was sent with the message to the monastery. It was also very clear that, despite his support for the Buddha being rekindled, King Udena did *not* want Samavati going out to the monastery without him, but through this prohibition a succession of monastic visits to the palace was thus established.

Ananda duly came the next day, with a small group of monks and, despite most of them looking a little haggard and fretful, the elder was as clear-eyed and joyful as ever. It was obvious that he had not been part of the arguments but even he showed moments of care-worn concern. She did not want to ask about it directly but Samavati suspected that the warm-hearted elder was having to put out a lot of fires and work hard to keep the peace between the squabbling factions.

The Elder referred to this obliquely when the Queen asked him when he might next be able to come and offer teachings.

"It is hard to say, I have... er... many duties at present," and here a look of distinct rueful sufferance crossed his visage.

"I quite understand," Her Serene Highness responded. With this comment she raised her hands palms together in añjali, and diplomatically pursued the question no further.



The troop of commandos were an impressive sight as they made their steady progress eastwards to Pubbavideha – at least they did to themselves, for they were cocooned within an enfolding pocket of opaque vapours spun by the warm-cloud devas and were thus, in the heart of the storm, invisible to the outside world. The asparas had also woven spells using a Gandhara charm and this rendered their camouflage complete.

Inside their mobile cloud-chamber, which extended a bow-shot above the tree-tops and a greater distance to either side, the group was flanked by Lord Kuvera, king of yakkhas to the north, and on the south General Punnaka with the naga Princess Irandati. They rode their giant flying horses with hooves of diamond and ruby and glistened in their armour of rippling gold and silver.

Above the colourful assembly flew Queen Samudajja and King Virupakkha, monarchs of the naga realm. In their serpentine forms they, and the four other dragon-warriors, were each almost a bow-shot long and they glinted in tones of silver and jade, gold and umber as their great crested heads and undulant forms flexed and flowed through the air.

Along the ground, through the woods and stream-beds, the kinnaris flitted and hovered – ever seeking the spoor – but were now clustered together in what looked like intense debate.

“Look, Paduma, this *has* to be the trail,” an elder male kinnari, clad in an array of bright yellow, orange and rich reds, was addressing Bee. “We keep picking up the scents of our nestlings.”

“And there’s these too, Asoka...” another female kinnari chimed in, “I’m sure this comes from my husband’s robes,” she proffered a tiny scrap of purple flower-gauze, edged with mauve and magenta gems.

“Pundarika’s right, Bee,” Ant joined the agitated discussion, “we keep finding odd shreds of clothing – this must be the way and it heads straight to Pubbavideha...”

“But that’s just *it!* Doesn’t this all seem just a little too convenient!” Bee held up the white strands of Minti’s hair she had collected along the way. “All these spots of kinnari blood, the scraps of cloth, the hair,” She held up the five long strands, “don’t you think it’s all just a little *too* findable? It’s been dropped in places where we’ll sniff it out if we don’t make too much effort. This all has the aura of accidentally-on-purpose to me. If they were at all concerned to cover their tracks they’d never have left such a trail.

“Besides, even though these precious traces that belonged to our kin point out this way, I feel no *presence*, no real kinnari-trace at all. The pull I get in that respect is to the north and west – I’m dead certain this is a false scent we are following.” As they

knew that Bee's intuitions were often very reliable Ant and Maggot were persuaded to her view – Maggot especially as she too could not feel the living trace, as Bee had mentioned.

Varuna and Isana drew close, soon followed by Samuddaja, Irandati, Punnaka and Gumbiya. Bee put her case to these leaders of the expedition with a fearless vehemence, unfazed by their eminent status. She insisted that she was not afraid, but concerned that they were all being duped.

Once the elders had had the time to confer among themselves, Lord Varuna spoke to them:

“Mahapaduma-sundari – we see your concern is genuine and your heart true, however we do not feel we can jeopardize this mission solely to meet the intuitions of one individual.”

“But I'm not the only one!.. Sir.” Bee blushed a little at her own forwardness in the presence of this high deva-rajā. He raised a jeweled hand to still her.

“You may go, with the blessing of us who lead this endeavour, and with those companions who feel as you do that the lost members of your family might have been taken elsewhere. As a guarantee of protection in your own mission, Lady Samuddaja, queen of nagas will go with you. All the other members of this expedition,” and at this Gumbiya stirred in protest, “will stay with the assault as planned – in this,” and here he looked directly at the yakkha whom he knew was a close confederate of the kinnaris and whose voice he had just noted, “there will be no exceptions.”

Bee nodded thankfully in acknowledgment; when she lifted her eyes she noticed that the deva-warrior just behind Lord Varuna had a big, self-satisfied smile. It was one of Isana's sons, she thought his name was Pitipuppha, and she also wondered why he wiped the grin off his face as soon as he saw that she was looking at him.



The wise and kindly elder Ananda was only able to come to the palace once every couple of lunar phases, usually the day before the new or full moon.

At first King Udena was a keen attendee of these teachings, but the sight of a roomful of his women all gazing adoringly at this (admittedly) eloquent and charming monk, proved to be a bit too much to bear. His inspiration waned and, besides, the effort that his chief consort Magandiya now put into arranging her apartments with fine flowers, sweet perfumes, delicious foods, delectable dancing girls and a seemingly endless supply of his favourite flower-liquor, puppha-rasa, made this a much more appealing destination for the Royal Interest.

He knew she had a reputation for being jealous and manipulative but she always spoke so sweetly, and apparently sincerely. Besides, she never uttered a spiteful word

about Samavati although, being a pure-bred brahmin and very aware of the Queen's humble origins as a foundling, she never deigned to look in her direction when they were in the rare situation of being in the same room together. Thus he was lulled, once more, into granting her the benefit of the doubt:— Perhaps that dream of hers had indeed been prophetic about the snake but just mistaken about Samavati and the Buddha. Maybe the snake just slid into the seraglio on its own was not part of anybody's plot...

Another draught of puppha-rasa and a fresh ensemble of dancers called in by Magandiya settled any misgivings he might have had:— Anyway, this was all a lot more enjoyable than those endless explanations and graphic cautionary tales about how to be good.

"Those monks are decent chaps, certainly," the King reflected, "but wholesomeness can grow very tedious."



Nature has its way of moving in cycles and, one day, the slow dimming of the King's enthusiasm for the Buddha and his teachings descended into outright disagreement between him and Queen Samavati once again.

"This quarrel that's been going on at the Ghositarama these last few weeks, you know it's all down to poor leadership. I can't say I think much of a commander who runs away when what he should have done was to crack a few heads together early on and sort out the problem before it degenerated into anarchy."

"Perhaps," Samavati ventured, as they walked together through the gardens during a break in the rain, for by now the monsoon had arrived, "his going away *was* his method of bringing resolution; he was, as they say, 'teaching with his feet.' I don't know if you've heard, but since the Master was moved to depart, the townsfolk got to hear more and more about the arguments that had been raging and, once people knew that the Buddha had been driven away by the selfish squabbles of the monks, they stopped donating food in the morning.

"I haven't been to Ghositarama recently – as you have so kindly let us invite the Venerable Ananda here to teach – but they say the monks have just about settled their dispute and now plan to go to find the Buddha after the Rains and to ask for forgiveness. Once the people no longer fed the monks, while they would not listen to the Master, they eventually listened to the growling of their own bellies."

Samavati didn't feel she was contradicting her husband – merely pointing out the efficacy of the Buddha's tangential teaching method – so she was shocked by the vehemence of Udena's reaction:

“ENOUGH, woman! Do not gainsay me! I may not understand this monk’s philosophy but I do understand how to rule. You are an orphan child of a merchant – what do you think you can teach a warrior-noble king?” He glared at her with an intense frustrated anger and stomped off, with a couple of pages in his wake, in the direction of Magandiya’s chambers.



“What do you think she wants, Khujj? They say she’s very much in love with the King.”

“Can’t rightfully say I’m sure, Miss; I don’t see that much of her but, when I do, I’d say she doesn’t really love or even desire the King. Beneath all that flattery for His Majesty she sneers at him. Not as you’d guess from her face, or her ever-so-pukkah brahmin accent, it’s just that somewhere under all of that she’s carrying a thick layer of whatyacallit... disdain. She’s toplofty.

“I know I shouldn’t eavesdrop but sometimes you can’t help overhearing things. One time I was passing the bathing chamber in her part of the palace – I can’t remember what had me going by that way – and I heard her voice between the splashes of the water as she was bathing herself – she must have been talking to herself as she never has her maids help her. What I heard her say was: ‘...crumpling like some consumptive child before that cow-eyed ommadawn...’ Now, isn’t that a nice turn of phrase to use for your husband?” She grinned mischievously and glanced sidelong at her mistress.

“What does it mean?”

“It means she thinks he’s weak and that you’re an idiot, with all due respect, Miss.”

“So what *does* she want then?” Samavati seemed genuinely perplexed.

“If you put all the pieces together, I reckon she’s insecure and that she feels unworthy, and so what she wants is power. She wants recognition and to control everything ’cos she feels so weak – or at least she’s afraid she’s weak and at the mercy of the world. She doesn’t like that so she wants to make sure she comes out on top. That’s my wooden masaka’s worth, if you ask me.”

“So, why does she hate the Buddha so? I’ve heard people tell of some of the insulting remarks, although very neatly phrased, that she has made about the Master.”

“You’ve got me on that one Miss Amba. Brahmins are usually put out by his Teachings ’cos he’s against the caste system – none of them like that ’cos they’re near the top – but our woman seems to have some special gripe. People sometimes talk like that when their feelings have been hurt. When someone has the idea they’ve been scorned or belittled – that turns real easily into anger and spite. When I reckon some

injustice has been done I can get a bit that way too, you know, all righteously huffy and hissy.”

“I know you really don’t like her, Khujj but, if what you say is true, it makes me feel all the more sorry for her – what a wretched state of mind to dwell in.”

“She’s an evil viper... but a sorry evil viper.”

“Oh, don’t!” Samavati covered her mouth trying stifle a giggle. “You know what I mean – more hatred in the mix is not going to make matters easier for anyone. Even if it’s impossible to like her we can at least wish her well, with all sincerity. Sharing the goodness of our hearts with her might help to bring her to a greater peace. The more her heart’s at peace the better that will be for her and for the King, and for all of us.

“I’m not sure what else to do, to try and bring contentment to this house.”



As the rainy season progressed and the pall of clouds over Kosambi swelled the River Yamuna, the estrangement between the King and Queen waxed ever greater. Days and weeks would pass sometimes without Samavati so much as seeing her husband.

On a particularly gloomy day Khujjuttara was racking her ample brain for some way to help the Queen resolve things.

“Miss Amba,” she began a little tentatively, “Why don’t we go and have a chat with the dowager queen, Lady Vasuladatta – she’s been married to His Majesty for decades; although I grant that she doesn’t see much of him now. She might have some good advice.”

“What a great idea Khujj – I can’t believe we didn’t think of this earlier – she’s had a lot of experience of his ways.”

The buildings of Samavati’s seraglio stood separately from the rest of the palace complex, so she and Khujjuttara waited for a break in the weather and then went via the long garden walk to the entrance of the elder Chief Consort’s dwelling.

They were graciously received by one of the old Queen’s maids and then waited in one of the outer apartments while Vasuladatta was informed of their unexpected visit. When she appeared Samavati was very impressed by the gentle demeanour of the lady. She was a handsome woman of about fifty Rains and was blessed with bright eyes and distinctively greying hair.

They seated themselves cross-legged on some low couches and, once the introductions and the exchanges of pleasantries were done, Samavati looked at the floor as if at a loss as to how to broach the subject they had come to discuss.

“Your Serene Highness,” Vasuladatta began, using the Queen’s formal title with no hint of jealousy or resentment, rather with a sincere affection, “if you have come to

discuss our husband, you can speak completely frankly. At this stage of my life I am neither inexperienced nor shockable." Her eyes sparkled.

"The truth is I'm here more out of concern for His Majesty than for myself – I am at something of a loss as to how to help him.

"One minute he's vowing sincere and eternal devotion to me, and to a noble path in life, the next minute he's bored and seeking distraction. It is as if there are two people at loggerheads inside him fighting for control of his estate, his heart. He's a good man at the core – I feel it – but he's jealous, proud and impatient. When he becomes surfeited with something or another, or a new experience has lost its sparkle for him, the tedium of it swiftly overwhelms him and, more often than not, the only thing he can think to do to change his mood is to call for another cup of liquor."

The courteous dowager let these words sink in, took a sip of some refreshing fruit cordial and chose her words carefully. "You now find yourself, Your Highness..."

"Please," Samavati interrupted – "you mustn't bother with the title, just use my name – we are equals here."

"Well, that's very kind of you, Ma'am, but you are, officially at least, my senior now; be that as it may, if it makes you more comfortable, I will call you by your name."

"Thank you," Samavati was feeling greater respect and affection for the Chief Consort by each moment.

"To be blunt, you now find yourself in the position I did – what, three or four Rains ago – when I was first supplanted." She held up a hand and then brought her palms together to respectfully silence the apology that was on the brink of bursting forth from Samavati.

"No, dear, do not aggrieve yourself on my account – I could see by your countenance and by everything about you, when you appeared on the scene, that you had no ambitions of your own and that you wished me no ill. Your eminent position now is solely of His Majesty's own making – which is something I cannot say of the latest addition to the royal household."

She paused, as if in inner debate, then smiling somewhat wryly, she said:

"When I was a girl, a little younger than you are now, I too was chosen by King Udena and he vowed his undying affection to me. May I burden you with my story?"

"I'd love to hear it," Samavati honestly replied, and Khujjutara inched closer, to be sure not to miss any details.

"I was the daughter of King Canda Pajjota, ruler of Avanti. He heard that young King Udena of Vamsa had skill in taming elephants, that he even had magical charm for this, and my father greatly desired this charm.

"He contrived to capture Udena and hold him prisoner. When this was achieved, and even though Udena was under lock and key, he said he would only teach my father the charm if he would pay obeisance to him. My father, being proud, refused but he

learned that Udena would teach it to anyone of his court as long as they paid homage to him.

“Since I was the only person my father could trust he asked me to be the one to learn the charm and to render my obeisance.

“He was afraid, however, both of us being young and needing to spend time together to learn the charm, that we would fall in love. So he told Udena: ‘We have a hunch-backed woman in our house – please teach her the charm, she is happy to pay homage to you.’ Meanwhile he said to me, ‘Dear daughter there is a certain leper who knows a priceless charm. Please sit behind this curtain and he will teach it to you. Once you have learned it from him, you will be able to teach it to me.’

“The next day I sat behind the curtain and the man on the other side taught me the words of the charm, repeating them over and over. The language was strange to me and so I could not pronounce it all correctly. Eventually Udena became impatient with me, calling out: ‘Dunce of a hunchback, your lips are too thick and your cheeks are too pudgy! Say it *this way!*’

“I replied in anger: ‘Foul leper, what do you mean by those words? Why are you calling me a hunchback?’” Here the old queen turned to Khujjutara and said – “Excuse me, dear, but I’m not trying to mock you – this really was the conversation we had.” Khujjutara, for her part, nodded and said, “It’s all right Ma’am, I’m used to it – please go on with your story.”

“Well, at this point Udena lifted the curtain and asked, ‘Who are you?’

‘I’m Vasuladatta, the King’s daughter.’

‘When your father spoke to me, he called you a hunchback.’

‘And he told me you were a leper.’

“Then we both said: ‘He must...’

‘... have been afraid...’

‘... we’d fall...’

‘... in...’

‘... love.’ It went very quiet then as we looked each other in the eyes.

Needless to say there was no learning charms or getting lessons after that, even though we spent every day in each other’s company.

“Each day my father asked, ‘Are you learning your lessons, daughter?’ ‘Yes, father,’ I would reply, knowing it was not the kind of lessons he had in mind.” She raised an eyebrow mock-conspiratorially.

“Udena and I then made a plan to help him escape from there. I asked my father for permission for one of the palace gates to be left open at all times and for an elephant to be available, saying: ‘In order to work the charm a certain medicinal herb is necessary and this must be obtained at night, at a time indicated by the stars’ – he agreed to this and left a gate open and gave us access to the elephant stables.

“When a few days had gone by Udena and I crept, in the dead of the night, to the stable. We roused Bhaddhavati and climbed up onto her broad back and silently left the palace, for her tread was supremely gentle, despite her size; once out in the open we used Udena’s elephant-charming vina and Bhaddhavati broke into a great and joyful charge.

“Even though my father discovered our flight before too long, such was our elephant’s speed, as she ate up the leagues between Ujjeni and Kosambi, that he was entirely unable to catch us. Once we arrived in Kosambi, safe within the palace here, I was sprinkled with the Royal Blessing and was made into his Chief Queen.

“It was *very* romantic.”

She paused again and took another sip of cordial.

“And now... I am fifty and flabby and grey hairs have appeared on my head, so I have been granted the blessing of ‘time alone in peace and quiet.’ I do not wish the same for you, Samavati, at your young age, but I can see that you spoke the truth when you said your concern was more for our fickle husband than for your own position or well-being. This is noble and wise on your part – qualities that Udena, and his latest fascination, Magandiya, could well do with more of.

“As for how to help him find greater happiness and ease – if I had been able to find such a charm that could effect this, spiritual or otherwise, you can rest assured I would have used it before now.

“Still, your own goodness and sincerity are a powerful message to him – even if he’d rather not receive it most of the time – so I would suggest you have faith in your own wholesome ways and trust that they will have their good effect in time. I’m sorry but I have nothing better to suggest.”



That said, still their conversation unfolded in a dozen joyful avenues throughout that long and rainy afternoon. At one point it was mentioned how the great elder Ananda was a regular visitor to the apartments of Queen Samavati and it was clear that the dowager was interested too.

“Please forgive me for never thinking to invite you,” Samavati apologized. “We live such separate lives here, despite being in the same compound.”

The old queen hushed her and made it clear that she was very happy now to have the opportunity to come to these regular teachings. She also asked: “In my household there are a few others whom I am sure would like to come too; would it be agreeable if they attended these talks?”

Just as she said this there appeared in the doorway an aged woman, on the arm of a young maidservant. She was very wrinkled and her skin was unusually pale; there

were strange faded blue markings along her forearms and at her temples. Her hair was mostly white but mingled in with it, in folded layers, were striations of dense red-gold. It was still thick, and was braided in four-stranded plaits, in a style Samavati had never seen before. Her eyes were filmed with opaque pearly cataracts.

“Right on cue,” Vasuladatta smiled, “you always know when you are being talked about. Your Serene Highness, may I introduce Gavinna – or Guru-Vinna as we all call her – she is a wise woman indeed and, despite her failing eyes, gifted with sight that few of us could ever hope for.”

“That’s a polite way of saying I’m regularly off with the fairies, or floating about in various dream worlds.” She smiled endearingly and tottered slowly into the room. Vasuladatta made space for her at her side and the ancient figure gently lowered herself to couch level. Samavati now noticed that she had the same strange blue markings on her calves and shins as well – intricate and blurred patterns of hatchings, spirals and delicately curving lines.

“She was a concubine of King Udena’s grandfather, many years ago, and was settled in these apartments long before...”

“...before you were even born.” She wrinkled her face again in a broad and friendly grin. “I wanted to meet you, Ma’am,” she directed her lightless eyes at Samavati, “and yes, I would be delighted to visit your residence when the elder comes to teach. Only...” here she wheezed for a moment, “please make sure we get plenty of warning – it takes a long time to persuade these old limbs to cross the garden.”

She faced Samavati silently for a moment, as if reading something written in her inner planes of vision. Her face both smiled again and, simultaneously, formed a frown – she seemed to nod almost imperceptibly to herself but said no more.



Now that the Sakyan monk was apparently gone for good, Magandiya’s confidence and sense of ease grew strong. The fact that she also seemed to have got the King firmly back under her thumb only added to these feelings of self-assurance.

Things were going well for her now, after the many frustrations she had experienced, but she saw she would need some help in order to fulfill the goals she had in mind. She needed an ally of fail-safe reliability:– The bribeable people she had used so far... their very buyability betrayed the frailty of their allegiances... no, she would have to go to her family.

She pondered the issue for a long time and then, one day, the answer came: “Of course, the brahmin priest from Taxila, my Uncle Slyma.”

This was going to work well.

CHAPTER 19

THE WANDERER



*abulum, pabulum, mabulum, bis;
Brekulum, speculum, mekulum, mis.
Brekkek, kekkek, kekkek, kekkek!
Koax, Koax, Koax!
Ualu, Ualu, Ualu!*

Quaouauh!"

Krishna was delirious in the heat; he was surrounded by bonfires at each of the cardinal points of the compass and the midday sun was roasting his brain gently in the pan of his newly-shaved skull. His mazed mind swam:

*Mingin foref, klege shanesto,
Aingee corses criestme padwo;
Munmanc hanim torseba orstspers,
Equin picar, poogisp bitur?*

*Norinic misms stind bionobte,
Ismst magulthr, gedgerl chedge;
Foitidi tieratt recodm myrac,
Flati percut, berigdin fyflac!*

Fragments of spells and mantras he had picked up from a dozen different wandering monks and yogis he had met mixed and melded themselves together in the hot feverish soup of his consciousness. Scriptural teachings, half-remembered dreams, rhymes in foreign languages and frog-songs from the nearby swamp joined together in a kaleidoscopic chorus of confusion.

In the midst of the giddy drifts of sound and images inside, mingling with the roar of flames and the tickles of running sweat outside, a clear and distinct question voiced itself in his mind:— How on earth did I end up here?



When Krishna first set out from Ujjeni it was with an intense and buoyant glee. The road seemed to spring beneath his feet as if the way itself was rejoicing in his journey. The dawn light was fresher, the birdsong more rapturous and the green growth along the verges rang with a vibrant life such as he was sure he had never known before.

The mood accompanied him through several days – light and dark alternated swiftly, and the sun and moon shot back and forth like shuttles in a loom. He was blissfully happy just to be free of the tensions he had been experiencing in his home and it was easy enough to mistake the mere cessation of pain – like having an aching tooth pulled – for some kind of permanent bliss of freedom. Just to be out from under his mother’s oppressive, suffocating wing – as he felt it – was a conscious delight whenever the realization of his new state of being came to mind:

“I’m free! I’m really free,” he grinned up at the high fluffy clouds that speckled the great blue dome of sky, washed clean and radiantly peacock-blue above him. He might not have much of an idea about what the spiritual path was or where to find it, or how he was going to develop all those wonderful magical powers he was sure he was heir to, but he was certain that these were not to be discovered through the life of a merchant in Ujjeni.

His immediate destination was completely vague at first – in the flush of leaving Ujjeni and making sure he had not been followed by his family, this detail had been of no concern to him. As that glow of relief diminished and the realities of life on the road announced their demanding presence – camping out by the wayside and now the need to find food every day, since his supply of flatbread and dried fruit was long gone – the question of:— Where *am* I going? repeatedly came to mind.

On the one hand he was determined to be a good samana, a yogi who has severed all ties with the family in order to pursue the spiritual goal. On the other he had his pet theory that his sister Tamba had somehow survived and that she was the mysterious red-haired woman that Dusaka had stressed would be so crucial in his path to understanding life’s mysteries.

He was equally determined to learn more about the Death-defeating mangala he carried and to train himself to use it in the most effective way he could to help the devas, indeed, perhaps to win ever-lasting fame by using it to bring about some kind of

final defeat of Death. On this last point he was more than somewhat murky-headed but he had faith it would become clear enough in time.



How he was to find the red-haired woman, and if she was Tamba or someone else altogether, well, Dusaka had not given him a clue on that. The last he knew of his sister was that she had been lost on the road to Kosambi. So, if he was to seek her, that would mean he should bend his steps toward the east. This idea kept clashing with the 'to be a wanderer, you're supposed to give up family ties' principle. However, while these two voices argued with each other, and while he was plodding along one evening behind the oxcart of a local villager, another, utterly sensible thought sidled in and he knew it was the right one to follow: "Just go where your feet carry you and keep your eyes peeled for this mentor. Maybe she'll be Tamba, maybe not."

Sometimes Krishna would find lodging in a village, if the terrain was harsh or there was no water to be found in the countryside but usually, like most wanderers, he stayed out in the woods and wild lands away from the country roads. Early in the mornings he would sit silently on some rock or beneath a great tree and try to focus his mind – following the breath to calm his thoughts or sometimes repeating a mantra, as Dusaka had taught him so often in Ujjeni.

These were often the sweetest of times; opening the heart to the stillness before dawn, watching the growing quality of peace within him and then opening his eyes to the new day – sometimes seeing local tree-spirits or naiads of the streams, flower-devas darting and gliding amid the groves.

As his journey progressed, though, the sheer pressure of daily walking for many miles, the growling of hunger when food could not be found or bought or bartered, the raw loneliness of having no friends to keep him company – all these began to wear on Krishna's spirits. He would get tired and tetchy, stressed, moping along at times and then, when he met a group of other samanas like himself, he'd be so eager for conversation and interaction he would overwhelm these fellow yogis with his torrents of excited chatter, so they would invariably find some excuse to get away.

All this made his mind restless and plagued with doubts, so his times of quiet meditation in the early dawn and at his night-time camps became more and more fraught and filled with mental chatter. He also noticed that the more frazzled and unsettled he became the less able he was to see any devas or spirits.



In some ways Krishna was quite pleased with how he was adapting to the life of a spiritual seeker – his unshod feet had hardened themselves to the lanes, roads and rocky trails he followed and he had become adept at finding secluded places to camp – but, along with his humbling struggles with meditation, he felt he was also not living up to his ideals in other areas.

He knew, for instance, that true wanderers, the kind of samana he aspired to be, never used money of any kind. Rather they subsisted on whatever was offered to them when they went through a village or town, or they lived on seeds, roots, leaves and fruits that they gathered for themselves in the forest.

He had always felt, during their classes with the brahmin pundit and the teacher of mathematics, that he was quick to learn and that his knowledge was comprehensive. Little did he suspect then that the kind of knowledge that would prove most useful to him was not in that curriculum. He now struggled helplessly when he attempted to build a fire; he could hardly find anything whatsoever to eat in the woods other than the most obviously familiar fruits – which were rare and very seasonal; and he knew no remedies whatsoever for the bites of the thousands of mosquitoes that swarmed around him every evening while he tried to sit and calm his mind – for he might be immune to death on account of the mangala around his neck but he was still certainly subject to being fed upon by the insect horde.

When he had set out, with scarcely a thought to the contrary, he had wrapped up tightly the heavy parcel of jeweled necklaces, golden rings and bracelets, earrings and armbands that had been his inheritance on his completion of sixteen Rains. These were his valuables so had packed them for the journey.

As his food supplies had dwindled, he had found it very hard to go through villages with his empty bowl in the hope of meagre alms when he could trade a bracelet – or just pay with some gold or silver cash that he had – and thereby provide his belly with much more ample fare. His cache of gold was sizeable and it took very little to make a market stall-keeper happy, or a family of farmers, and to cause them to offer whatever fine food they had. He was embarrassed by this way of supporting himself but the logic of the grumbling demon of his appetite was without flaw:– I'm hungry; this wealth is rightly mine; let my family make good karma by having provided support for a noble samana on his quest...



Even though he had had the idea of heading east, and had not formed any desire to go against that, for reasons he was not quite sure of he found himself steadily trekking north toward Uttarakuru, to the land of fast-flowing rivers and the great mountains of the Himavant – to the abode of sages.

One evening, several moons into his journey, when Krishna opened his eyes after sitting quietly for some time, he noticed another figure in the moonlight, across the forest glade where he was camped. It looked vaguely like a young man wrapped in a white shawl but, in the dimness, it was hard to tell. He shut his eyes again and continued with his attempts at meditation.

Company was so rare in these northern marches that curiosity had Krishna opening his eyes again soon after and looking intently at this apparition:— Was it a person or some kind of celestial visitor sitting so still also apparently meditating? It had been many days now since he had seen any kind of ethereal beings, let alone been able to have any converse with them, so curiosity got the better of him. It was also cold by now so he thought that, if he made some moves to light a fire, perhaps there would be a response from this presence – be it a friendly samana or a restless fetch.

His feeble and failing efforts to get a spark to ignite the dry moss of his tinder soon had the desired effect.

“Here, let me try that.” The voice sounded human, genial but with an accent Krishna didn’t recognise.

The fire-building exercise – which the stranger carried out with ease – rapidly led to warm and easy kinship. The young man, it seemed, was indeed a fellow wanderer and was thinking of settling near this place. He had been camping in the area for a few weeks, seeking alms-food each day in the nearby village and he mentioned by-the-by that he had sadly gone without any food that day.

As they chatted together over the fire, the wanderer Surya, for that was his name, waxed expansively about his long-term plans to found a hermitage. He said he had discovered a wonderfully suitable valley, up in the hills near here and that, one day, he hoped to settle there and build a proper temple and an ashram. “Of course, that would take quantities of money that I do not have,” he opened his hands and reached out on either side, to indicate that the two robes he wore were all his worldly goods.

Krishna too was hungry after his long day’s walk and, at a pause in the account of Surya’s plans, he said, “If there were houses nearby maybe we could find some food for this evening.”

“It’s a bit late to be out for alms, don’t you think?” His new friend replied.

“We could just buy something,” Krishna suggested, not quite sure if Surya would approve of a samana going shopping for his supper.

“Good idea...but with what?” he asked, in a tone that assumed Krishna was as bereft of funds as he was.

“Oh, I’ve got something that might do.” He reached round for his travelling bundle and unearthed the tightly-wrapped package of his father’s jewelry. He fished out a handsome brass ring with a large semi-precious stone in it and said, “I’ve been swapping bits and pieces along the way for food and occasional lodging. This should cover us for a bite to eat, as long as we can find a house or two nearby.”

The eyes of his companion flicked briefly over the cloth-covered bundle, then fixed in a closer study on the ring. "That's a fair-sized amethyst if I'm not mistaken. Where did you get this? It's not stolen is it?" He laughed, to be sure Krishna knew he meant this as a joke.

"No, not at all. It's my inheritance from my father. I grew up in Ujjeni to the south of here and they make a lot of fine jewelry there. See, the gold is reddish where fine traceries of it are chased into the brass – that's an Ujjeni trademark."

"There's a few houses not too far from here," Surya spoke matter-of-factly, "including that of an old brahmin who's quite well-off. I could take that down and see if he'll trade it for a meal for the two of us."

This sounded like a fine idea to Krishna so he gave his new friend the ring and he took off into the moonlit forest, keen to get to the village before the hour grew too late.



Surya seemed to return remarkably quickly – Krishna felt he had only been staring into the fire and feeding it dead branches for scarcely an hour – and his new friend was bearing smiles and an armful of goodies. He unfolded the contents of his wrap and displayed a fine array of freshly cooked rice, curries, sweet-meats and fruit, all of which had been carefully packaged in banana leaves and pinned with slivers of bamboo.

"Wow!" Krishna was impressed, "You certainly know how to find the right places."

"And not only that – look," he opened his hand and showed Krishna three fat gold kahapanas. This was a lot of money.

"They were just sitting down to supper and so all this was ready-made. The old fellow – who I've met a few times – is a brahmin but he's crazy for fine jewels. He took one look at the ring and swore he had to have it, at any price. He wouldn't hear of just giving us some food for it. The giddy old fool gave us ten times its value – here you go." He dropped the three weighty coins into Krishna's palm and set about dividing up the enticingly aromatic food. This was the best meal Krishna had had in quite a while – things were definitely looking up.

As they were finishing off the last grains of rice and the final crumbs of the sweet dainties, the conversation had got back around to Surya's plans for the hermitage. The high valley sounded like a great place to live and meditate, and soon Surya and Krishna were hatching wild schemes, outdoing each other with their visions of what they'd build up there and the kind of fine spiritual community they would develop.

Krishna was suddenly struck by a great idea: "You know, if that brahmin's so smitten with Ujjeni jewelry, we could trade the rest of my stash here, get a huge return in gold kahapanas from the old fellow and then we could buy the land up in the hills. If he's foolish enough to see value where it really isn't, we'd be foolish not to take advantage of that." As usual Krishna felt that his display of logic was flawless. "What do you reckon?"

Surya admitted that he was impressed by the idea, but he still needed some persuading that it was a practical possibility. Krishna was so taken by his own brilliant scheme, and fuelled by a full belly and the fire-lit camaraderie, that he finally got his friend to agree to speak to the brahmin about the plan on the morrow.

When the time came to rest for the night, Krishna lay for a long time by the fire, watching the moon move between the tree-tops, listening to the sounds of the forest night and fantasizing freely about the paradisaical hermitage up in the high valleys. He even saw vividly the way sparkle-eyed Tamba would walk in one day, dressed in the robes of a female wanderer, her dusty red dread-locks pinned up in a bun with a pair of eagle-bones, and say: "Krishna – I have been looking for you."

The next morning Krishna agreed to stay and look after the campsite while Surya went with the bundle to visit the brahmin's house; it would be a lot easier for both of them to set out from there to go up and see this hidden valley, than for both of them to go all the way into the village and then to have to backtrack again.

Surya waved goodbye at dawn and took off by the same trail as colour washed into the day. The forest birdsong was raucous and brought a bright delight to Krishna's heart. He sat on a flat rock beside the stream and he waited, vainly attempting to still his sixteen-year-old thoughts and to bring his mind to peace. Plans upon plans and fantasies of their future ashram among the clouds swarmed and tumbled like the spume of the mountain torrent.

And he waited...

And he waited...

And he waited...

It was well past noon and shafts of sunlight formed brilliant pools of colour on the forest floor. He was hungry and, by now, getting anxious and impatient. If his friend was somehow lost or injured he didn't even know in which direction to look for him, beyond the edge of the glade.

His straining ears, eager for the sound of his friend, picked up some kind of approaching noise. He sprang to his feet but at first could not tell what he was hearing. Then below him, further down the stream, he realized it was the sound of gently clanking bells.

A small herd of goats came up the hillside, picking their way among the rocks, followed by a pair of tattered goat-girls – they were youngsters, may be ten or eleven

Rains, and looked very much like sisters. They were chatting cheerfully with each other; when they saw him they noticed his anxious look. The elder girl grinned toothily.

"Have you seen a young man this morning, white robes, carrying a package around here?" Krishna inquired sounding a little hapless and oppressed. The two girls muttered something to each other he couldn't hear, then the elder said: "Don't think you're going to see your 'package' again mister. That fellah's well-known around these parts."

Krishna's heart sank.

"He offered to sell your valuables then?" They laughed but then tried to suppress their mirth out of courtesy, seeing Krishna's shattered expression. "He a real scamster, that one. He pops up, makes a killing then disappears for months. He's from round here – that's why we know 'im – but he's as slippery as a greased eel in marsh-muck. Sorry sir, but I'd say g'bye to whatever it was you gave 'im. He's famous for not getting caught – and he keeps the headmen sweet – so they're not likely to help you either. Where're you from anyway?"

They chatted for a while as the goats strayed and nibbled the bushes and the grass beside the stream. Krishna warmed to the ragged girls and told them a bit of his tale. As he packed up he fished out the three fat gold coins he had been given the evening before.

"This is all I've got left... but... I'm a wanderer, how did he know that I'd have anything precious?"

"Well mister, you're not exactly lean, like most wanderers are." At this Krishna noticed that it was true, he'd never really thought of it before, but he was more well-fleshed than most he met on the road – even more so than these two skinny village girls.

"I reckon he saw you had been eating well and he figured: 'Here's a bush with some berries on, let's give this one a try.'"

Krishna was impressed by the wits of this northern child – she was pretty sharp for one so young – but this appreciation did little to allay his wounded pride at being so easily duped, and for the loss of all his resources. "Well, at least I have these," he reflected, jiggling the three coins on his palm.

The smaller girl, who was much more shy, whispered something to her sister. They both looked at the coins and frowned.

"What's the matter?" Krishna's heart sank again.

"Well, mister, I wouldn't try using those kahapanas to buy anything, not unless you plan to leave town pretty quick. She turned to the younger girl who rummaged in the folds of cloth at her waist and produced an almost identical thick gold coin.

"Dad gave me this as a keepsake when that fellah done 'im last year – that's why we know 'im" – she held it out for Krishna to look at and gave him a gap-toothed smile. "Looks like real gold but it's filled with lead – good isn't it?"

When Krishna asked around the village people were less than helpful: “Be off with you, you black scoundrel – ‘stolen jewels’ my eye! What are you, some runaway slave?’ What do you take us for?” He had forgotten the negative effect his skin-colour often had on people now that he was away from Ujjeni, and especially since he no longer had the wealth which had, up to this time, always purchased him a fond welcome. He was just another penniless, dark-skinned wayfarer, alone on the road. He was an outsider, and the further north he went, the fairer folks tended to be. After trying a few more houses, and getting very short shift at the headman’s hall, as the sisters had predicted, he pulled his tail between his legs and left the village – glum, sulky, forlorn and very lonely, he rued his greed and his folly.



This woe-laden funk stayed with him over the next few days, regularly being given extra torque by the blunt unfriendly treatment he received at the hands of many villagers. He knew that wanderers were, by definition, casteless but he couldn’t help but notice how the rejections and insults he received most often bore upon his colour. Sometimes wanted to cry out: “But I’m a vaisha, born of the merchant caste! I grew up in a palace! My sister’s the Queen of Vamsa!” He managed to restrain the urge most of the time but still he couldn’t help himself pointedly speaking in his well-educated accent to impress those who scoffed at and scorned him. Although even this tactic would backfire sometimes and he’d get the response, “Well, didn’t you crawl out of the drains of a posh house” or suchlike.

He had never in his life thought of his skin as being anything other than handsome and impressive, for that was the message he got from his mother and his friends as he grew up in Ujjeni. He kept forgetting, and was rudely reminded now that he was out in the world, that sharing the hue as well as the name of the Dreaming God, was a liability not a blessing.

He as now very aware that, when he came to a town or village, he was only to use the wells designated for the outcastes, the candalas and matangas, and those who followed ‘unclean’ professions such as the dung-collectors, butchers and the corpse-carriers. He had just arrived at such a well in a small prosperous town, about ten leagues south of Jalandhara. He waited for the two middle-aged women – dark complexioned and in threadbare sarongs – to fill their jars, and was about to run the bucket down to haul himself some water when a voice called out across the small courtyard.

“Hey!” There were three well-dressed young kshatriya men striding into the enclosure. “There’s a new tax on the well here.”

The two women looked frightened and perplexed. "But this is ours, the *candalas*, it's always been ours – there's no tax, there can't be." They were worried.

"Well there is now – just been introduced," Krishna could see that the three would-be gallants had been drinking, "Come on – cough up! Empty your purses." They laughed and shared the hilarious wit of this demand with each other.

"But we have no money..." The stockier of the two *candala* women pleaded.

"No money! What? How can this be? *Everyone* has money," again the three revelers guffawed at their own great humour. "Well," the leader carried on, "if that's the case, you'll just have to pay us in kind." He rocked on his heels as his addled mind searched for a suitable barter.

"Dance!" He grinned and raised his arm as if he was a master of ceremonies conducting a troupe of performers. "Dance for us, fair ladies, and your payment will have been fulfilled."

"Leave them alone," barked Krishna, moving into the space between the two women and their tormentors.

"Out of the way, black boy – you're spoiling the view."

"Leave them alone, go home, sober up and grow up." Krishna's voice was cold, angry and serious.

"Ooooooh... the big black *matanga's* giving orders to the nobles – isn't that the wrong way round?" They creased up once more at the brilliance of the repartee.

"No, seriously, Snowflake, we're here to watch a dancing show and if you don't mind your manners, well, you'll have our blades to answer to." The leader's tone was less jovial now as the reality of the face-off was sinking in.

"Leave them alone – attack me if you like but these good people you will not harass." As he said this he stripped off his upper wrap and stood before them bare to the waist, his hands open and obviously free of weapons. The *mangala* hung about his neck.

In a sudden lurch the leader of the youths pulled a dagger out of his belt and flew at the apparently defenseless Krishna. He stood his ground, trusting (almost completely) that the charm would do its job. The blade skidded off the skin of his midriff as if it had struck metal. His assailant stumbled, the knife falling from his awkwardly twisted wrist.

"Any more?" Krishna was getting angrier now. The second one tried to skewer him with a longer blade but it met a totally impenetrable wall and his hand skidded up the edge gashing his palm and fingers. He recoiled, staring in disbelief at his bleeding hand.

"I'd take your head off if it wouldn't defile my sword," the last of the increasingly anxious trio taunted.

"Try it" – and Krishna offered the side of this neck – just as *Dusaka* had done.

Whannnggg! The sound of ringing metal reverberated off the walls around the square.

“Now, you *scum*,” and here Krishna took particular relish in uttering this insult to these upper-caste yahoos, “will carry the water for these good women you have insulted. Go on, pick up their jars and take them where they need to go.” He needed no weapon other than their cowardice.

Without a word they stumbled over clumsily, raised the jars to their heads and bore them from the well, shocked and shamed almost to sobriety. Krishna picked up their fallen weapons and urged the two candala women to show the humbled warrior-nobles the way. He felt supremely powerful and pleased that, at least today, he had been able to do some good in the world.

When he parted company with the women and their families, having tossed the knives and swords disdainfully after the retreating youths, he was surprised that they seemed as distressed as ever and that they scarcely thanked him for his miraculous intervention. The stocky woman saw he was puzzled by their non-committal, almost ungrateful response and pulled herself out of her own tangle of feelings to explain: “We do appreciate that you meant well, lad, and you’ve got a lot of courage – as well as mighty thick skin – but you shouldn’t have shamed those nobs like that. If you’d ‘ve left it at the well, we’d ‘ve been very happy. Now you made them look the fools all through the town, well, those of our families who survive their spite will be oppressed for generations. You might as well just take a knife to me and Adicca here, and finish off our husbands and kids as well.”

Across the lane, under the shade of a broad tamarind tree, an old man with big earrings and a scruffy little dog shook his head and smiled.



“I need a teacher, why didn’t I think of that before...” Krishna was muttering to himself, “I wouldn’t keep making such stupid mistakes if I had some proper guidance. And I need to develop better concentration if I’m ever going to hone my psychic powers... ‘hone’...ha! I can’t even find them, let alone sharpen them...”

He heard about an encampment of yogis, samanas like himself, out in the forest beside a swampy hollow, just beyond Jalandhara. Once he had found the place he was sure this was going to be just what he needed. Here was a whole crowd of a few dozen like-minded monks who were intent on spiritual development. They did all kinds of elaborate and demanding ascetic practices so the grove had an aura of great spiritual purpose. He was certain he had found his people.

He listened to the various teachers and tried a great variety of meditation systems and yogic disciplines:

—one talked about ‘keeping the postures even’ so he tried to sit for an hour, walk for an hour, lie for an hour and stand for an hour in rotation all day and night.

—one talked about ‘the cessation of perception and feeling’ so he tried become like a boulder.

—one stood on his left leg all day and all night, assuring Krishna that the more pain he felt the more bad karma he had burned off. “So how much have you burned off so far? And how much more do you have to go?” The yogi smiled in a wincing sort of way and said: “I don’t know, but if I need to find out that sort of thing, I just ask Guru-ji.” He indicated an aged monk who had dangled from a tree branch by one arm for 40 years – his long beard now mingled with the bushes below his feet

—one tried to persuade Krishna that he was the *most* austere of all the renunciants but when, as Krishna joined him in piercing huge numbers of fine rods through his skin, his new student observed that he didn’t seem to have renounced competitiveness, the teacher displayed what he called ‘holy wrath’ but which looked to young Krishna rather like garden-variety anger.

—one advocated the ‘practice of the five fires’ and, like many of these endeavours, for a few weeks the ardent Krishna threw himself into this training with great gusto.

The four big fires on all sides and the pitiless sun above – this was designed to aid his cultivation of spiritual and psychic strength – the external heat was intended to invoke and evoke ‘tapas’ or inner psychic heat, the power and insight of the awakened sage. So far, after five moons of the five fires, Krishna had only developed some significant powers of endurance and a few brief flashes of inner vision.

These latter had come at times when, overcome by exhaustion and heat, something in him had relaxed (or snapped) and a vision of those he had known in the past welled into view.

The very first one had involved his sisters Amba and Tamba. It opened in an upstairs room in a wooden house Krishna did not recognize. Through the window he could see a few other houses, with palm trees and bananas so it seemed to be in a village somewhere, rather than in a big city. In the few seconds of the first part of the vision all he saw was a skinny, chestnut-and-auburn haired girl of nine or ten Rains who looked very much like Tamba, as far as he could remember her. She had only been five when he had waved his last goodbye.

She was sitting with a woman he didn’t recognize at all; Tamba was combing out the woman’s hair and they seemed to relate like mother and daughter, rather than mistress and servant.

The scene then changed and there was a teenaged Amba – she looked quite different, being more grown up, but he was sure it was her because of the crowd of

poor and sick people in the hall. He'd heard the story of the fence she had invented; he also recognized her lovely smile.

Lastly there was a brief flash of her, looking divinely beautiful on a throne, beside a fierce-looking, dark-bearded king. And that was it.

Some weeks earlier, when he had been trying the 'keep the postures even' discipline, in a moment in the middle of the night he had seen, with great lucidity, the profile of his mother as she read his farewell letter – composed over many hours on a palm-leaf. She slowly mouthed each word as she inched her way through it, for she had never been a scholar but the words were too painful and personal to allow her to ask for help in reading it.

Then he saw her at the riverbank looking distraught and urgent.

Then he saw a length of cloth swirling in the current of the River Carmanvati, cloth just like the sarong she had been wearing.

He wondered:— Had she fallen? Had she drowned herself? He chewed his lip nervously as he sat there in the night, his thoughts and emotions churning like that same river in its spate. Finally, he reflected: "Well, I've got to let go of family ties anyway – perhaps it's for the best – one less thing for me to worry about." Part of him felt resolved by formulating things in this way; another part, deep in his heart, quaked and was disquieted.

The last of his visions had come close to the end of the rainy season while he had been trying to meditate on being as rock-like as possible.

The intuition had been growing in him that all of the teachings and disciplines that were practiced in this grove of ascetics were missing a basic point. The men there had a definite commitment – true indeed – but no one actually seemed to be happy or free on account of all their efforts. He was disappointed and therefore felt he needed a fresh direction. "How *did* I end up here?!" he wondered – this misery really isn't of much use to any of us here."

These thoughts had been brewing for a few weeks and, as he faithfully sat there with the monsoon rains sluicing down all over him while he stoically remained immobile, the cheerful, craggy face of Dusaka appeared before him.

"I need to find a teacher – like you," he heard his own voice pronounce.

"Why is that?" Dusaka-of-the-vision replied.

"I need to develop my psychic powers, so I can read situations more wisely. I also need to find out how to use the meditation to actually experience happiness and freedom – not just to assume it will come to me somehow, out of some blind belief that the experience of pain is a holy virtue."

"Are you sure the psychic powers will help?"

"Of course! So where should I go to find such a teacher?"

"If that was going to be helpful, Taxila would be a good place to look, but are you sure that's the main thing you need?"

“Of course! You know that!”

“I do? Well, well...”



Ant Bee and Maggot had felt very honoured when, just as they were about to set off on their own, the great heavenly king Vessavana, Kuvera of the Yakkhas, had given them his personal blessing.

“As you know – dear ones – I am not only monarch of the yakkha race but also the lord and protector of water- and tree-devas and all of the earth-spirit clan. As your father and one who is avowed to guard the safety of the world, I will give you aid in the form of these cintamani-vijja – they are wish-fulfilling stone charms and, when one of you holds theirs the others may easily know their thoughts. In this way may you never be lost to each other.”

He reached out his huge, horned and bejeweled hand and gently dropped a precisely-cut stone of deepest azure into their cupped palms. “May your instincts guide you well and your good hearts protect you. Should you prove correct in your intuition, we shall come to your aid if you need us. In the meantime Queen Samuddaja will be my arm and my flame to lend you strength.”



They headed northwest, as Bee had suggested and combed high and low for any trace they could find. Eventually they backtracked all the way to the Simsapa Grove outside of Kosambi and Bee decided to see if she could discern any lines of scent and resonance from there.

The pull she felt – backed by the slenderest of familiar fragrances – was again to the north and west.

“We should head for Uttarakuru, I’m sure that’s it. I feel Minti’s call in my veins.” The others were not certain, this could be a long wild-pixie chase, but they decided to trust Bee anyway and not to hold back.

Their journey took them through endless forests, along rivers, through grassy valleys and everywhere they asked if anyone had seen signs of the lost kinnari. They met garden-devas, forest- and park-devas, medicinal-herb pixies, water-spirits and many rukkha-devas of the forest giant trees – very few had any hopeful news.

Finally, after many long days and increasingly rugged countryside, as they wearily approached a huge body of water, Bee lit up, “There!” she cried. The others could see nothing. The tall magenta-clad kinnari raced to the edge of the bushes on the lakeshore and reached to pick something up – it was a single long white hair.

They were now right at the edge of Simbali Lake. On its northern shore they saw a strange woody construction half-way up a vast crag. It was like a bird's nest but the 'twigs' were the size of whole branches and there were even entire tree-trunks woven in to it as well.

"I think, my friends, I will just go under water for a while." Queen Samuddaja was eying the giant nest with extreme concern. By way of explanation she added, "We nagas are the favourite food of the garuda, the giant eagles, it will be for the best that I lie low for a while, if we are going to linger here."

She assumed her serpentine form and slid gently into the lake.

The three kinnaris, with their aspara companions, Rhamba and Salassa, could discern a distinct but subtle fragrance around there – many kinnaris seem to have passed through. They were pondering if and how they should approach the nest to consult with its occupant when overhead the silhouette of giant wings fully obscured the sun and half the sky.

The garuda Dhanañjaya, an elder of the garuda clan, gently came into land at the lakeshore only a bowshot away from the kinnaris. His sharp eyes had spotted the red and pink forms from high above. They came forward with the celestial dancers in their billowing filmy garb, the arms and ankles of the asparas ringed with strings of jade and pearl. Neither they nor the kinnari really looked as if they were dressed for battle so they were surprised when the great eagle said:

"You are going to war."

He rocked his head to assent to their look of curiosity that he should have surmised their reason for being there. "Word travels fast among the winged ones when there is danger in the air. Are you here among the mountains searching for your kin? You are far from the gardens and gentle woodlands of the plains."

"Yes, Sir," Bee began, "my sister and several dozen other kinnaris have been kidnapped. Vepacitti the asura, who dwells far to the east, has been blamed but I feel sure that our kin have been brought near here instead, and maybe not by asuras at all."

"We garudas try to stay aloof from petty squabbles but we will not sit and watch while the innocent are harmed. I am of the Supanna family and we have the good of all at heart. I heard tell of this gross deed so I will help you, if I can. I have been travelling much of late and when I returned to this lake some little time ago, I picked up the scent of many kinnaris and that of some others too. There were devas and yakshas in the troop and at least one naga. Strangest of all were the traces of a perfume – it smelled like mountain air and naga blood and of some uniquely rich floral nectars I knew not. The sense of smell of the supanna is almost as keen as our eyes so I know for sure that such a band came through here."

As the great bird spoke of the strange fragrance, the nearly-arrived group smelled it too – for even now the thinnest of traces of it lingered amid the other elements of the spoor. For Bee it called to mind the night lotus; Ant caught a whiff of

kanavera; Maggot meanwhile knew it as the tang of a freshly opened jambu. They also realized, as did Rhamba and her brother, that they had smelled it before, at the Vejayanta Palace and in amongst the party of deva-raiders.

“I do not know for sure if the ones you seek are nearby but there is rumour from the feathered children of the Parvati Valley, close to Kulluta village, that a certain cave there has had enchantments put upon it. Any creature, be they with feathers, scales, skin or carapace, that has tried to enter there of late has fallen dead, as if pole-axed, at the door.

“The tiny ones who sing their words told this truth to me. So, now you must ask yourselves, for what reason would such a spell be put in place, other than if there was aught inside that the spell-binders wanted to keep hidden?”



“There are forms, monks, cognizable by the eye that are delightful, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, tantalizing. If one relishes them, welcomes them and remains fastened to them, that person is said to be one fettered by forms cognizable by the eye. That person has gone over to Mara’s camp; they have come under Mara’s power; they have been caught in Mara’s snare so that they are fettered with the bondage of Mara. The Evil One can do with them as he likes.”

Krishna was reciting these potent words, that he had learned from a fellow samana in the grove of the ascetics, as he approached the village of Kulluta.

He had asked for the whereabouts of the well for wanderers and outcastes and had just rounded the corner to find the spot; it was at the edge of the last grove of trees before the houses began. It was late afternoon and the place was quite deserted, only one other person was around.

As he drew close to the well he saw that it was a young woman who had just filled a large jarful of water. In a deft and well-practised manoeuvre she swung the jar up onto her head, not spilling a single drop. She then, in the same fluid motion, began to walk down the lane into the village proper.

Her sarong was tight and her hips undulated in an easy rhythmic motion – the age-old mark of walking so that the burden stayed at the exact same height while the carrier moved along, thus not wasting energy or spilling the contents by the load being bounced up and down.

Completely forgetting his own thirst and his interest in bathing after a long day’s walk, Krishna’s eyes became transfixed by the hypnotically rolling oscillation of the figure he was now following.

It took him a moment to realize that up above the swaying focus of his attention there dangled a long thick pony-tail that swung in perfect syncopation with it. It was five different shades of red: auburn, ginger, russet, chestnut and flaming orange; and around the girl's head there buzzed a busy throng of flies.

CHAPTER 20

AT THE KNACKER'S YARD



an I carry that for you?" Krishna asked, scurrying up beside the young woman.

"You took your time!" She shot him a glance without moving her neck and added to it a friendly, one-sided smile.

"I was, er, distracted..." Krishna responded.

"I'm sure you were."

"...and didn't think to offer," he reached up and, a little clumsily, received the water-jar, attempting to transfer it to his own head with the same grace with which she had lifted it. He had lowered his head-height to be the same as the red-haired girl and, with her steadying the load as well, they shifted the weight onto him; it was heavy and a few drops spilled.

After a faltering moment or two Krishna straightened his posture and found his balance. The slender girl smiled at him full in the face now. "There you go – and if you spill any more, you'll just have to go back to the well and get another jarful." She was of fine features and the loose strands of varicoloured hair that framed her look shone with a bright glow in the late afternoon light. Krishna was as smitten as if he'd been bludgeoned by a yakkha.



"Keep your eyes pointing forward," she chided, "if you keep staring at me you're going to trip and drop the lot – and if that jar breaks, it's you that's going to have to replace it." Duly chastened, he tried his best to keep the conversation going without incessantly turning to stare at his new companion.

"Sorry, I always have trouble staying focused. Anyway, I don't know your name, and where is it we're going? We don't seem to be heading into the village." Krishna had

noticed that the path they were taking seemed to skirt the houses around the edge of the main group of dwellings.

“Sugandha’s my name – ‘beautiful fragrance’ – it’s a family joke, on account of where we’re going.” She let Krishna chew on this cryptic comment, then continued, “It’s also why I have my little friends here with me,” now Krishna was doubly puzzled and just managed to stop himself before he turned to look directly at the young woman again.

“The butcher’s entourage,” she announced, now walking slightly ahead of him, and gracefully swept her arm as if she were a grand lady introducing her attendants to a visiting ambassador. Krishna then realized that she was talking about the flies that darted to and fro around her as they walked. “And where we’re going is to the knacker’s yard where I live and work – that putrid palace of blood and dung where my dear mum and dad and I spend our entire lives.

“That’s why the name’s a joke,” Sugandha explained, “you can never get the smell of rotting carcasses off your hair, your clothes and your skin.” Now that she mentioned it Krishna could indeed smell the rank tang of decay in the air about them, it was mingled in with the other village smells but it was distinct now that it had been pointed out to him.

“All of us who were born here in Kulluta village are sudras or candalas. We’re a low lot but, along with the corpse-carriers and the dung-collectors, butchers are at the bottom of the heap of the worker caste as our professions are ‘unclean,’” here Sugandha affected a very good imitation of a posh brahmin accent, wrinkling her nose in mock disgust. “We’re not quite as near to the bottom as the candalas but close enough to have to use the outcaste wells – that’s why I have to make the long walk every day. And here we are...”



The foetid stench of death filled the yard. It was a miasma that forced itself into the nostrils with every breath and then proceeded to chew its way through them into the heart. It was sickening and made Krishna want to run as fast and as far away as he could, or at least to jump into the icy rushing waters of the Vipasa River that flowed below Kulluta, to flush even just this much of the rancid stink out of his system. And he had only been there a few moments. He winced.

“You live here?” He asked, as he handled the jar to the ground beside the small tank at the edge of the open area.

“Home sweet home,” Sugandha cocked her head, and Krishna realized that she wasn’t being entirely sarcastic. Around them was a collection of ramshackle sheds and barns. Pens of various sizes contained goats and pigs, a larger one held some aged-

looking cows and a line of stables housed similarly decrepit horses and ponies – forlorn and depressed creatures who smelled the same doom in the air that had assaulted Krishna’s nose on his arrival.

Off to one side was a large barn with an open double door; various feed-stores, and some piles of accumulated refuse, were jammed in side by side. On the opposite side of the yard, at the edge of the compound, sat what seemed to be the family house. It was a stone and wood structure – as were most dwellings in that area – but the ground floor was an open space that served as a pen for more livestock. A flight of steps led up the outside to the living quarters above.

On its own, a little apart from the animal enclosures, stood a long low stone building with small windows in the side. Krishna could hear the sound of anguished squeals emerging from it. Sugandha noticed him looking at it: “That’s the slaughterhouse; sounds like dad’s doing pigs today.”

Despite his urges to escape, Krishna found these impulses arguing with equally intense desires to stay close to this flame-haired girl.

“I had a sister who was a bit of a redhead – not as bright as yours of course – is it that colour naturally?”

“What kind of an offal-brain are you?” She gave him a scornful look, “haven’t you ever seen madayantika before? They call it henna, or camphire in the far west. If your hair’s naturally got a bit of red in it – like mine has – then it comes out like this.” She pulled her pony-tail over her shoulder and shook it. “It’s very lucky they say – a good mangala – to have five-coloured hair.”

“Most of us in Kulluta originally come from Gandhara, they say, and up there almost everyone uses it. It’s still popular in the village here – that’s why some people call Kulluta ‘Bimbasisa-gama’ – ‘the village of the redheads.’”

Krishna felt awkward in the pause after Sugandha spoke and was anxious to keep the conversation going. “I said I ‘had’ a sister because I’ve been told she died when she was young but I’ve got a feeling she’s still alive.”

“She must’ve been quite a sight,” Sugandha chuckled. Then, seeing the somewhat gormless, uncomprehending look on Krishna’s face, went on, “You know, red hair and skin like midnight...”

“No, actually she wasn’t dark at all – I’m a bit of an oddity in my family – she had coppery skin like yours.” The two of them went quiet again, now looking at each other, not sure what to say.

Krishna’s pulse started to speed up. He felt sure this beautiful girl was appreciating how handsome he was – the big dark-purple eyes, his manly physique – she gazed into his face long and hard. Finally she said:

“You really are *incredibly* black; aren’t you embarrassed about that?”

If she had asked him this question a year ago, before he took on the life of a wanderer, he would have just laughed and shrugged it off without a second thought.

After now having been on the receiving end of such frequent prejudice – especially since he had lost all his money – her query made him feel self-conscious and insulted. He could hardly believe how she could be so unabashedly bigoted and rude. She seemed unbothered that she might hurt his feelings by such a question.

“No, not really...” he said falsely, feebly, for he was embarrassed by it at this very moment. “I’m fine with it, it’s... just the way I am – what can I do about it anyway?” He now felt the strongest of desires to let Sugandha know that he was no runaway candala on the lam from some low servitude, a vagabond simply on the road looking for a free lunch, but he was also keen to preserve his ideal of abandonment of status, that he was a samana, a wandering holy seeker.

“Sometimes,” he hinted awkwardly, “wealthy or high-class people are born with dark skin, and they too can choose to adopt the life of the homeless seeker.”

“Yeah, right!” she snorted, “and just because you can put on a posh accent you’re going to kid me you’re one of them.” Her laugh was hearty but not unkind – she plainly regarded Krishna as being from some very inferior family but equally she didn’t hold anything against him for that. By the look of injury on Krishna’s face she realized that she’d been unintentionally cruel; to make amends she offered: “So, would you like to stay for a few days and help out here? We could use a hand.”



Thus it was that Krishna became a hireling at the knacker’s yard. At first the noxious fume of muck and mire, mingled with the rotting offal-scrap in the runnels and added to the anguished screeching of the butchered animals as they met the knife, was overwhelmingly vile and squalid to his tender senses.

His devotion to Sugandha, however, grew ever stronger and so, to his surprise, his nose seemed to adjust and the impact of the putrid squalor became quite bearable. His work consisted of mucking out the yard and hauling the struggling slaughterees into the long low chamber where Sugandha’s father, ironically named Ahimsa – ‘the harmless’ – would dispatch them and then carve up the carcasses, after he had skinned and gutted them.

He also had to scrape hides and to wash the slaughter-boards. After a while he was allowed to sharpen the knives, once he had shown he could give the blades an edge and not damage them irreparably.

The moon waxed and waned and Krishna settled into his life there. He lived in a small storage space in the corner of the feather-shed – the place where the chickens, quails and ducks were killed and plucked, and where their plumage was stored before being sold on for furnishings and clothes. Sugandha was aware of his adoring, heartfelt fixation on her (you would have had to have been a purblind yakkha living behind the

moon to have missed it), and she really did not intend to string him along, nevertheless she could not help but take advantage of his staunch, puppy-eyed commitment. All the work that he now did meant that she didn't have to do it – she could even get clean enough once in a while to shed her share of the entourage of flies when she went on errands into the village.

It was still her lot to lend a hand though. When it came time for her father to head up into the meadows over the Rohtang Pass – where the King's brood mares, foals and retired war-horses grazed for the summer months and whence he would bring down the aged, sick and weak for knacker – it was she who had to take over the knife in the slaughterhouse. It thus happened naturally that, since he was at her side as much as he could be, Krishna offered to help her in whatever he could, even with this most gory of tasks.

"I can teach you how to do it, if you like," Sugandha said, leading him into the dingy building. What Krishna thought was, "I wouldn't say 'like'..." what he said was, "Sure... I'm happy to learn."

"Ever since my mum's arm got injured by a panicking pig a few years ago I've had to do this. You can actually get to like it, strange as it may seem." Krishna nodded but deeply doubted what she had just said.

"Now, animals are smart, and even if they are old and worn out, they know what's about to happen and they don't want it. Right? Who would? So, you need to be *calm* – to put them at ease – *strong* – to hold them steady – you need to close your heart and be *fearless* – so their cries don't make you waver – and last, you need to be *decisive* – so you do the job in one cut. That's best for you, and for them."

She then tugged on the halter of the goat they had dragged into the killing room with them. In a single, relaxed motion she wrapped an arm around the quivering animal's head, stood back by its shoulder and pulled the knife sharply across its throat.

"Like that. Now, let's get one for you to try..."



In his efforts to please and impress Sugandha Krishna buried his feelings of revulsion and rapidly learned the craft. He got so good that, when Ahimsa returned with the horses and ponies from above the Rohtang, the knacker was quite happy for Krishna to carry on and share the job with him.

What was strange to Krishna, some moons after he first began this job, was to find that he had indeed grown to enjoy it. There was a raw power that he felt with the helpless victim in his grip, the sharp blade in his cutting-hand. And there were strange, unbidden thoughts that came too; they rose in his mind almost as if it was somebody else thinking them, saying them: "This is truly to be in control of life and death," the

words formed clear and razor-edged, “this is the glory of the gods, who can bestow life or take it... as they choose.”

At this thought Krishna drew the knife with a decisive pull, and the neck of the squirming pig he had been straddling opened like a trap door, a giant extra mouth, and hot blood in pulsing gouts gushed forth on the killing floor.



Ahimsa was taciturn and burly, a man of few words who liked his grog. He was of a darkish complexion, although nowhere near the colour of Krishna; Karuna, Sugandha’s mother, was also swarthy and sun-weathered after many years of animal herding and ceaseless outdoor work.

Sughanda held up her hand and turned it this way and that, remarking half to Krishna, half to herself, “You know, I’m almost fair-skinned, wouldn’t you say? I think you’re right about people sometimes being radically different colours from their parents; on the other hand I sometimes wonder if these are my real parents at all.”

Krishna’s impression was that Sugandha had beautiful, nut-brown skin, but it was not *that* vastly paler than that of her parents. He felt it would not be diplomatic to make that particular observation so, to deflect the issue, he asked, “What makes you think they’re not your real parents?”

“Well dad swears up and down that they are; when I asked before, he tells me, ‘Of course you’re our daughter; you nearly killed your mother when she was birthing you! That’s why we never had any more kids.’ But it’s just a feeling, you know...”

“Sometimes I think that maybe I’m the Lost Princess of Taxila, the capital of Gandhara. I haven’t got the greeny-blue eyes – like some others in the village have – but I’m so much lighter than my parents are, look...” She proffered the lower side of her arm for him to admire and showed off the chestnut-tinted fairness of her cheeks, “... my skin’s hardly even tawny.

“I have this feeling that I was brought here on a wagon from Taxila, hidden in a basket when I was a baby, to protect me from some palace intrigue. Then I was given to these good-hearted butchers to be looked after, just because no one would *ever* think of looking for a princess in such a place.

“Most of the people in this village are from Gandhara originally, so Kulluta exists as a kind of outpost for the Gandharans. If I had to hide my daughter from some jealous queen who wanted to do her in, this would be just the place I’d send her. What do you reckon?”

Krishna leaned back against the stooks of hay piled up in the barn where they were sitting. It was late in the afternoon and the dust of the dry season was drifting in patches of light that broke through the vents up in the eaves. He was enjoying their

closeness and the hot-season drowsiness that carried the meanderings of her fantasy like a pearl-prowled ship on the brow of a tumbling wave.

“I don’t know, Su; do you have any memory of the journey at all?”

“Don’t remember a thing, that’s the trouble. When I was six or seven Rains I had some kind of swamp-fever and I was unconscious for the whole cycle of a moon. Or at least I was semi-conscious ’cos they say I was shouting and raving, and having long conversations with people who weren’t in the room.

“The spirits, or vapours, or whatever it was I was full of, went to my head and took my memories when they left, so now everything that happened before then is a blank. “My parents and others always talk about me being around Kullutta when I was little – well, they would, wouldn’t they, if they were all sworn to keep the truth secret – I suppose the idea is to keep me safe from the evil palace plots in Taxila, or may be just to make sure they can keep me for themselves, or something...” her voice trailed off.

“I could be a princess, couldn’t I? I’m slim and pretty enough, don’t you think?”

Again her forthrightness somewhat disarmed Krishna. She drew her wrap across the lower half of her face and fluttered her eyelashes alluringly. He knew she was only playing, in a sisterly way, but his heart pounded like the war-drums of Ujjeni.

“Of course you’re pretty enough, you’re gor... er...” His throat was suddenly filled with gravel and he felt as if his tongue had been replaced with a small tortoise.



As Krishna had settled into the rhythm of his days, and was feeling the comfort of a predictable roof over his head for the night and daily food from the kitchen of Karuna, he also began to fantasize about his current situation, how it might mesh with his spiritual aspirations and the kind of insights his year on the road had led him to.

One of his ideas, which had arisen soon after his arrival at the yard was that perhaps Sugandha was not just the butcher’s beautiful daughter but was secretly the red-haired sage who could reveal all the secrets of the mangala.

“Maybe she’s like the great yogini Yeshe Tsogyal, the consort of Padma Sambhava, she was only sixteen Rains when they became a spiritual couple and she ended up a great sage herself. She could turn herself into a flying tigress and would carry the guru on her back up into the free open air among the mountains, amongst the eagles. Dusaka told me that the cave where they lived was known as the Tiger’s Nest.”

Then he reflected on more of the tales Dusaka had told him, about the trials that the great sages had endured in being taught by their gurus: “Tilopa had his student Naropa go thieving and get caught; he put him through all kinds of painful and disgusting trials; and Marpa – he had Milarepa build and take down a stone tower seven times. Maybe my life in the knacker’s yard is a spiritual trial – a test of my mettle

– and then, at the end, Su will reveal herself as a guru and teach me how to use the mangala. Didn't she hint at this when she said having hair of five colours is an auspicious omen, 'a good mangala' – she used those words."

Krishna was determined to fulfill his life as a samana but was very happy to pursue the fantasy of the 'consort' option that some of these great saints, sages and siddhas had followed – well, this opened the door to a romantic life with Sugandha *and* the sincere pursuit of his spiritual goal... it all fitted very neatly.

"All this killing and skinning of goats, pigs and cows, shoveling dung and rotting giblets – this is the nectar of training!" Thus he had thrown himself into his life there with emboldened vigour. Of course he didn't tell his consort-to-be that he suspected what the method behind this situation was, but this intuition served to sustain his commitment through those many rank, blood-spattered months.

Occasionally he would drop a hint or subtly try to prod her on the subject of the mangala, but she feigned an attitude of disinterest, or complete ignorance whenever he edged near to it. He took this to be just the kind of prickly rejection that Naropa had received from Tilopa, and so he read this stand-offishness as a clear sign that he was on the right track. After he had been there eight or nine Moons and the rainy season was approaching once again, he decided that hints and subtleties had had their day, and that he was going to ask her straight out. Or at least, he decided, he'd tell her about these great gurus and their training methods – about Yeshe Tsogyal, the beautiful young magical princess, and Padma Sambhava, and all the trials Naropa and Milarepa had been through – and then see how she responded.

As they sheltered in the barn from a sudden downpour Krishna spun out for her the collection of tales he had heard from Dusaka, all the time looking to see if there was even a faint knowing twinkle in his beloved's eye. No such luck. Instead she merely asked: "So, are any of these gurus and siddhas still alive?"

"Actually," Krishna had forgotten this bit, "none of them have even been born yet."

"Not born yet?! So none of this stuff – with the student having to go off and rob the stall-holders in the market, and the tower getting built and unbuilt – none of this ever actually happened?"

"Of course it's happened... at least that's what Dusaka, that old monk I told you about, would say: 'It may have happened already somewhere, or it may happen in the future – but, if it hadn't already happened somehow, how could I be telling you about it? Even if it's actually yet to be...' It would bend my mind around sometimes, just to listen to him." Krishna looked into Sugandha's beautiful, inscrutable face, waiting to see if she would reveal any startling truths or give him any direct spiritual teachings. She, in turn gazed into his eyes, then said:

"You're totally offal-brained, you are."

"I was wondering, you know, like Yeshe Tsogyal and Padma Sambhava, if you and me might, you know..."

"You what?! You must be joking! Not only am I at least a couple of Rains older than you, but I couldn't marry *you* – you're the colour of the dung-collectors and the lowest brand of candala."

"Don't look at me like I have two left eyes!" Krishna was deflated and hurt, "It's not such an outrageous suggestion, and I'm not as low caste as you think I am – my sister is a queen!" He was angry and upset now and didn't give a damn about the castelessness of wanderers any more.

"Oh yeah!?" Sugandha was highly skeptical of this bizarre assertion – even weirder in some ways than the stories of the princess who transformed herself into a flying tigress or the murderer who built towers, dwelt in a cave and turned green from living on nettles. She arched both eyebrows and cocked a half-smile, "Don't make me laugh." She paused, as if in thought then added, mostly to see what further flights her big-eyed devotee's imagination might take, "So, what country is she ruler of?"

"She's Queen Samavati of Vamsa."

"The Angel of Kosambi is your sister!? Ha! If that's true then I definitely am the Lost Princess of Taxila."

"Well, she's my half-sister, to be completely accurate," Krishna was pouting now.

"And I'm the half-lost Princess! How can you possibly believe she's even your half-sister – you're darker than a yakkha's armpit. What kind of a mug do you take me for?" She shook her head as if to knock loose this wacky collection of ideas: "One sister's a redhead, the other's a queen – sounds to me like someone's trying too hard to make an impression. So, who's your brother? Ganesha with the elephant head?... No, don't answer that."



Once again Sugandha felt a little remorseful for having been so blunt with Krishna:– He just did not seem to understand how ugly and inferior his skin made him. He was a sweet boy – like a big, guileless, faithful hound – but how could he even *think* that she and he might... Oh, it was touching that his devotion was so sincere but really... No, she had her sights set considerably higher.

She made a point of being extra-kind and appreciative by way of recompense and he seemed to forgive her rapidly for her hope-destroying attitude. Their conversations returned to their usual comfortable bantering and, as the rains fell and turned the yard into a running quagmire, they settled into their familiar roles, or nearly so.

Sugandha had told herself that she was touched by Krishna's faithfulness and that his colour was low and ugly, yet she had also been strangely affected by his open declaration of his hopes. Albeit that they were tangled up with his odd ideas about her being able to turn into a tiger and fly to Mount Kailash if she wished, this was nevertheless the first time anyone had ever even hinted at wanting to marry her.

One morning there was a break in the weather and a fierce sun shone through the scattered fleecy clouds. She picked her way carefully across the gruesome sludge of the yard to let Krishna know that the midday meal would be ready a little early that day.

She arrived at the door to the slaughterhouse and was about to call him when she felt all movement within her suddenly fall still.

Krishna was wearing only a loin-cloth, pulled up between his legs and tucked in at the small of his back. A shaft of sunlight played on the thick ribbons of muscle strung across his torso, along his legs. He was splitting a cow's carcass along the spine. He raised the heavy pole-axe over his head, thumping it down and through bone and flesh, gristle and nerve, over and over again in a mesmerizing rhythm. Where the sun hit his skin it flared with an indigo sheen.

Sugandha's heart pounded – a fist thumping urgently at the door of her chest – an imprisoned creature demanding to be released.

"Oh, Mother Kali. Look at him!"

She bit her lip and scurried away lest Krishna catch her there, staring. As she tried to reach the safety of the house and keep her feet vaguely dry she heard her thoughts running:

"But I don't even *like* dark-skinned people. Blackness is ugly..." her feelings of sisterly endearment towards Krishna were now being thoroughly confused by the realization of an attraction he held for her of another quality altogether.

Before things ran away with her and events took a turn that, well, that she *really* didn't think... well, just weren't *right*, Sugandha felt she had to take action. She knew that the Headman's son had eyes for her and, if she played her cards right, he was an excellent marriage prospect – she felt she had a good chance there despite the fact that she was only the knacker's daughter.

She reckoned that since even the Headman's family were sudras, there should be no basic caste differences and that, if the lad were sufficiently desperate, he'd be able to persuade his parents to approve the match.

She'd always been keen to marry up, and had set her sights on him, but until now she had never dared to make a move – they had an unclean livelihood after all and, should she be seen as polluting the Headman's family, her own household could be at risk of banishment. Her father had the prestigious job of slaughterer to the King's horses, but this meant nothing if some caste protocol was besmirched.

That said, this was no longer a time for caution. Reason needed necessarily to be pushed aside; she felt she had better cast out her net and make her catch soon, risk of failure be damned.



Krishna rarely ever went to the back of the house but he was hunting for a fresh whetstone. The one he always used had just broken – he supposed he had been over-vigorous in his knife-sharpening recently and he knew he was taking out a lot of his frustrations on the butchering block, but he was really enjoying it.

As he rounded the corner of the building, in the area behind Sugandha's house, he heard her voice coming from the other side of the stone buttress that supported the back wall. Not sure what that might portend, if anything, Krishna continued his search, looking amongst the small piles of old tools, rubble, weeds and animal debris. He glimpsed Sugandha there with a tall gawky man in his mid-twenties; neither of them saw him and he retreated to the other side of the stone barrier. The two of them were standing, wrapped around each other; Krishna could not bear to leave without eavesdropping for awhile.

"Honestly, though we spend all our time together, I've just been stringing him along so we can get free labor and I can avoid having to kill and skin all those foul goats and pigs, and to be forever rank with their stench. See, I smell quite nice now."

"Mmmmmmm..."

"He calls himself a yogi, a homeless spiritual seeker, but he's more your common-or-garden wayfarer if you ask me; he works for a living, stays in a village, you never see him meditate and he's got moon-calf eyes for me."

"So you're not sweet on him then?" The nervous voice of the man enquired.

"What! Are you mad? Why would I want to tie myself to some over-eager, air-headed black boy? I'm only interested in handsome men who've got some kind of future."

All went quiet for a few moments.

"Besides, I'm a full nineteen Rains now, practically an old lady, so it's getting way past time for me to find a husband."

"What have you been waiting for?"

"What d'you think? Just for the best-looking, green-eyed man in Kulluta – who also happens to be the Headman's son – to notice that I'm the one for him."



The day after this conversation had been overheard by him, Krishna was in the slaughterhouse having just cut the throat of a large pig. The dispatching knife was still in his hand.

In the doorway of the long low building, a figure appeared. Krishna noticed the silhouette and looked up from the bleeding animal beneath him. It was the Headman's son – Jayanta.

"Er... excuse me, have you seen Miss Sugandha? I'm... er... looking for her."

"Evidently," Krishna felt the young man's fear; his gangly frame held awkwardly, as if in apology for existing.

He walked towards him, wiping the blade on the hem of his loin-cloth, his heart overcome by a violent, taunting urge. Jayanta took a step back, towards the door, put his foot in a puddle of putrid filth and then moved the other way, somewhat unguardedly, into the corner of the room.

"What are you doing with that knife?" Jayanta's eyes were alight with terror.

Krishna was very close now and had the tip of the blade circling slowly and pointed right at his victim's face.

"Frightening you, I think. I just killed some other swine with it." He came up very very close and gently rested the needle-keen point on the artery to the left of the man's wind-pipe.

He let the knife-handle pivot on his fingers as the beat of blood in the man's neck gently rocked the blade up and down. Eventually the tip pierced the skin under its own weight as it oscillated evenly, releasing a tiny drop of blood that trickled down Jayanta's neck. Krishna smelled the acrid tang of fresh urine being added to the fug of the slaughterhouse. His latest victim had just wet himself.

"Why not kill him and take the girl? You've done it so many times now and it's such a glorious feeling – you love it..."

"*This* is the divine power over life and death that the red-haired woman has taught me! I get it! If I want him to live, he lives; if I want him to die, he dies – and nothing whatsoever can harm *me*." Krishna's thoughts were cold and clear. He spoke:

"I could just kill you and take the girl, feed your body to the pigs – no one would ever know – I'm pretty fast with the knife."

As the relish of this moment flushed the core of his being and Krishna felt his power to be total, across his vision there fell a curtain, a shimmering film. The face of the stricken man was overlain with the unmistakable features of Dusaka – distinct in every detail. Krishna and Dusaka looked into each other's eyes. The old monk raised one eyebrow, as if in quizzical enquiry.

The air stood still.

Krishna lowered the knife. He smiled:

"Just joking around – sorry if I scared you. Your name's Jayanta, right? Well, you are the victor; take good care of her, I'll be leaving tomorrow."



Later that same day, as he sat by himself in the feather-shed, he realized he hadn't known his own feelings until he heard himself say he was leaving.

"I left on a spiritual quest – gave up family and home – and here I end up killing animals, looking forward only to the prospect of marrying this beautiful girl and 'rising up' to qualify to kill horses or even elephants.

"Sugandha is no Yeshe Tsogyal – no great yogini-guru trying to impart a teaching on the mysteries of life – she's just a fearless and forthright girl who has a good heart and ambitions for marriage. Just a woman who's happy to have some besotted mug come along and do her filthy chores for her so she doesn't have to smell like a charnel house and be mocked by the rest of the village. 'The red-capped fly-catcher' they call her. I was just imagining her to be a maha-siddha so I'd have a spiritual excuse to hover around her, like one of our ever-present friends."

Krishna went over to the house and told Ahimsa that he thanked him for the food and shelter, and for his training in the butcher's craft, but that he would be setting off, early on the morrow. Karuna and Sugandha were also in the room but it was mostly with the gruff butcher himself that Krishna spoke.

Once he had left the building, to go and pack up what things he had, Sugandha felt a wave of affection come over her and a surge of tears at the thought that she would soon lose her dark companion. She would miss him and his ever-ardent helpfulness, his readiness to serve and to trust.

"It's for the best," she tried hard to convince herself, "it really is, there's no question," but, if there was no question, why was she needing to convince herself, even at this late hour? She rounded on her doubts and did her best to squash them with a single blow.

"I am marrying Jayanta. I said 'yes' to him only yesterday and the rumour is that his parents approve; and so *that is that*."

She wandered across the yard; it was now drying out after the last of the big rains, at the end of the afternoon. She wanted to give Krishna some kind of treat before he left, so he would at least be able to take something good from there on his journey.

"He did so much work for us and never complained and he got so little back for his pains, especially from me. He really touched me, that beautiful, black, golden-hearted boy. Well, at least he's given me something I'll always remember him by – I got a husband."

She found Krishna in the hay-barn where he was cleaning and putting away a few of the tools he had been using. Without saying anything, just when Krishna had given up all hope of ever winning her affection, she gave him the most brazenly

coquettish of looks and took his hand. She pulled him behind her while she ducked into the shadiest corner of the barn, hidden from all view.

“This is just a kiss to say ‘goodbye’ all right? I’m as good as betrothed to the Headman’s son now but you’ve been so kind and good to me, the best friend I ever had, although I’ve been such a cow, a pig, a bitch to you.” She pressed up very close.

“Oh no,” Krishna protested, “you’ve been...” but his words were stifled as Sugandha locked her spritely five-coloured head, mouth to mouth with his. His legs began to turn to lengths of crumpled string.



At dawn, someone standing on the lane that led south-east out of Kulluta would have seen a dark figure, wrapped in a shawl, his bedroll slung across his shoulders, hair piled into a knot.

They would have noticed his steady unhurried pace and the way he seemed to consume the air as if breathing some sanctified nectar.

As he emerged from the last reaches of the built-up area and came into the grassy forested land, they would have seen him pause, stilled as if in contemplation of some deep internal matter, and then turn to one side, looking into the space adjacent to him as if some other being were there, a being visible only to himself. They would have heard some soft words spoken.

He would then have been seen to walk on for a few paces, then to halt his steps again, tilting his head as if in a gesture of listening, as if that other entity called him from behind.

If there were someone watching they would have seen the tall dark, shawled figure turn from the waist and, again, cock his head in a posture of polite attention. Then they would have heard only silence in reply.



Krishna climbed through the forest of ancient cedars, pondering as he went the direction he should take. His original idea – since his vision of Dusaka in the grove of the ascetics at least – of going to Taxila to develop more psychic powers, seemed vain and childish now. The gory year at the knacker’s yard had left him sadder and wiser, and in no doubt that what he needed was a teacher from whom he might acquire some real wisdom. He needed to get some basics in place.

He thought over the various things he had learned from Dusaka and also from the other wanderers he had met along the way.

Of all the saints and sages – at least those who were alive at the moment – the one whose name he had heard spoken of most highly was that of the Buddha, the Samana Gotama. Even the wanderers who disagreed with his philosophy often confessed that he was the greatest and wisest of all men.

“I should forget about psychic powers altogether and give that up as a pointless side-track. And if there is no greater sage in Jambudipa than the Buddha, then it is him that I shall seek.” He also recalled hearing that, in recent years, three monasteries had been established simultaneously in the area of Kosambi and that, accordingly, the Buddha was said to be spending a lot of time there.

“Well, I was trying not to seek out my family but if the Buddha is in Kosambi, and my sister happens to be queen there, who could blame me if I took the opportunity to pay her a visit?”

Even as he felt his spirits lift dramatically with the new prospect, Krishna reflected: “I had better be careful before I get too charged up with this idea. The last few enthusiasms I followed all left me with a bowlful of ‘What on earth was I thinking?’ And ‘How did I end up here?!?’ So let’s ponder this a bit before I charge off again to the south-east.”

He had climbed the steepest part of the hill and now came out into an open space. Facing the western side of the valley, on a flatish sward overlooking the fast-flowing Vipasa River way below, there sat a little stone temple dedicated to his divine namesake.

The sun was yet to rise over the hillcrests behind him but he could see its fulvous golden light slowly sweeping down in a luminous wave over the face of the hills before him. The air was so fresh it almost hurt his nostrils – he breathed deep and tasted the beautiful absence of the reek of decaying flesh and dung. “What on earth was I ever thinking?”



Krishna spent the entire day close to the stone temple. For hours he sat and looked over the valley or closed his eyes and tried to still his thoughts. He was very happy to be a wanderer once again.

Come the evening he listened as the pujari made his lone offerings of lamps incense and mantras at the temple. Krishna had been delighting in his solitude so, rather than join in, he had retreated to the open glade half a bow-shot away. He sat on a rock and watched the stars slowly blink on and pepper the sky with their silvery presence. He felt blissfully and utterly alone – buoyed up and suffused by the distant chanting, the ringing crickets, the call of owls and star-fire – so he was more than a little surprised when he heard a familiar voice join the orchestra of night:

“Well, well, well! Now look who we’ve got here.”

He opened his eyes and, in a luminescent, multi-hued, fluid ripple of forms, there stood and floated a semi-circle of his dearest celestial friends: Bee and Ant and Maggot, the naga Queen Samuddaja, and two beings whom he did not know – a female and a male of startling beauty who resembled each other closely. The whole group smiled while Krishna laughed uproariously at himself and at the world – how quickly everything can get turned upside down – and they embraced each other warmly.

CHAPTER 21

MAGANDIYA'S STORY



nbelievable though it was to Magandiya, it appeared that the wavering sympathies of her Royal Husband had shifted once again back in the direction of the Sakyan monk and his teachings. Her hopes were being thwarted once more and this time it was the ever-so-charming, ever loved and lauded Ananada that was the irritating agent of her grief. It was infuriating. Sometimes she felt as if the gods were deliberately bending the King's labile affections, now this way, now that, just to tease her and see if she would crack. This most recent incident had nearly pushed her to that point.



As had now become quite customary, the elder Ananda had come to the palace the day before the full moon to offer teachings to Queen Samavati and her retinue. These days His Majesty did not attend as he had, he curtly announced, "more important affairs to attend to" – although it was no secret that these 'affairs' consisted of no more than extended dining and dancing displays in the seraglio of Magandiya, or bouts of carousing with his courtiers and minstrels – or indeed both of these debaucheries together.

That day Ananda chose to talk about generosity and its many blessings, with no other intention in mind than to encourage a wholesome quality that was well-recognized as a primary cause of happiness in the present, and as a source of good karmic results in the future:

"Good friends, the Master once said: 'If you knew, as I know, the result of giving and sharing, you would not eat without having the thought to share the food before you. Even if it was your last morsel, your last mouthful, and you were stricken with hunger, you would not eat without having shared it, if there were someone to share it with.'

Then he started to recite:

*“If beings only knew’ –
So said the Great Sage –
‘How the result of sharing
Is of such great fruit,
With a gladdened mind,
Rid of the stain of meanness
They would duly give to noble ones
Who make what is given fruitful.*

*Having given much food as offerings
To those who are most worthy,
The donors go to heaven.*

*On departing the human state,
Having gone to heaven they rejoice,
And, enjoying pleasures there,
The unselfish see the result
Of sharing freely with others.’”*

Samavati and all the women of her court, including Vasuladatta and the elderly Gavinna, were gladdened and inspired by this teaching. To their embarrassment they had just eaten, before the visit of the monks, and few if any had had such unselfish thoughts in mind as they dined.

Although Ananda had not intended this teaching as any kind of a hint, nevertheless, Samavati was moved to think of something to offer him, right then and there. Food would be no use as the sun was already past the zenith and she knew that the elder Ananda and the other monastics would not eat again before dawn of the next day.

She then noticed that Ananda’s robe looked a little threadbare and, realizing that the monks could easily dye her plain white wrap the ochre colour of their order, she removed the cloth from her shoulder, folded it neatly and then came forward to offer it as robe material.

This respectful and kindly gesture had the effect of inspiring the rest of the assembly and, in a single multi-limbed flurry of movement, almost all of the women of the harem presented their shawls and wraps for robe-making. Those that refrained only did so as their garment had some kind of embroidery or was studded with jewels, or was already dyed a darker colour.

Ananda and his attendant monk smiled warmly, receiving these helpful offerings with much appreciation. Their pleasure was as much for the happiness it gave the donors as it was for the usefulness of the gifts.

The pile of neatly arranged cloth was impressively high by the time the last offering had been made. To the surprise of everyone there it was just at this moment, as the last of the harem returned to where she had been sitting, and before Ananda chanted the blessing, that a flustered page appeared at the doorway and proclaimed: "His Majesty, the King!"

Udena, slightly glassy-eyed despite the relatively early hour of the afternoon, strode purposefully into the main hall of the seraglio where the group was gathered. His original reason for visiting was instantly forgotten as he took in the unexpected sight before him – he noticed at once that almost the entire harem, including the Queen, were without the modest wraps that they usually wore when attending these teachings. He assumed the worst:

"What is this?! You bed-swerving, lecherous gang of hussies – is this monk the latest one you plan to cuckold me with? Eh?! And what's all this cloth? Is he planning to set up a stall in the market?" The jovial mood he had been enjoying on his way there was transformed into a tirade of wrath. As he fumed his somewhat addled mind managed to put two and two together, and he realized that the neat stacks of cloth were what Samavati and the others had been wearing. Before he could think his way to some idea about what this might be indicating, Samavati spoke up:

"We were moved to make an offering, husband, and this cloth was what we had to hand – I am not immodestly dressed now, see," she indicated the plain bodice that she had on, "just without the outer wrap that has become usual for us at these teachings." Samavati was obviously unintimidated and spoke calmly and respectfully.

King Udena, at this, felt a wave of regretful shame wash through him – he had jumped to conclusions once again, driven by his own coarse habits of perception. He was, nonetheless, keen to preserve his dignity somehow, so he blustered, "Well, monk, what are you going to do with all this cloth, set up shop in the market?" He pointed disdainfully at the white heaps before Ananda's teaching seat. "How many robes does one monk need?"

"We can own no more than three at any one time, great King," Ananda replied matter-of-factly, "that's plenty for our needs," he smiled in his usual endearing way.

"But what will you do with all the extra ones?"

"I will share them with the monks whose robes are worn thin."

"But what will you do with those old robes that are worn thin?"

"We will make them into dust cloths to line thatched roofs with."

"But what will you do with those dust cloths that are old?"

"We will make them into mattress coverings."

"But what will you do with those mattress coverings that are old?"

“We will make them into ground coverings.”

“But what will you do with those ground coverings that are old?”

“We will make them into foot-wipers.”

“But what will you do with those foot-wipers that are old?” The King by now was quite enjoying this badinage and was amused to see how far it could go.

“We will make them into dusters.” The elder responded, continuing the rally.

“But what will you do with those dusters that are old?”

“Having torn them into shreds, great King, having kneaded them with mud, we will use them to patch any cracks there might be in the plastering.”

Then King Udena thought: “These bhikkhus use everything in a very proper way, they’re frugal and they don’t let anything go to waste.” He lowered himself to his knees and, with genuine humility he and the Queen along with all the harem, bowed three times to Ananda.

As he rose up after the last bow he called to his attendant over his shoulder, “Boy! Go to the market immediately and purchase an equal number of lengths of fine white cloth for the Sangha; I too would like to make an offering.”



When Magandiya’s uncle arrived at the royal court she was impressed by his dignified demeanour. He was tall and clean-shaven but possessed a wealth of prematurely grey hair that he wore in a neatly pinned-up topknot. He was never hurried in his gait and he seemed to process, rather than to walk – as if he were in the company of refined deities whom only he could see and converse with.

She had never met him before and she suspected that this was because the modest village where she grew up, Harittananda, was considerably beneath his station. He was from the ancient and prestigious city of Taxila, after all. When they were introduced he was extraordinarily polite and proper in the forms of address he used. He was schooled in exactly the right titles and pronouns to employ when a high-ranking brahmin met the chief consort of a kshatriyan king, and who was also a family member. She felt very flattered that, despite her being so young – only twenty Rains – he accorded her all the honours due to a senior noble.

“Please Uncle,” she motioned him to an adjoining couch, “make yourself comfortable, and please be so kind as to leave my titles aside. To others I might be a ‘Royal Highness’ but you are my mother’s elder brother so please just use my familiar name.”

“Are you *sure* Ma’am? He asked, as if she were unwittingly trespassing on some unseen protocol, “Wouldn’t that appear a little over-familiar, to allow that informality

to one so newly come to court?" His diction was precise and every word chosen carefully.

"Perhaps you're right..." she mused and was glad to see he had such prudence and circumspection, "let us just say that when we are in private counsel you must call me 'niece' or just 'Magandiya,' in other company you may use my titles as appropriate." He assented with a scarce-perceptible wag of his head.

"And your name Uncle, is very unusual, I've never heard of anyone called 'Slyma' before."

"Yes..." and here the brahmin priest allowed the faintest suggestion of a long-suffering resentment to tint his expression. "My blessed father, your maternal grandsire travelled much in his studies and developed an avid interest in languages and sacred texts. All of his many children have thus been graced with... *unique* names; that's how your mother got the name Mariam, from the rocky shores of a land-girt sea, far to the west of here.

'Slyma,' the name I have been graced with, is that of an eminent deity, an avatar of wisdom, worshipped by some of the clans of Suguda – to the north-west of Jambudipa, beyond Gandhara and Udiyana." It was plain that he had had to explain the origins of his name far more times than he would like to have been bothered with during his life.

As they talked Magandiya became more and more delighted with each of the details of Slyma's accomplishments, as they were coaxed forth from him; he was not only knowledgeable in the ancient scriptures (a hint of surprise in Magandiya that he could recite the entire Triple Veda was met with a scornful frown) but he also referred to the many years he had spent studying and mastering a number of spells and incantations – for healing, protection, and other 'useful' purposes.

On this last point he would not elaborate at first but Magandiya, being both young and beautiful, as well as having her own powers of persuasion and her royal status, managed to learn that her uncle could read other's thoughts, change their moods at will and could even render himself invisible with a Gandhara charm if need be. These were both useful to know about and, most importantly, would be precious abilities indeed to employ in the execution of her plans.

"Your Royal Highness... Magandiya, I have told you much of my life and its activities, of the knowledge I have gained, but one thing I do *not* know is why you have invited me here.

"I have a suspicion that, even though the current 'house brahmin,'" and he used the words with a distinctly pejorative tone, "is a few rungs below me on the ladder of what is possible in the accomplishments of the priesthood, it was not just to find a better chanter of the scriptures that you have called me hither." He raised a refined grey eyebrow and paused; the silence was both a suggestion and a polite termination of his

own willingness to talk much more about himself before he found out what the game was.

Magandiya had pondered many ways that she might involve or inveigle her Uncle Slyma's aid in carrying out her schemes. Now the fact that she was face to face with him, and their conversation was completely private, spiced further by the awareness that he could read the thoughts of others, persuaded her to be absolutely frank with him.

"We are pure-bred brahmins, Uncle. We are handsome, fair-skinned, knowledgeable, refined in manner and born of the mouth of Lord Brahma Himself. In truth we should be at the head of society, as I'm sure you would agree, since the ancient scriptures tell us this in so many ways. Nowadays, however, the rule of brute force dominates and the kshatriyas have usurped the leading role in society almost everywhere.

"I know," she raised a hand as if to still a comment about to emerge from him, "I am now the consort of a head-anointed, warrior-noble king, and our children will be velamikas, but that changes nothing with respect to the purity of my birth. As again, I'm sure you would agree."

Slyma the brahmin indicated his allowing of this truth, or at least that he heard Magandiya's assertion, by the slightest inclination of his head. She paused, as if waiting for more confirmation. Eventually Slyma said, "Indeed, this is so."

"I have risen to the status of a Chief Consort but my grievances are still many – and not just through my own prideful ambition. Firstly, even if the fickle kshatriyas are nominally at the head of society it would make a great difference if such a king had a pure brahmin queen at his side – rather than some orphan girl who, it is rumoured, began her life as a vaisha, some shop-keeper's daughter, before she was adopted by Lord Ghosaka.

"Secondly, my husband's spiritual tastes are as changeable as a dancer's choice of make-up. He's like a fretful jewelry-lover shopping in the market who can't decide which bargain he wants to go for. One moment he sees the Sakyan monk Gotama for the inflated charlatan that he is, the next moment he's groveling at his feet and has forgotten the sanctity of his ancient traditions.

"That monk is a caste-breaker and a heretic; he should be banished from this nation and his poisonous views should be banned from all promulgation. He preaches against brahmins and welcomes wretches from every caste into his coterie of devotees – even candalas and matangas! And he a kshatriya by birth – it's a scandal and an affront to all that's holy and pure in this world." She was fired with an intense vehemence – her eyes blazed and her breath came in short uneven bursts.

Slyma followed her words with a cool receptivity – not caught into her fury but with a keen regard nonetheless:– Where was she going to go with all of this?

“What I see is that, if Samavati is removed from the picture, many objectives can be achieved. Once she has gone I would naturally rise to the station of Chief Queen. Thus a true brahmin would be in the highest position of power in Vamsa and thereby able to enact many reforms and laws that would help to stabilize the nation.

“When I am the one Queen, I will be able to guide my husband’s restless sense of spiritual allegiance to where it properly belongs – with the Triple Veda and the ancient holy rituals that have come down from the earliest of days.

“Further, I will then be able to see that the Sakyan and his crew of sponging freeloaders are disgraced and sent packing from the land between the rivers. Thus a brahmin ascendancy will be promoted on three fronts.

“My question to you, Uncle, now that you have heard my thoughts, is – will you help me? For this is the sole reason I have invited you to come,” she stilled her voice and folded her hands in her lap, patiently awaiting his reply.

“What you propose, Niece, is very close to sedition or, more accurately, treason; therefore these are dangerous ideas. I do not say that I reject them out of hand,” here he raised his palm towards Magandiya, by way of reassurance, “but one should be very cautious indeed before pursuing such options. It would also be of significance to consider what the outcome...” here he weighted the word deliberately, “what the *rewards* might be.” He voiced the last phrase with as much of an impersonal inflection as possible, nevertheless what Magandiya heard was the banter of the bargainer:– And what do *I* get out of it?

Pleased to see that her uncle had his hard-edged worldly side as well as an array of spiritual achievements, she said with an ingenuous smile, “The position of High Priest might well become open and, along with that, all sorts of other perks,” she flashed him a mischievous sidelong glance, “that one in such a position could naturally avail themselves of, as I’m sure you know.”

She then rose up from her seat and called the maids who had been banished behind the heavy doors of her chambers. She led her uncle out into the gardens, feeling proud to walk beside such a lofty and awesome presence. She showed him around some of the grounds, leading him to the area of her part of the palace where she had had rooms prepared for him as, for the time being, he was to fulfill the role of priest in her division of the court.

Magandiya rarely came this way and had forgotten that there was a back entrance that led through a small gate in the palace walls, with some steps leading down to the river. A group of dark washerwomen had large bundles of laundry on their heads and were angling across the small yard towards the gate. Magandiya was chatting animatedly with her uncle who was walking beside her and she failed to notice that the first of the washerwomen crossed her shadow. Slyma pulled instinctively away to his left, to avoid coming into the same defiling contact with the low-caste workers:

“Maybe in this benighted backwater,” he shuddered, “they even let candalas work in the palace.”

He was a little surprised that Magandiya was so heedless as to have not even noticed the encounter, but he decided to make nothing of it and to let the servant go unpunished. The opportunities that now presented themselves here were far too abundant and alluring to bother with such smears on ritual purity.



Krishna sat long into the evening, drinking in the company of his dear ethereal companions, rejoicing too in the happenstantial reappearance of the powers of vision he had thought he had long since lost. Nearly three years had passed since he had last met the kinnaris and it was at least two since he said goodbye to Queen Samuddaja – there was a lot to catch up on, on both sides.

“You’re so grown up,” remarked Ant who was the smallest of the three kinnari friends, “you’re at least a head and a half taller than I am now.”

“Do you mean I wasn’t grown up before?” Krishna joshed her, “was I *that* childish?”

“No, but now, well you’re...”

“Manly. You’ve grown tall and strong Krissshna – your mother would have been proud of you,” Samuddaja spoke warmly but then fell silent; after the hours of carefree chattering Krishna was surprised at the sudden hush around him.

“How is my mother, Your Majesty?” Krishna searched the inscrutable beauty of Samuddaja’s face and looked into her golden eyes with their slitted pupils. He had a sinking feeling he knew what he would soon find in there.

“Dear Krissshna, your mother, Savitri, has passed into other realms beyond my view. The naga-guardian of the River Carmanvati came to me and brought me the news, more than one of your sun-turnings ago. We knew not where to seek you, Krissshna for in your message to your mother you said naught of a destination. The river naga tried to bear her up, as we do, but – as he recalled the circumstance – she was tangled in her sarong-cloth and she made no effort to stay afloat.”

The silence prickled while feelings within Krishna’s breast battled with each other; he felt tears rising at the fact of this news – now much more real than his fevered hallucination in the ascetic grove – but he also recalled his resolve to leave all family attachments behind. He felt his friends’ eyes were on him although almost everyone, except the naga queen, was looking at the grass and the pebbles at their feet, or off at the distant temple shadows.

“Well, perhaps it’s for the best.”

He brusquely prodded the ground with a stick, repeating the hard-hearted words he'd used before to settle his turbulent doubts. His friends were taken aback by this brutal attitude of his but it was easy to put it down to the young man trying to tough it out in the face of tender and regretful feelings.

"How did you know what I put in the letter?" He asked, trying to steer the subject away from the sensitive regions it had burrowed into. The response he heard from the naga made it all the worse:

"The rukkha-deva Alambusssa discerned great sorrow in your mother so she entered the house to seek her and extend her love and compassion, for she knew you had set forth that very morn. She found Savitri with the palm-leaf letter. Since your mother was a poor reader she pronounced each word as she read it. Alambusssa did not mean to invade her privaccy but she could not help but hear."

Now the royal naga fixed him with an intense and serious stare, "Dear Krissshna, your words were far from kind." Her look both held him tenderly and challenged him simultaneously.

Desperate now for a change of subject, Krishna looked around at all of them and asked, "So, what are you all doing out here in the far reaches of Uttarakuru? You're a long way from your homes."

Everyone was relieved to get off the subject of Savitri's death so a cacophony of voices chirped up at once. There was collective repartee between Ant and Bee, Rhamba and Salassa over who was going to bring Krishna up to date and, as usual, the final choice was Maggot as she had the best memory for these things. When Bee turned to her and said, "Go on Maggot, you give him the details; only bear in mind that for your two or three sun-turnings, Krishna, we've only had a couple of moons of deva-time."

Everything then went quiet. Bee was surprised that Maggot didn't start in on the account immediately, as she usually would, and when she turned to look at her she found her friend gazing at Krishna as if she had been transfixed by some paralysing charm. "Oy! Miss Dozy Rose-apple, wake up! We need your reciting skills."

"Oh, sorry, what? So... what's happened?... let me see..." a small fraction of her mind had been listening after all, so she thought back to the last conversations they had had with the dark lad from Ujjeni.

It took a little time but she explained about the planning of the raid on Vepacitti's stronghold, and the group of deva-commandos who had gone: "This time Lord Indra elected to stay behind, along with his children, out of respect for the fact that the asura Vepacitti is also his Queen's father."

"I reckon it's also because of what a disaster it was last time, when he went off and left that airling Suvira as the guardian – that's when the Great Park was wrecked while his Royal and Celestial Highness was off playing hopscotch, count-the-pixie and hunt-the-coral-flower in the Nandana Grove with his fluff-headed asparas." Bee was clearly miffed at the prince's negligence and all the damage that had come from that.

“Hey – not all of us are so clueless as those feather-feet. True, the dovey-darlings of Nandana are a vapid flock of feather-heads but some of us have got more to us than a pearl-habit and an obsession with dance-steps – eh, brother?” As she said this, Rhamba was weaving an exotic pattern in the air with her sinuous pearl-threaded arms. The movement flowed and rippled as if her limbs were liquid light. Her fingers snapped and flickered in a succession of gestures, deliberately and hilariously belying the arch practicality she was proclaiming to be her chief characteristic. Her voluptuous, lissom form was now matched and mirrored in its motions by her brother Salassa at her side; lithe and burly, he also shimmered in a blur of precise and bejeweled actions, his limbs glinting and flashing in the light of the rising moon.

“If you two can possibly contain yourselves,” Maggot grumbled with mock-indignation, “I’ll get on with the story.”



The next day Ant, Bee and Samuddaja went off on a reconnaissance mission, leaving Krishna with Maggot and their two new companions, Rhamba and Salassa the asparas. Bee had been getting stronger and stronger signals that Minti and the other kinnaris were nearby. Their scents were ever thicker in the air and the magnetic pull of her sister in her blood was like a hunger. She also could now discern some kind of radical sickness, some deep injury that was carried with the other feelings. Her hunt became a race the more she kenned this – time, for some reason, was running out.

They were intent on following up the lead that the garuda had given them so they went to search for the Parvati Valley, a few leagues to the south and east of Kulluta. It was mid-afternoon when they returned to the temple and brought news of their findings to the others:

“It’s definitely the place,” Bee had a grim expression on her face but was charged up with excitement too – they had found what they were looking for after all this time. “The trail of the kidnapped kinnaris and that scent that’s always your favourite, but which has that weird tinge to it, it all gets more intense until you get...”

“... right close to the cave-mouth,” Ant chimed in, unable to keep quiet after the tension of the search, “there were two or three yakkhas stationed nearby and, there at the cave-mouth, just like Dhanañjana said, there’s a circle...”

“... of dead creatures – beetles and birds, lizards and geckos, mice and a snake or two...” Bee continued, “and strangest of all, even though Minti’s scent was strongest, the nearer to the cave we crept, there was no scent...”

“... or sound...”

“... that came from inside. It was like everything was muffled...”

“... like kapok in your ears.”

“We managed to sneak up quite close as the yakkhas were a bit of a dozy pair, but we didn’t want to chance it too much. Better to come back...

“... and see what we all thought was the best plan...” Ant hesitated.

“... of attack.” Bee finished it for her.

Needless to say, the discussion of what to do next ran on through the remains of the afternoon. The conversation was still going strong as the stones of the temple were tinted egg-golden by the sunset. By the time the moon rose at the second watch of the night – well after dark had claimed the valley and the sounds of night birds and big-eyed hunting creatures off in the far groves, were all around them – decisions had been reached.

Krishna told them all about the mangala and managed to convince them, including the skeptical Bee and the discerning, wise Samuddaja that it might be of great use in this escapade. If there was some kind of killing curse on the cave entrance, as there seemed to be, it was obvious to Krishna that his mangala could protect them:

“Look – I’m ready to try it, even if you’re not. And how else are any of you going to get inside if you don’t have any way of breaking the spell on the door?”

Both Rhamba and Salassa were gifted enchanters but they could not guarantee that they could get through the entrance. Rhamba was acquainted with the kind of magic in the mangala – she could feel it clearly as she held it – and she agreed that it might just work.

Krishna was not open to lending it to the others as he felt the moment had come to really test himself. This might have been a vanity on his part – eager for a share of the glory – but they all had to admit that he was being very brave. Maggot was so touched by his selfless courage, (and by his moonlit profile, if truth be told,) that she surprised herself by shedding a fragrant tear or two.

Once the plan had been finalized the naga queen spoke in a solemn, heartfelt voice: “Paduma – we will rescue your sister Himavanta-Komudi, and all those trapped with her. We must act soon, thus there is no time to call for aid from Lord Vessavana – he is still on the mission to Pubbvideha. On the morrow we will make our move.

“They shall be rescued or we shall die in the attempt – are we all agreed?”

The night rang with crickets and the living light of the moon and a million stars. Their agreement was voiced by the roaring silence.



Slyma the brahmin bowed to the elder Ananda with grace and the utmost sincerity. He had been coming to the regular teachings in Samavati’s chambers for several weeks and she had been duly impressed by his august demeanour, his respectful attitude towards the monks (much more polite than most brahmins) and by

his interesting questions. He often asked the elder about useful points of the day's instruction and did not just seek for an opening to air his own knowledge and wit.

One day, seemingly quite by chance, he got into conversation with Queen Samavati after the bhikkhus as well as the majority of the harem's community had all dispersed. They were discussing some knotty aspect of the teachings and, but for Khujjuttara, they were quite alone.

Samavati politely invited him to come and sit in the small garden room so they could continue their interesting conversation in comfort. It turned into a long and pleasant discussion and when Samavati turned to ask Khujjuttara about some aspect of the teaching, or to ask her to quote some particular verses, she marked well that the high brahmin priest paid equal attention to this dark-skinned slave:— He seemed much more liberal and open than most of his caste.

She wondered how it could be that he and Magandiya were from the same family — she saw very little of the Chief Consort but the stories of her sharp tongue and her hatred of the Buddha were common stock of the gossip-mill, which not even Samavati could possibly avoid all of. Magandiya was as obsessively purist as a brahmin could be, they said, but her uncle seemed to be of quite a different character. Even so, Samavati did note that the priest Slyma had politely declined offerings of refreshment served by Khujjuttara:— Well, he's doing his best but he probably has some immovable caste precepts that he has sworn to uphold.

Eventually Samavati felt so at ease with the brahmin Slyma that she commented to him on the contrast between uncle and niece; she also confided, to her surprise, something of the concern she felt about Magandiya's ill will towards the Buddha.

"Oh I can understand that she, like many other brahmins and some kshatriyas, does not like the way the Master speaks out about the negative aspects of the caste system. That's natural enough, given her upbringing and education, but that kind of attitude is far from universal — as you yourself, reverend sir, so ably demonstrate. I can't understand why she has such a grudge against such a wise and obviously holy man — it seems far beyond a simple distaste for another's teachings."

Slyma seemed to weigh up the Queen's words carefully before he spoke. Khujjuttara drew a little closer, not wanting to miss any nuance of what he might say.

"Your Serene Highness, if I am to answer your question truthfully and accurately I must betray something of a family confidence passed on to me by my sister. I am not sure if my niece is even aware that I know of these events." He spoke cryptically, but with a calm and friendly air. He paused before he continued.

"I can sense your own purity of heart and I trust that this account will not leave this room," at this he glanced pointedly at Khujjuttara, "for I suspect that Lady Magandiya would be sorely vexed to know that this tale has been told. Nevertheless I feel I should pass this information on to you for it will help you to make more sense of my niece's troubled heart and why she bears such spite toward the Blessed One."

“You have my word that not a syllable will be repeated – either by myself or by my trusted friend. Still, I would ask you to be sure that you are pleased to help me in this way for I would not wish you to be breaking any promises.”

“No, Your Serene Highness, no promises, just a discrete forbearance and a restraint of that kind of tale-bearing habit which is the bane of human society.”

Then he began his story:

“My niece is an only child. She grew up near here, in a village called Harittananda. I myself have lived my entire life in Taxila and its environs so I never met the child until I came here to Kosambi. I have many brothers and sisters by my father’s various wives so I am not well-acquainted with all of them.

“You have seen that she is indeed a beautiful girl. Well, as an only child of their middle-age my sister and her husband doted on her unstintingly. Within their humble village she grew up with the knowledge that she was of a unique and supreme loveliness – at least that was the message imparted to her unceasingly by her adoring mother and father.

“Her father was the Headman and the village is a community of goldsmiths so, accordingly, she grew up surrounded by and adorned with substantial riches. As she came to marriageable age, about five Rains ago, suitors began to arrive – word having spread far and wide of her legendary beauty.

“Brahmins and kshatriyas from Magadha, Kosala, Vamsa, Uttarakuru, Avanti, Sakya, the Vajjian Confederacy – from all across this continent of Jambudipa visitors came – each asked for her hand but her father refused them, each and every one, saying, “You are not good enough for my daughter.” That her father would dismiss kings and handsome princes, brahmins of unsullied lineage and ancient noble families, well, you can imagine how special the girl felt:– A slender nymph of fifteen Rains whom all the world desires. You can see how a person might easily lose their way amidst that degree of admiration.

“One day, shortly after she had completed sixteen Rains, the Buddha happened to pass through the village on his wanderings. Now, you are well aware Ma’am, that some holy men marry and some do not – brahmins often have families whereas the wanderers, samanas like the Master, are ones who live a celibate life, they have no marriage partners and they make no liaisons of that kind whatsoever.

“Now my brother-in-law has many fine qualities but religious sensibility is not one of them. He saw the Buddha that morning and was so stricken by his majestic form – so handsome, so much taller than an average man, his eyes the colour of lapis lazuli, his golden skin, his aura of peace and divine power – that he decided then and there: “There is no man in the world comparable to this person. This is the only man suitable for my daughter – he’s the one!”

“Sonakara, for such is my brother-in-law’s name, spoke to the Master, saying; ‘Please Venerable Sir, stop here for a moment. I have a proposition for you but I must go and consult with my wife first. Please be so kind as to wait here – I’ll be right back.’”

“He rushed into their house and spoke to my sister Mariam, saying, ‘I have found a match, a fine husband for our precious daughter!’ For he did not realize that the Buddha was one who had abandoned family life and who delighted in the independence of the wanderer.

“He told Magandiya to stay in doors for the time being, while he and my sister discussed matters with this visitor. When they went outside the Buddha was no longer standing in the exact spot where Sonakara had left him. For a moment he panicked and said, ‘But I *told* him, ‘Please stop here for a moment...’ Now, where’s he gone!? Look, here are the footprints he left.’ Now, my sister is an intelligent and well-educated person. When she took a close look at the footprints that the stranger had left she saw at once that they bore the marks of a fully round wheel with many spokes. She knew that this was a sure sign of a person who has left all sensual desires far behind; such a one would have no interest in marriage whatsoever, no matter how attractive the proposed partner might be.

“She said: ‘Husband – this is no footprint of a person interested in a marriage – even heavenly nymphs or the beguiling daughters of Mara could not entice a flicker of attraction in such a one. It would be as if one were to offer meat to a horse; it would refuse it simply out of its own innermost nature. So, if we offer our beloved daughter to this man, he will necessarily refuse her. We should not do this.’”

“‘Hush, woman! You’re always seeing a crocodile swimming in the water tank and thieves hiding under the bed, you don’t know what you are talking about!’ Thus did Sonakara silence my sister’s wisdom and pursue his own path instead. He then took Mariam over to meet the Blessed One who, they realized, had simply moved into the shade of a tree to get out of the bright sun. He said, ‘Monk, I would like to give you our daughter to be your wife. She is known by all to be the most beautiful girl in Jambudipa and I have turned away kings and princes, brahmins and kshatriyas in dozens before today, as all were not good enough for her but, good and venerable sir, we see that you *are* good enough – indeed we see you are the very best of men. Please be so kind as to take Magandiya as your wife.’”

“Brahmin, I have nothing against your daughter but, as I have long since given up the family life, I have no interest in engaging in marriage or any such liaison. In fact I live according to a monastic Rule which forbids a monk from even so much as touching a woman, even without a lustful mind, even just with their foot, or even with a stick. Similarly, the nuns who follow this same Rule refrain from physical contact with all men. If we refrain from even so much as a slight physical contact, how much more should we refrain from such a thing as marriage?”

“No, my friends, you honour me to think of me as the best of men, but that excellence in this case includes abstention from the married state. I hope your daughter is able to find a suitable husband. May you be well, friends. Now, I will take my leave.” This is what the Master said.

“My brother-in-law, shamed and angry, embarrassed that his wife had been right and he had been wrong, stormed into the house saying, ‘That arrogant excuse of a monk said that you are not good enough for him; that he wouldn’t wipe his dirty feet on you; that he wouldn’t even hit you with a stick.’

“As you would imagine, my niece, by now so ready to be given to this man – the only one worthy of her exalted beauty – felt scorned, rejected and insulted by the words she heard reported, although the Master had not said those things and had intended no slight whatsoever. For is it not the case that feelings are often hurt like this, when sharp words enter our ears and puncture our inflated pride?

“When her mother tried to tell her the true nature of the dialogue, Magandiya would not believe it, for she adored and was adored by her father above all others, and trusted his every word. Thus it was that she resolved: ‘I possess birth, lineage, social position, wealth and the charm of youth; I shall find a husband who is my equal and then just you wait and see what becomes of that monk Gotama.’ And thus it was that she conceived a hatred towards the Master.”

CHAPTER 22

THE NOXIOUS CAVE



oised as if at the edge of a vast lake under an open sky, Samavati guided her mind to a quality of great stillness and spaciousness. She focused her attention on the gentle, natural movement of her breath and felt her whole being grow calm and filled with brightness.

With her that evening in the airy upper shrine-room were Khujjuttara, Lady Chandra, three of the other concubines and Upaseni, Chandra's devoted maid. This group, with a few others, often gathered in the quiet of the palace after the bustle of the day was done. On the occasions that the elder Ananda had come to offer teachings, there would be an intensified zeal among the circle.

Samavati deliberately cast her mind back to the monk's visit and the insightful dialogue that had followed on from the talk. As was often the case Gavinna, the blind crone with the radiant mind, had asked some astute and penetrating questions, and even the brahmin Slyma had stilled his tongue as the wise old lady and the eloquent monk had gone back and forth discussing the issue at hand and comparing their understanding and experience. It had been delightful and illuminating for all present.

She reviewed the knotty points of the teaching over again until she felt she thoroughly understood it. She then let her mind rest on the thought of Gavinna herself and all that she had heard of that sagacious woman's life. A warm feeling of pure love and admiration welled up in her heart at this; she nursed it as she would the tiny flame of a freshly-lit fire.

Samavati recalled the stories she had managed to draw forth from her aged friend about the unfolding of her life and, with each chapter of the tale, the flame of her thoughts of loving-kindness grew steadily brighter:

"When I was a little girl my parents gave me the name Gwhynneth." As she pronounced the syllables her voice reverted to a sweet and softly-modulated accent. The sounds had a strange and songlike lilt that Samavati had never heard before. The

ancient carried on, "For tongues outside my land it is a name hard to speak, thus it has been twisted this way and that in all the places I have dwelled. Here, as you see, it has become 'Gavinna' which belongs to nobody's language – and thus to everyone's.

"In the land of my fathers, once a child has survived six or seven winters, it is our custom to mark our limbs with charms: speed and strength for the legs," here she indicated the blue ink tracteries on her shins, "and nimbleness for the arms and hands. The eyes are marked to preserve keen sight but as you can see," she blinked her lids over the pale opalescent spheres, "both the ink and the spell have faded." She stroked the marks at her temples.

"When I was but eight summers old, Phœnician raiders came to our coast, driving their boats up the village beach. They were a dark and strong people and, despite the speed the charms lent to my skinny legs, together with the bravest efforts of my father and my mother, and my courageous elder brother, all this was not enough to prevent my capture, along with several others. For the main prize they sought among us was not gold or jewels – which we had little enough of – rather it was the fair skin and bonny locks with which most of us in the village had been dressed by Mother Nature. My hair was thick and red-gold, my skin as fair as a cornfield in late summer, so I and a dozen of my tribe were loaded aboard and taken off as prizes.

"At the slave auctions of Athens, in Hellas, the price offered was not high enough – they had many fair-haired folk in that land already – so my captors took us to Byzantium and I was sold in the market there.

"I grew into a woman beside the inland sea in the court of a prince of Parthia. When his power waned, and he was forced to pay tribute to his conqueror, I was given to an aged warlord in Maracanda.

"Before I had reached a full eighteen summers that decrepit sovereign took me to Taxila for he sought, among the magicians and the prophets, a cure for his old age and his waning powers. They gave him a remedy – a tonic that thrilled and thrummed in his innermost heart, to his highest satisfaction – but, to his great grief, the price he had to pay was his precious girl with 'her eyes as green as sea-flowers and her hair the colour of beech-leaves on an autumn morn,' as we would say.

"By this time I was wondering if my journey would ever cease or if I would end my days at the world's edge with the enfolding serpent – the Ouroboros – that I believed in those days wrapped this great earth within its circle.

"Instead, my new owner in Taxila discerned that I, like many folk of my land, was not only gifted with hair of flame but also with great powers of inner vision. He schooled me and took me on as something of a prentice – despite my girlhood and my exotic colour – *and* the fact that I was far from brahminhood.

"He was keen to keep me close so, when he was compelled to journey across the Land of the Five Rivers into the heart of the Middle Country, necessarily I was at his

side. We reached the Yamuna River and sailed south, intending at some point to break off and head to Saketa in the east, for this was where he had been summoned to.

“Now, the brahmin mages of Taxila have wonderful powers but sometimes these arts avail them naught. While the pilot dozed, our decrepit vessel struck some rocks, was fatally holed and then quickly pulled to pieces by the current. I clung to a spar and rode the waters until I was washed up – a bedraggled stray – here on the shoals below the castle of Kosambi.

“This far to the east white meat is rare fare indeed; so those who found this unconscious foreigner on the riverbank realized that they might easily win favour with the King by offering His Majesty this unique and curious prize. Thus I was – once dried out and dressed up with some splendour – presented to him at court. For myself, I was merely glad to be alive.

“I was but twenty summers old then and he a man of sixty; King Udena, his grandson, was not yet born. He was pleased to take into his harem this foreign wench with the tattooed and freckled skin, and I was thus – although I knew it not at the time – at the end of my long journey. In *this* world, that is, if you know what I mean.”

Samavati remembered the child-like wonder she had felt when she asked Gavinna how far away the land of her fathers, as she called it, actually was.

“If a rider on a tireless horse headed west from here – and had no mighty rivers to swim, no mountain passes to freeze on, no deserts to be baked by, no seas to sail – they might just reach the land of Cymru if they rode without pause for a hundred days. Ordinary travelers pass more than a year in making that journey, for it is fully a thousand leagues towards the setting sun from Jambudipa.”

Samavati let these thoughts of her dear friend and mentor subside but she kept the flame of loving-kindness bright. It now filled her heart, her whole being, and she radiated it out around her, to all those in the shrine room that balmy evening. Once she had filled the room and all its occupants with this loving light of friendliness, she willed it out in ever-widening circles: to the entire palace – to the King, to Magandiya, to Vasuladatta, the good people of the staff and court, and every creature that dwelled within the buildings and in the gardens – and thence to all of Kosambi. From there she spread it onwards and ever outwards, out over Vamsa, Vedisa, Avanti, Magadha and Kosala, across the mountains, deserts and lush valleys of all of Jambudipa, heading north, south, east and west simultaneously until, at last, her loving heart encompassed and embraced the entire world.



“Her Serene Highness is a fool, as you so rightly surmise,” Slyma the brahmin spoke somewhat guardedly, although his words dripped with an acidic contempt. “Her

mind is largely vacant, apart from some affectionate sentiments, nevertheless she carries concerns about the *perceived*," he leant upon the word ever-so-slightly, "negative effect you have had upon the King and for the antipathy that you bear for the Sakyan monk. She cherishes no ill-will toward or fear of you – you will be glad to hear – and she has no inkling of your intentions regarding her.

"I have to say," he raised a single grey eyebrow to lend emphasis to his scorn, "it is surprising just how credulous and void of common sense, and of reasonable suspicions, an apparently intelligent person can be."

"We are of one mind, Uncle." Magandiya's smile carried all the relish of viper that has a tasty mouse locked between its jaws.

"Indeed we are," the brahmin replied. "Vamsa needs to be scourged of the infection of the Sakyan heretic and, I agree, the best way to effect the leeching of that contagion from the system is for you, dear Niece to assume the role of Queen here. To my mind it is perfectly blameless, indeed it is most meritorious, for a doctor to administer appropriate *medicine*," again he squeezed the word a little to release some of the venom it contained, "to combat such infections.

"In fact I am doubly interested in helping to remove the current occupant of the queen's throne since – as you again so rightly noted – it seems that she is not even a kshatriya by birth. I have made extensive enquiries and have found she was actually born a vaisha and is a warrior-noble merely by the process of *adoption*," he released the word as if it were a fleck of some vile substance that had accidentally landed on his lip. "In more... sophisticated, developed countries no kshatriya would accept such persons as caste members; it would be unthinkable, as unthinkable as it is for any brahmin family to adopt anyone not of the blood into their home.

"I was not born in this country of Vamsa but I am happy to serve it, and your good self, by helping to expunge this double disgrace; the shopkeeper's daughter must be removed from the throne and the Sakyan vagabond, and the influence of all his tribe, must be banished from this land."

"You have given voice to my heart, Uncle. I could not have expressed the situation better in any way. These issues are a scandal, a travesty of justice. I agree wholeheartedly with everything you said. The question that now faces us is: how exactly to combat the 'infection'? I have tried various forms of 'medicine' already but all my efforts have borne no fruit." Magandiya seemed tense with excitement.

"Of one thing I am absolutely sure," he spoke calmly, as if to soothe his conspiratrix, "she must die. You're not squeamish about such things, are you?" The question was pointedly rhetorical; the look he gave her said she could only agree.

"Given that His Majesty is so mutable in his affections, this undertaking can only proceed to a successful conclusion if the shopgirl can never be restored to the throne. The only way to ensure that end is if she has demised. Am I correct?" Again, the question was designed not to need an answer.

“What we need to arrange, dear Niece, is a comprehensive and thoroughly tragic accident.”



The Parvati Valley wove eastwards in sinuous folds of steep green and dark-grey rocky outcrops. The small group hugged the valley floor hovering just above the rushing waters of the river. Samuddaja led the way although she was travelling under the surface of the torrent; now she was in her element.

Krishna was having his first experience of flying – held on one side by Maggot and on the other by Salassa – this being made a little easier by the weightlessness charm that the aspara was working on him. It made him feel somewhat queasy but the sheer excitement of the new sensation overshadowed that completely. It was still before dawn, and thus unlikely that they would meet any human bystanders along this uninhabited stretch of terrain, so they had not felt the need to work an invisibility spell as well. There were no villages in this valley until it flattened out a little and the gentler slopes of its eastern end were reached.

The other kinnaris kept low to the ground and Rhamba cast various quietening and masking spells to hide their sounds and scents. Despite these precautions they met precisely no one other than a nocturnal water-rat or two and an owl returning to its roost after a night of hunting.

As they drew closer to the cave, they slowed their progress and redoubled their caution. Samuddaja assumed her humanesque form, dressed now in green and golden armour that shimmered with lights of silver. Her battle-cloak was gathered tight around her shoulders.

She motioned for Krishna and the kinnaris to stay still while she and Rhamba, who had the best hearing, inched forward to bring the cave-mouth into view. All was quiet and still. They watched as the dawn slid over the valley withdrawing the curtain of greys and shadows, inviting colour back into the world.

They were on the point of rejoining the others when, up above them, in the open area before the cave-mouth there was a sudden burst of activity. The naga queen’s sharp eyes and the keen ears of Rhamba tried to pick up every detail. They melded with the shadows in the valley wall, courtesy of an enmurkenment charm that Rhamba was working on the two of them.

Many voices talked at once. They could see seven or eight yakkhas and at least two nagas in the gang. There were also a couple of kumbhandas, pot-bellied gnomes who were notoriously coarse and violent.

There seemed to be a general gearing up and a discussion going on. The aspara caught the words “meeting up with the royals” and “collect more product,” then, in a

flurry of urgent movement the kumbhandas were hoisted onto the backs of two of the yakkhas and the whole crew rose skyward – heading to the south and east.

“My dear asspara,” Samuddaja whispered, “I do believe we are being blessed by good fortune.”

They motioned the kinnaris, Krishna and Salassa forward, and the troop clambered or flew up to the cave’s entrance. Just as Bee and Ant had described before, there was a neat semi-circle of dead creatures around the opening in the hillside.

“I can’t hear or feel anything inside,” Bee complained again.

“I don’t think any of us can,” Salassa offered, “not only is there an immovable killing spell on this doorway, they’ve got a whole slew of screening charms in place too; no smell, no sound, dingy light inside – they really don’t want anyone to know what’s going on in there.”

“Krishna stepped forward, saying, “Now, let’s see if this mangala really works...”

“Wait!” Samuddaja halted him with a raised hand. “Thiss isss no small thing Krissshna – are you ready for thiss to be your final act!?”

“That’s right,” chimed in Bee, “help him relax,” then, realizing that the wisecrack was probably highly out of place, she blushed, but in fact both Krishna and the naga chuckled.

“My apologiess if I wass a little over-dramatic, my friends. But we should be cautiousss. Paduma, Jambu, Kanavera, have you got the cintamanis that Lord Vessavana gave you?”

The three kinnaris nodded.

“Assparass – are all your spells in place?”

They too nodded in assent.

The naga queen then drew a long, slender, wavy-edged kris from the sheath that hung down her back beneath her cloak; green lights flickered to and fro along its length as if miniature dragons cavorted on the ripples. When he looked closer Krishna saw that his eyes were not playing tricks, translucent dragonlets of malachite and emerald, jade and verdigris indeed darted along the length of the naked blade.

“I hate to think what’d happen,” he pondered, “if you got skewered with that.”

He looked around at the faces of all assembled there. The moment had come.

When he approached the invisible film across the entrance, he held tight to the mangala with his left hand and reached forward with his right. Gingerly he inched closer and closer until he realized he was across the line that marked the boundary of the death-trap. This was a bit of an anticlimax as he had imagined at least a *fizz* or a *pop* as the spell was punctured – he didn’t even feel much of a tingle. What he didn’t realize was that, far from the mangala rendering him totally immune to *all* spells, had there been a vomit- or diarrhoea-inducing spell, or a catatonia charm in place, he would have regurgitated heroically, had the worst runs of his life or he would have fallen over

utterly unconscious for who knows how long a time. It was only death that the mangala prevented.

“It’s safe!” He called back through the entrance. “I’m through and still alive!” The air was rank and foetid with a thick festering smell, like the rotting flowers of some nauseating swamp. From inside the cave he saw Samuddaja raise her finger to her lips to hush him. He clamped his hand to his mouth instinctively, recollecting that they didn’t know for sure that they were alone there:– Perhaps the gang had left some kind of guard behind as well.



Once he had rejoined them outside the cave-mouth, Rhamba instructed them all to draw close and to hold on to Krishna. The power of the mangala would easily protect them as long as they kept a firm grip on him when he led them through the killing veil. Again he clutched the mangala in his left hand while Maggot took a firm hold of his right; the others gripped his arms and his shoulders.

At the instant they were through the kinnaris and the asparas started gagging and coughing, “Agh! Why didn’t you tell us there was this ghastly stench in here?” The three kinnaris seemed to be particularly stricken and Bee couldn’t stop herself from puking.

“She’s here!” Bee struggled to compose herself as she wiped the floral spill from around her mouth. “Down the tunnel, this way!” She barked in a hoarse whisper.

There was a spacious chamber around them at the cave entrance while off to the right was a small opening in the rock. There was a larger track that opened up in front of them but it was this side-passage that Bee was now indicating. The reek of floral death, of festering lilies and acrid evil, grew ever thicker as they raced along the path.

It soon opened out into another large chamber. None of them knew quite what to make of the sight and smells they met there. It was some kind of vast, demonic, apothecary’s kitchen.

All along two walls were cages containing kinnaris of every size and colour, of all ages. They looked sick and weak and many were unconscious. There were kinnaris strapped to tables with stomach-churning arrangements of tubing, made from some foul animal intestines or blood vessels, protruding from their necks and arms and legs. Huge smoky bottles stood beside them where liquid could be seen to be accumulating.

Great pots of over-ripe pungent flower essences were lined along a bench, with brass alembics and coils of copper gurgling and bubbling noisily.

In one corner, cast into a gory heap, was a nightmare of spent corpses – kinnari bodies that were almost as translucent as their garments had been. Their blood-essence had somehow been sucked out, leaving only the spent husks of their lost lives.

The rancid flower stench bit into their nostrils while the moans of the sick and weakened pierced them to the core.

"Minti! Minti – you're still alive, I'm here! It's Bee – Minti! Wake up!" Bee was leaning over one of the tables and desperately trying to figure out how to disconnect the tubes and pumps and spring-driven wheels that were draining the blood, the life-essence out of her young sister.

"Here, let me." Salassa stepped up and moved his hands in some swift passes over the prone, figure with her ice-white hair laid out on the slab. The tubes slid from the side of her neck and the gurgling siphons grew still.

"We must act fassst," Samuddaja said abruptly, "a guard is on hisss way."

They flung open all the cages and helped the sickly and weak to their feet. All the others on the drawing tables were released and what minor wounds they had from the gory drains and catheters were closed by the healing charms of the asparas.

Krishna, Maggot and Ant gathered the dead – they weighed so much less than when alive that the three of them were easily able to lift a couple of bodies each. There was no question that they might be left behind in this nest of sickness.

Samuddaja led the way, with two kinnaris supported by one arm and her kris in the other. The asparas brought all the ones who could walk. Bee carried Minti in her arms.

"Quick, quick – some yakkha guardian hasss been left here, he'sss only moments away – get everyone to the entrancce." Samuddaja was more urgent than ever.

They reached the first hall and ushered the two dozen kinnaris who were mobile through the cave mouth into the open air. Bee was trailing behind with Minti while Krishna made sure that Ant and Maggot got safely out, with their burden of expired forms like fallen petals. Samuddaja stood by the entrance, blade at the ready.

"Oy! What do you think you lot are up to!" A gigantic yakkha blasted into the chamber. He was half as big again as Gumbiya and Krishna had never seen anything like him before. He was covered in gnarly spines like a pineapple from the hells and carried a spiked club in his armoured hand.

"Look after Minti," Bee placed her unconscious sister in the naga queen's arms, "We can take care of this fellow."

Before she had time to object, Samuddaja saw Krishna step forward, brashly and rashly, walking straight into the path of the yakkha's club. The giant oaf swung his weapon in a broad arc, aiming to crush the tiny figures before him. Bee as well as Rhamba and Salassa were in range of his sweeping blow.

"Yaaaaaiiy!" The great stroke, to the amazement of all but Krishna, had not only failed to crush him and all the others, but had rebounded off him causing the same kind of nerve-shock to the yakkha's arm that he had suffered when he had tested the mangala on Dusaka.

"Stings a bit, doesn't it?!"

He dropped the club which had caused him such pain and the yakkha was now gormlessly looking at his hand trying to comprehend what had happened.

“Get out and help with the injured, Krishna – we’ll handle this fellow.” Salassa and Rhamba moved in front of the slack-witted guard.

He looked at Samuddaja and she, feeling confident that the charms of the divine dancers would be more than enough to divert the intellectually challenged yakkha, nodded and said, “Let usss look after the otherssss.”

Rhamba and Salassa began to weave back and forth in front of the confused, gargantuan being, undulating their arms and whirling their fingers, stamping and shuffling their feet in an bewildering dazzle of movement. Bee rose up to help add to the confusion as, above all else, she was determined that this lout would have no chance to reclaim her sister.

She flitted around his wart-studded head, pulling his bristles and poking him in the eyes. The songs and rhythms being conjured by the asparas were driving the clod-headed creature to distraction as he swatted and flailed at Bee, trying to knock her away like a fly that plagued and pursued him with a ruthless will.

“Giddahda here!!!” He smashed himself sharply on the head, then across his left eye. “Owww.”

“Hey, this way dummy!” Bee flitted off down the main tunnel trying to draw him away from all the others and to keep him from the recollection that he was supposed to be there guarding something, as well as the realization that that something had just left en masse.

Rhamba and Salassa followed after as the great clodpoll lumbered angrily after the hovering, darting, magenta-clad kinnari, who coaxed him on like some kind of tantalizing, tormenting and elusive dragonfly.



The freed kinnaris gasped the fresh, clean air of the valley and blinked at the morning light. Minti was still in the arms of Samuddaja but she was starting to come round.

None of them had the faintest idea what had been going on there and what the purpose of that demonic bloodletting kitchen had been. Even less were they sure when the other members of the gang who had set up this hellish prison would return, or if the guardian yakkha would suddenly reappear and attack them all. There was simply a feverish urgency to escape the area as soon as possible. They knew they had to go – and now!

“Kinnariss who can fly, go with Jambu and Kanavera,” she indicated Maggot and Ant, “the ressst I will take care of.” She stood Minti up on her feet; the white-

headed youngster smiled wanly, looking around at the other kinnaris vacantly and greeting the friends she recognized. "Krissshna, the asparasss will bear you home."

Samuddaja addressed the sickly and injured kinnaris: "We nagasss never usually carry any beings other than our young but thiss occasssion iss exceptional – the foul creatures who are responsible for thiss have really got under my scalesss." The slits of her pupils flared with amber fire.

"Pleasse stand back, I'm going to ssspread." At this she expanded her form to its full naga-serpent proportions. Her humanesque appearance vanished and before them was a giant horned cobra a full bow-shot long. She raised her head and unfolded its ruby-jewelled hood out wide. Then, stooping down with intense care, she surrounded the two dozen injured kinnaris, overarching them, then wrapped her hood all around them. She thus formed a perfect green- and golden-scaled carrying chamber for the wounded while Ant and Maggot passed in the half-dozen bodies of the dead. When all were safely aboard, the naga queen rose on the air and flew westwards back home to the temple.



"I really must apologize to you, Ma'am if my niece makes life difficult for you. I believe it's because she feels that you keep drawing the King closer to the Master. If she can draw His Majesty away from *you* she can similarly draw him away from the object of her vengeful feelings, the Buddha. It really is a most unfortunate situation. Nonetheless, I will continue to do my best to ameliorate whatever animosity there may be. Above all else, my niece needs to learn a measure of mudita – joy at the good fortune of others – and how to curb her critical and ambitious nature." Slyma folded his hands in his lap and assumed a convincing expression of concerned goodwill.

"You are very thoughtful and I appreciate all your assistance in this, brahmin. You have many skills and virtues and one of them is your ability to assess circumstances accurately. It is a notable and very precious talent. Your account of Lady Magandiya's regrettable misunderstanding gave me cause for great reflection. It was a helpful source of insight and, perhaps one day, it will be a source of harmony and understanding in this palace."

"Speaking of talents, Your Serene Highness, during the course of my education I have acquired extensive knowledge of temple architecture and maintenance. Over my many visits to your seraglio, to listen to the teachings of the elder Ananda, my attention has occasionally been distracted from the Dhamma of liberation and has been drawn instead to the dhamma of timber preservation." Slyma smiled with an obsequious smirk, indicating to the Queen how humorous it was that such a lofty contemplator of spiritual realities as he should have been distracted by such mundane concerns.

“The pillars that support your chambers are thoroughly dried out and are beginning to crack and split, as you have probably seen for yourself, Ma’am. If they are not attended to they will degenerate and attract termites, thus soon rendering that fine structure uninhabitable.

“If it would please Your Serene Highness, I could arrange for all those pillars to be treated and thus ensure the preservation and long life of the building.”

“That’s very thoughtful and kind of you, as usual, Slyma. I will be indebted to you if you could see that that was carried out. What kind of preservative or treatment should I provide for them?” she enquired.

“No need to worry about that Ma’am I will be happy to supply the necessary,” the brahmin put on a slightly affronted ‘how-could-you-even-think-your-humble-servant-would-not-offer-to-pay-for-this’ look.

“But I insist, brahmin – this repair should in no way impinge upon your resources. I am certain the royal treasury possesses far more copious wealth than you have accessible to you. Please tell me exactly what we will need.” Samavati was sincere and intent on taking care of this expense.

“At first glance, Ma’am, I’d estimate that there are about 150 wooden pillars in this whole building. That would necessitate about twenty large jars of sandal-wood oil – that will be the very best for the task we have in mind – it will be expensive, but it is the most excellent of preservatives and it yields an exquisite perfume.”



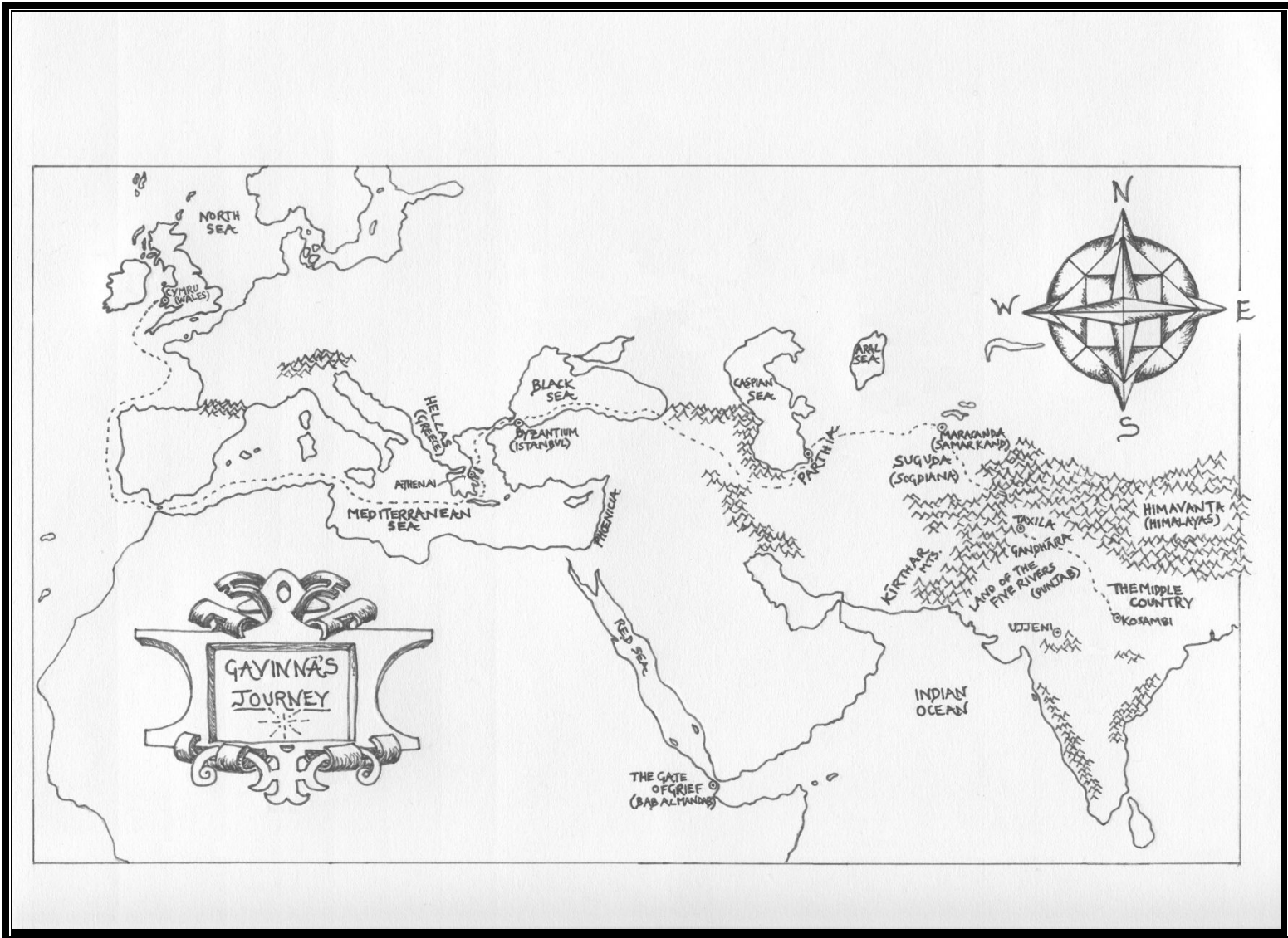
Rhamba and Salassa came rocketing out of the entrance and were surprised that the yakkha didn’t chase after them.

“We lost him. You waiting for us Krishna? Quick, let’s go before Captain Numbskull figures out which way we all went.” They spun a weightlessness charm and wrapped a distraction field around Krishna as by now it was broad day. “It doesn’t really make you invisible as such,” Salassa explained, “the Gandhara charm works by making the people who see you not register what they are seeing.” He was chattering away somewhat needlessly, in part to dispell the tension of the danger they were all in, as they swept along the valley floor trying to keep in the shadiest places possible.

They were swift in their flight and, when they finally arrived, glad indeed to have reached the temple without pursuit. Just as they were entering their encampment Krishna asked, “So, why isn’t Bee with you? Did she get out some other way?”

The two asparas nearly dropped him as they came in to land. “Oh no... We thought she was with the others.”





CHAPTER 23

THE PERFUMED HOLOCAUST



irtually every day Khujjutara voiced her feelings to Samavati about the brahmin Slyma. “He’s weasel-sly and slipperier than a barrel full of greased eels, Miss Amba, I can feel it in my water, in my bones. You shouldn’t trust him so much.” The queen’s faithful friend was deeply concerned. “And I’m leery of what he’s up to with our place; have you seen all those little marks he’s been making on the doors and windows Miss? All the pillars too... they’re like little yantras in some old language, funny little patterns of letters and lines. If he was really just looking out for cracks and termites would he need to put much more than an ‘x’ to say ‘do this one’ like most builders would? He’s putting spells on this building Miss, and I don’t like it.” Her brow was more furrowed than Samavati had ever seen it.

“Honestly, Khujj, you fret too much. He seems a genuinely thoughtful and caring man – much more so than many of the priestly caste that we’ve met before – he even wanted to pay for the repairs. Besides, he really knows what he’s doing.” She had taken Khujjutara’s hand to reassure her but to her astonishment her friend frowned and pulled away, refusing the gesture.

“You put far too much faith in authority, Miss, if you don’t mind me saying so; when elders or higher ups say you should do something, you just go along with it regardless. And even you...” here Khujjutara was a little cautious as she had never said this before, though she had felt it many times “...when you tell someone to do something, you act like they shouldn’t dream of questioning it – just ‘cos you’re the Queen,” now she knew she was well out on a limb as Samavati’s expression was one of

shocked surprise. She added, "I'm not trying to be rude, Your Highness, but just telling you how I see it – I'm really worried..."

Samavati took in what her companion and helper said, and on reflection, realized that all of it was true. "You know Khujj, I've never thought about it but you're absolutely right. If I'm told what to do, I do it without question almost invariably and if I wish others to do something, especially those junior in status to me, I *do* expect them to simply obey – and you know," here she blushed a little to confess, "I *do* like wielding that power. You just will something and it happens; and I'm just now realizing that I do love that feeling. That's exactly what I'm like Khujj!" She brought her hands up to cover her mouth while the flush of self-recrimination faded from her cheeks. "How embarrassing never to have seen it."

"It's not a matter of embarrassment, Miss, I'm more worried about your safety. I only brought that thing up about authority to say: 'Don't trust the brahmin, just 'cos he's older, taller, handsome, and says all of the right things' – he's bad news Miss, I tell you, the very worst."



The scent of sandalwood laden the air of the seraglio with a sweetly soporific, languid mood. Everyone felt a carefree sense of well-being and cheerful ease. Even Khujjutara was lulled into relaxing her anxious watchfulness, despite her warnings having been ignored.

"All these cloths wrapped around the pillars certainly do make the place smell nice – I have to grant you that – it's a bit like being in some sort of perfumed paradise, isn't it Miss Amba? That's if such places really existed." The two of them walked along at their usual gentle pace, to make allowance for Khujjutara's halted, awkward gait. The entire forest of pillars that held up the ceiling of the main hall, plus all the other timbers in the building, had been shrouded or draped with lengths of oil-soaked cotton cloth. Their home had undergone a transformation into what seemed like a stage for a dream-like theatre.

"What with all of them off at the river-puja down at the Triple Union, I think I might just go into the market and get us some fresh flowers from Mr. Sumana – not that we need any more smells around here but it's the hot season and a bit of colour would freshen things up, wouldn't they Miss?"

The festival she was referring to was a blessing ceremony led by the brahmins a little way down-river, at the sacred place where the Ganga and the Yamuna Rivers flowed together. It was also regarded as being the spot where the celestial River Sarasvati joined these two earthly waterways, hence it was known as the Triple Union.

The King was going to be there with Magandiya and Vasuladatta, as well as the brahmin Slyma who was to be assisting High Priest Maha-baka. Khujjutara thus felt nothing untoward could happen since all those whom she saw as a danger to her mistress were well out of the way that day.

She took off for the market, baskets unladen, and was struck by the heat that the day held even at this early hour of the morning.

As she shuffled out of the palace compound another pair of slowly moving figures headed toward the building she had just left. It was Gavinna and her helper Kesini, a sprightly teenager who was always needing to be reminded not to be hurrying her aged mistress along. The girl knocked loudly on the main doors of the seraglio for it was firmly closed against the rising temperature of the day, as were all the shutters on the windows. In this season there was a strict protocol to be closing the place up before sunrise in order to trap as much of the precious cool night air in the building as possible, to keep the place bearable during the long hot daytime.

The maid who answered the knock on the door was surprised to see the venerable seeress as it was not yet mid-morning and it was not a day that the elder Ananda was due to visit.

"I have to talk with the Queen, at once." Gavinna's voice was strong and clearly conveyed that there was to be no discussion about Her Serene Highness's availability. The girl scampered off, feeling the push of Gavinna's blind eyes pressing her forward along the corridor.

The old woman took a few steps into the building as Kesini closed the door. Gavinna inhaled sharply through her nose, both apprehending the dense vapours of fragrant oil and in the realization of an irreversibility that has just entered the situation – a bridge that had just fallen away behind them.

"I wish you hadn't done that," she quietly said, both to Kesini and to the universe in general. She cast her sightless eyes from side to side, her features displaying a shifting panorama of moods: fear, stillness, compassion, irony, indignation, serenity.

"Please come in," Samavati greeted them, "how can I help you?"

"Well, Ma'am, I had come to help *you*. Now I fear it is too late." She stood still, leaning on her walking staff, not entering any further into the building. If she could have seen she would have marked the look of friendliness mixed with puzzlement written upon Samavati's face.

"Early this morning I had a series of visions – first there were fire-filled phantasms, you and others burning, burning – then came the nagas from the lake, you know them I believe, these elders had been urged by Lord Indra himself to come and warn me that you were in grave danger today. They tried to enter this seraglio themselves but all entrances to the suprahuman – all devas and nagas, yakkhas and the like – had been blocked by powerful spells.

“I came to tell you of this peril and to see if you could escape the blaze that is to come, but now...” She turned hesitantly and faced the main entrance. “The door was opened to us just before mid-morning; when the sun reached that point halfway between dawn and noon it seems that certain spells, which until then had lain dormant, came into play. If you try that door now I fear it will not open, not to any force that we can use. We are now quite trapped.”

Kesini reached for the door-handles and shook them with her considerable strength. It was as if the two door-panels had become fused down their entire length. She swung her foot and kicked with her heel, most inelegantly but in a way which should have been effective – not a movement.

She then reached for the bar on the shutter nearest to them and, as they all watched, it responded with the same rigidity as had the door. It was as if wood had fused to wood, the way it does in two trees that have grown conjoined with one another.

The girl pounded and heaved, cursed like no palace-dweller should, but to no avail.

Then, with a single breath, all those gathered in that entrance-way smelled the unmistakable aroma of perfumed smoke, like the headiest of incenses. From the tiny yantras inscribed on every pillar and beam around them, steady plumes of flame and fragrant fumes poured forth.

Golden fingers of fire poked out from the folds of cloth, winking a single message along the length of that shadowy hall.



Samuddaja was torn. There was the need to escape the area before their base-camp at the Krishna temple was discovered but they could not consider abandoning the brave kinnari Bee to a worse than dire fate... But she was loathe to risk more lives recklessly... Who could go in and have any real chance of rescuing her without leaving those at the temple unprotected?

It was now midday so she agreed with the other kinnaris that they should at least stay for a few more hours while they tried to contact Bee through the use of their cintamanis. In the meantime the two asparas wove every guarding and distraction spell that they could. Salassa’s favourite was a modification of the Gandhara-charm. It was a screening charm that worked according to the malevolence of the onlooker; the more the observer hated you and wished you harm, the less capable they were of noticing any sign whatsoever of your presence. A friend would see you standing there waving to them while an enemy would neither see nor smell, hear or sense anything there at all. It was very neat.

They had been back at the temple for a long time and the waiting was hard to bear. Just around mid-afternoon Maggot called out, "She's alive! I hear her."

"Maggot..." Bee's voice was faint and blurry in her thoughts but both she and Ant could hear their friend's words well enough. "We hear you!" They replied.

"... old pollen-head whacked me after all, didn't see that one coming, so I was stunned a bit – didn't take much of a knock to deck me, he's a big fellow." Their minds went quiet for a moment, then Maggot sent the thought, "Where are you?" It took a moment for Bee to come back:

"I'm in one of the cages in that ghastly kitchen. The vajrapani knocked me dizzy with that blow, but when he picked me up and breathed on me I was right out – phew, he must be a carrion-feeder – I came to in this cage." She went quiet again.

"I'm lying on my side, pretending to be unconscious but I've managed to get the stone into my hand. I might come across a bit fuzzy."

"No," Ant projected, "you're not loud but we can hear everything – these stones are nifty, aren't they? Very handy in a tight spot like this; there'll be a market for these one day."

"Anyway," Bee continued, "the rest of the gang that the others went to meet, seems like they came here soon after you all got away but it's hard to tell, I don't know how long I was out. The boss was livid to see all the prisoners gone; well, the whole crew of them were. There's about half a dozen devas in their group, several other yakkhas on top of few that we saw, some more nagas, plus a handful of khumbandhas.

"There was a whole group of them that were on the raid to Vepacitti's stronghold with us. The leader seems to be Pitipuppha, one of General Isana's sons – he's very much the boss and throws his weight around a lot – and there were some of the royals from the Vejayanta palace, Princesses Asa and Saddha – the pretty ones – and Prince Suvira, the party animal. They are children of Lord Indra and Lady Suja but Pitipuppha's the one in charge. And they all had the hum of that strange perfume – there's the reek of it all through this evil place." She paused again, then chuckled in her thoughts, the oddness of the sound reverberating in the minds of Ant and Maggot.

"He really gave that vajrapani yakkha an earful for not chasing after you all. Warty had said: 'But Sir, you told me I wasn't to leave the cave – not for any reason.'

"Dunderhead! What in the name of all the hells did you think you were guarding after they had gone and taken all the product with them?!" It was pretty funny, even though..." Bee's voice vanished and there was a fierce, icy reptilian sound in its place.

"Very interesting," they heard, then a furious hissing crackling noise, followed by silence.

"Oh! Miss Bee!! What jes' 'appened?"

Maggot recognized the familiar accent.

"Is that you Gumbiya?" she asked, very surprised to be picking up his thoughts.

“Allo Miss Maggot. Sorry about that, but His Lordship knew I was close to all of you and would worry about how you were, so he gave me one of them thinking stones too – they are good, aren’t they? But what happened to Miss Bee?”

They all realized that Bee’s captors must have seen her using the stone, and then taken and destroyed it. Ant and Maggot quickly brought Gumbiya up to date on their success and he in turn told them that the raiders had managed to capture Vepacitti, the asura king.

“E’s not a happy camper, to say the least, but he’s safe in the lock-up at Vejayanta now. Soon as we got back there I asked Lord Vessavana if I could help you lot out. He gave me the OK and the bluestone.

“Wasn’t that long after that I heard your conversation and started heading west, seeing as you seemed to be out this way – can I ’elp you?”

“Can you ever! How fast can you get here? We’re near Kulluta village in Uttarakuru,” Maggot was excited and relieved that now they might be able to rescue their friend Bee.

“I might be officially retired and a bit past it, but I can put on a fair turn of speed if I have to. If I’m not there by sunset, I’ll hang up my club for good.”



“Stealth will be more helpful to you than power, to begin with,” the steady sound of the naga queen’s suggestions slipped in easily and were taken to heart – Gumbiya was an old warrior and thus accustomed to hearing orders that were given once only and then followed faithfully.

“You ssshould reduce your form as much as you can to make the initial breach – how are your abilitiesss at ssshape-shifting?” She raised the arc of an eyebrow and pinned him with her slitted pupils, almost accusingly, he felt.

“Well, Your Majesty, none of us are as good at it as you nagas, and some yakkhas are better at it than others – and it’s not my strongest... well, see what you think.” With what was clearly some effort, the huge bristle-crested being slowly shrank himself down to almost human size. He looked a little like a spikey-haired version of Ajjuna, although about a head taller and packed with some extra loaves of muscle; his tusk-like teeth still curved prominently from his mouth.

“Ssssplendid!” Samuddaja was sincerely pleased. “Will you take my dragon-blade?”

“No, Your Majesty,” Gumbiya eyed the shimmering, green-lit Kris with a little suspicion, “I’m honoured by the offer but I’m probably better off with weapons that I know,” he indicated his club which he had also reduced to hook neatly on his belt.

“Well,” said Krishna, ‘you’ll have to take this, just to get in the door.” He handed the mangala to the yakkha who then looped it around his own neck.

“We will stay here until you return,” said Samuddaja, “or until we know that you will not. I will guard the kinnariss from further attack with the help of the assparass and we will send word to Lord Vessavana for our aid. Go well, and return blessed with glad success.”



As Samuddaja suspected, having just suffered the indignity of being robbed of their quarry, the gang had their guard down and Gumbiya found no fellow yakkhas posted at the mouth of the cave. The mangala saw him easily across the threshold littered with small corpses and he followed the instructions to take the passageway down to the right. He was now very glad to be in a smaller body as this tunnel would have been an extremely tight fit, if not impossible at his natural size.

He had heard the sound of raised voices from far within the caves when he first entered but now, as he headed toward the source of the dense odours that filled the air here, those noises faded into silence. He crept gingerly along the last few paces of the passage ready for an immediate attack or to come face to face with the enemy.

It felt very quiet and still in the room at the end of the passage so he risked poking his bristly head around the doorway. The hellish kitchen was just as Maggot, Ant, Krishna and the others had described it. In a corner cage he saw a single wan figure, curled on the floor in a ball.

“Miss Bee?!” He whispered as he leaned toward her and received no response. A rage rose in him which he did his best to control while he delicately ripped the steel-barred door off its hinges, attempting to be as quiet as he could. She looked drained and semi-conscious, there were wounds on her neck, and her skin had the translucency of the petals of a dying lily-flower.

As gently as he could he gathered her into his arms and tenderly cradled her damaged form – trying not to breathe on her face, just in case his vapours might make things worse for her. He felt a mixture of intense anger at those who had hurt this poor brave being, excitement that he hadn’t been found yet and fear that they would be discovered before they could make their escape.

He had just emerged with Bee into the grand entrance chamber when he heard the sound of running feet from the other tunnel. He had got as far as, “Uh oh,” in his thoughts when, from the main passageway where he had heard the voices, there sprang four yakkhas with clubs held high. One of them was obviously the thunder-fist from the Vajrapani clan, now towering four times Gumbiya’s height.

“Now I’ve really copped it,” he gulped, “where’s the back up when you need it?” Realizing that all he was armed with at present was an unconscious kinnari he looked down at Bee’s face in a desperate search for... he didn’t know what. Then he realized what his intuition was telling him. As the four huge beings came barreling at him, the image of the three kinnari friends standing in the forest night spun itself clearly into vision. Everything seemed to slow down as he closed his eyes and began to recite the Twenty-eight Buddhas’ Protection:

“Namo me sabba Buddhānam...”

It was as if space itself bent downwards. The onward rush of the four gigantic ogres took them hurtling into a pit of flame that had opened up in the seemingly solid floor of the cave, just in front of Gumbiya’s feet. He looked down into the blazing abyss over the singeing talons on his feet, which were now smoking with an acrid stench that even he found made his eyes water.

“Stone me.”

He put Bee carefully down beside him. She mumbled something vague and he swiftly expanded to his natural size – it was much easier going *this* way with the shape-shifting business. He unhooked his club and, grasping it in his right hand while he picked up Bee in his left, he swung a bone-shuddering blow at the cave wall of the main tunnel. Voices were approaching rapidly and he smashed again and again, now one side, now the other.

A thunderous rumble began and he burst from the cave into the open air. He could pick out the roaring of nagas as they tried to melt the fallen rock now blocking their path but he figured, with an old soldier’s gift for rapid mid-battle calculation, that they’d probably be delayed long enough for him and Bee to get away.

He was only too conscious of the frail condition of the kinnari and by way of voicing his determination to save her, he muttered the ancient yakkha phrase of undying faithfulness and commitment: “My arm is your arm.”

“Hang on tight,” he said, half to himself and half to Bee, as they took off at high speed and hurtled down the Parvati Valley. He heard her murmur something although her feeble voice was lost upon the rushing wind. He slowed down, asking, “Are you all right? Do you want me to ease up or stop and hide for a while?” She mumbled again as they swung this way and that with the twisting curves of the valley floor. He drew her head up close to his ear and slowed for another moment to catch her words. She now managed to whisper impatiently: “I *said*, ‘This is *great* – go faster!’”



As they rested through the day, while Ant and Maggot tried to provide what sustenance they could without staying too far from the safety of the temple, much conversation went on about the kinnaris' horrific journey with the group that had kidnapped them all. Krishna and Samuddaja did not want to further burden these injured and sickly beings but they were also keen to find out what had been the purpose behind that ghoulish apothecary's kitchen and why this gang had been draining the blood-essence of the kinnaris.

"They were leeching us because of the properties our essence has," one elder male kinnari was trying to explain, "they want the heart-flower nectar I suppose... for something..." He was vague in his speech and drifted into a doze before he could say much more.

Krishna was more perplexed than illuminated by this and turned to Maggot to see if she could explain what the older kinnari was saying. "What is so special about kinnari blood-essence?" He asked his friend.

"Well, we kinnaris are each the embodied spirit of some kind of flower: rose-apple, kanavera, asoka, lotus, all sorts. So we carry that flower's heart-essence in our blood, upon our breath." She tried to explain, although she also felt this was like trying to describe a snowflake to one who had never been to the Himavanta, or colours to one born blind, or to convey the roaring of the infinite sea to one who had never left the Middle Country of Jambudipa. The look on Krishna's face told her that the youth, brave and handsome though he might be, was as clueless as a dove-footed nymph on this one.

"What do you mean?" He pressed on, trying to get the picture.

"It's like this," Maggot leaned over and put her face but a few finger-breadths from his; she breathed in deeply, then exhaled slowly into his slightly startled big-eyed visage. He inhaled.

Krishna felt as if an ethereal hand reached into the magnetic centre of his being and squeezed there some quick and primal spring – a place wherein all scent and colour, taste and sound were germinated, a kenning chemical taproot of all feeling and being. The sublime pressure then densened this quintessence until it burst in soft tendrils of rose-apple-scented ecstasy. Time stopped.

"Gosh," was all he could say.



It was late evening and the three-quarter moon had just rising over the eastern hills when the valiant yakkha Gumbiya returned with his injured passenger.

All the kinnari who were mobile and strong enough gathered around to greet them. They wanted to applaud her for helping to distract the giant vajrapani so that

they could all escape, and also to thank Gumbiya for now having single-handedly rescued her.

Minti was still horrifically pale and very weak but she demanded to be allowed to get up and sit with Bee. She was as forthright and bore as little nonsense as her elder sister did. She came and sat by Bee and they smiled warmly to each other: "Thanks for the rescue, sis," Minti grinned. "No problem," replied Bee, "but now you owe me one."

Despite her weakened condition Bee was keen to speak with Samuddaja and Krishna to tell them what she had learned in the caves. "I was in the cage and curled up so they assumed I was unconscious at first. I listened to their frantic conversation in the room with all the pens and the leeching tables. They were angry and blaming each other impatiently, and there was a lot of talk about 'running out of amata.' I couldn't understand what they meant by this but it was plain that it was something they all wanted, *needed*, and it was the voice of one of them – who I guessed was the leader – who assured everyone that current supplies would last them 'moons and moons' and all they had to do was to ensure 'the acquisition of more product.' That's us, by the way, kinnaris," she shared a glance with all the gauze-clad and hollow-eyed friends who had been similarly drained, "we're 'product,' to this gang of sick-hearted pretas." A few gasped at her use of such language, for the hungry ghosts were the most wretched and craving-haunted, pitiful and repellent beings outside the hells.

"Well, at least we've got one left,' one of them said, and they hauled me out of the cage where the vVajrapani had stuck me. While I had been in the cage I had kept my eyes open a crack and I had recognized the ones I told you of through the stone. When they pulled on me to bring me to one of the tables, a naga noticed the stone I had in my hand and, I suppose, recognized what it was; he destroyed it by his fiery breath.

"While a couple of them got me onto the table and strapped me down, I heard more of the talk between Pitipuppha, his two brothers and the children of Lord Indra. They were discussing where to find more 'product' and they talked a lot about Kosambi.

"Some of those we saw leaving the cave when we arrived early this morning had gone to reconnoitre other areas but Pitipuppha was saying that the news was that rich pickings were to be had around the woods of Kosambi. This was because the Buddha had now left the area and, with him gone, the kinnaris would have little if any protection.

"Then he mentioned, as an aside, that even the Master's most ardent devotee Queen Samavati would not be around much longer as the Chief Consort, Lady Magandiya, had plans to finish her off. The nagas who were there chimed in at this point and confirmed they had heard this too. Lord Indra had been trying to intervene but even he had been thwarted – there was evil, destructive magic that had been woven."

As soon as he heard this news Krishna was alarmed and started to talk about how he had to get there to help his imperiled sister. Samuddaja held up her bejeweled hand and silenced him with a look.

“Please Krissshna, allow Paduma to finisssh her account, then she can ressst and we can consider our next move,” he stilled his anxious restlessness while Bee continued. The other kinnari and the asparas clustered closely around her, listening attentively.

“At this point the devas all came over by the table and then one of Isana’s sons looked me in the face. ‘I know this creature. She’s not one of those we had here before. This is the girl who took off from the raiding party, to seek the ‘lost kinnaris’ elsewhere.’

“‘Well, well,’ said Pitipuppha, ‘you’re absolutely right. I recall sizing her up for possibilities of product while were on our *holy* mission.’ It was nauseating to hear him talk like that, and what a creep! I thought there was something funny about him while we were travelling together.

“‘Well, my dear,’ he says ‘I trust you find great satisfaction in the knowledge that you were absolutely right. The stock were nowhere near Vepacitti at all. However, your satisfaction will be short lived. Since you so selfishly robbed us of our rightful property, you fall to the duty of having to provide some recompense from your own... resources.

“‘We’ll just take a bit at a time, to enable you to keep producing for a while, but we’ll need to extract rather a lot from you as the appetite for the product seems to increase all the time. It’s the way of the market, you realize.’

“‘Take what you like,’ I told them, ‘the naga queen Samuddaja and Krishna and my friends will soon be back for me.’ *‘Krishna?’* The great avatar? I hardly think *He* will be very interested in the likes of animals such as you.’

“‘Not Krishna the Great God you moron – Krishna the Death-defyer from Ujjeni – he’s a human but with great powers; that’s how we walked into here without being harmed. You’re thicker than that clod-polled yakkha you put on guard.’”

“Pitipuppha didn’t take very kindly to being spoken to like that so I got another crack on my head for being lippy. He must be as proud as he is pollen-headed because he didn’t take my warning seriously, so Gumbiya was able to walk straight in too.”

“Then they hooked me up to that awful siphoning system and eventually I passed out. The next thing I knew I was being bundled out of the cage again by my intrepid liberator here. And so we’re back.” She smiled a little feebly but with great appreciation at the yakkha who was looming over the gathered friends.

“Now that they know they’ve been recognized, and I am a witness on the loose, I suspect they will destroy whatever was not crushed by the rock-fall and try to cut their losses.

“My guess is that they’ll try to hide any evidence and deny, deny, deny any knowledge of the thing– after all, what’s the word of one orphaned kinnari against a group of royals from the Heaven of the Thirty Three Gods?” With the ending of her

account Bee sighed heavily and her eyes glazed over. Her head lolled to one side and her friends saw that she had fallen fast asleep.



Krishna was desperate to go and help his sister but he had no idea of what to do or how to get there. From what they could deduce the seraglio of Samavati was sealed to all celestial influence but humans could still come and go freely. This led Krishna on with ever greater vehemence.

“Even if there is some kind of killing spell, the mangala can help me again. It worked before, didn’t it? Twice, no *three* times; it protected Gumbiya too.”

It was well past midnight by now but time was of the essence so they decided to move at once.

“Gumbiya, Rhamba, Salassa – I charge you to stay here and guard the injured kinnaris. I do not think the kidnappers will be seeking to regain their losst ‘product’ sinccce, as they know that Paduma wasss in my company, they will not risk my fire and my blade but rather, as she deduced, I am sure they will desstroy their haven and make themselves as scarccce as possible. Neverthelesss we need to be cautioussss and prudent, for the ways of frusstrated desssire can go against all reassson. You mussst all stay at this temple until Lord Vessavana arrives here. He will transport the injured and exhaussted to safety in his capital Visssana, here in the blessed region of Uttarakuru.

“In the meantime I will carry Krishna to Kosssambi with all ssspeed. Not once in a hundred sun-turnings does a royal naga carry any being other than her offspring – now, in a single day, I will submit to thiss... irregularity... for a second time.”

She allowed herself an ironic, one-sided grin, “But I do so gladly, for thiss iss an occasssion of dire necesssity and the lives of a whole houssehold of noble beings iss under threat of gruesssme death. If all her housse is ssealed to aid then, I fear, all her housse is in the gravesst danger.”

She had scarcely finished saying this when, with a flourish of her cloak of silver mail, she stepped back from the group and transformed as she moved into the giant horned serpent body of a royal naga.

“Hold on tight Krissshna,” she said with her thoughts directly projected into his mind, “grip my hood and don’t let go. We will travel by water as it iss my element and we mussst teach the winds the meaning of true hasste. Do not be anxioussss about breathing; if you hold on all will be well.”



Not all of the women of the harem were as ready to submit to the idea of being burned alive as some of the others were. For a time, as the smoke of the fragrant fires multiplied, a few of the desperate as well as the pragmatic raced hither and thither, trying every door and window, just in case any exit at all might have been left unbarred. There were none.

In the upper storey there were some high vents in the walls that allowed the hot airs of summer to escape; these were too small for even the slightest of the women to crawl through, however, and served rather as flues to draw the flames. When they rushed jars of water from their bathing area in order to douse the fires, it was clear that the flames were bewitched for no amount of soaking would even so much as slow the blaze.

Once it was clear that all physical escape was impossible, Samavati decided she would do her best to help their hearts and minds to be liberated regardless. She summoned all the women to the open, smoky space of the main hall and climbed up onto her throne – the same seat that her dear Khujjutara had used so many times to recite the Dhamma teachings of the Master. As she recalled the words of her friend, uttered only that morning about her submission to and love of authority, she reflected that, despite her regret for having had such a trait, the capacity to command was useful in such intensely frightening circumstances as this for it helped all present to recollect themselves and to be free from panic.

With the flames licking ever higher up the pillars, and the perfumed smoke swirling in intensifying waves, the doomed queen recited to them from the teachings Khujjutara had related in the past:

“Just as the moon’s radiance surpasses that of all the stars; just as in the last month of the Rainy Season, in the autumn, when the sky is clear and free of clouds, the sun, on ascending dispels the darkness of space and shines forth, bright and brilliant; just as in the night, at the moment of dawn, the morning star shines forth, bright and brilliant, even so: whatever ways good karma can be created that will lead to a pleasant future birth, all these do not equal one sixteenth part of the heart’s release through loving-kindness – this way surpasses them all and shines forth, bright and brilliant.

*“For one who mindfully develops
Boundless loving-kindness
Seeing the destruction of clinging,
The fetters are worn away.*

*If with an uncorrupted mind
One pervades just a single being
With loving kindly thoughts
One makes good karma thereby.*

*But a noble one produces
An abundance of good karma
By having a compassionate mind
Towards all living beings.*

*Those royal seers who conquered
The earth, crowded with all beings,
Went about performing sacrifices:
The horse- and the human-sacrifice,
The water- and the soma-sacrifice,
And that called 'The Unobstructed.'*

*But these do not share a sixteenth part
Of a well-cultivated mind of love,
Just as the entire starry host
Is dimmed by the moon's light.*

*One who does not kill
Nor causes others to kill,
Who does not conquer
Nor causes others to conquer,
Kindly towards all beings –
They have enmity for none."*

Thus did Samavati encourage all her friends to recollect the wisdom they had gleaned through hearing the Buddha's teachings – even from his own lips – and not to dwell in a mind of hatred for those who had caused these fires. For every one of them knew that this inferno was no accident – the sealed doors, the failure of water to quell the flames, even the refusal of the cotton wrappings to be removed from the pillars for, when they had tried to strip these away, they would not budge – no, they were the victims of an ill-willed intent but they knew they need not create more hatred on account of that.

Then, Gavinna, who was sat in a small alcove at Samavati's left side, spoke up – her voice rising with power and clarity over the roaring flames, despite her frailty and her age.

"Sisters, held by two kinds of views, some devas and humans hold back, and some overreach; only those with vision see.

And how, sisters do some hold back? Many devas and humans enjoy being alive, they delight in being, they feel fulfilled by being alive. When the teachings remind them

'all things are impermanent' and, more importantly, that the cessation of becoming is nirvana, their minds do not enter into it or acquire confidence in it. Thus, sisters, those who are life-affirmers hold back. In the face of these very flames they fear their loss.

"How, sisters, do some overreach? Now some are troubled, burdened and weary with this same life and they rejoice in the idea of non-being, of the ending of this life, asserting: In as much as this self, when the body perishes at death, is annihilated and destroyed and does not exist after death – this is peaceful, this is excellent, this is reality! Thus, sisters, do some who are life-negators overreach. In the face of these flames they are eager for the end and the peace they believe they will gain by that.

"How, sisters, do those with vision see? Here a wise one sees what has come to be as merely having come to be. Having seen it thus, she practices the course for turning away, for dispassion, for the letting go of what has come to be – for all things cease naturally on their own, we do not have to hasten them nor fret to delay their end. Thus, sisters, do those with vision see.

*"Having seen what has come to be
As having come to be,
Passing beyond what has come to be,
They are released in accord with truth
By exhaustion of the craving to become.*

*When a wise one has fully understood
That which has come to be as such,
Free from craving to be this or that,
By the ending of what has come to be
She will not seek any more becoming."*

Samavati caught the last words of Gavinna as the heat rose and the smoke began to overwhelm some of the women. She heard screams and pain-filled wails as the flames seared their flesh and closed in about them ever tighter. She called out to them all a heartfelt, final utterance:

"Dear friends! It would not be an easy matter, even with the knowledge of a Buddha, to determine exactly the number of times our bodies have thus been burned with fire as we have passed from birth to birth in the round of existences which has no conceivable beginning. Now is the time for all of us to be most heedful. Farewell, dear friends, my sisters, let all of us be at peace."

She peered around her through the smoke of the roaring conflagration. To her great delight every single member of her harem, her dear sisterhood, was sitting patiently and composed. She saw the formerly flighty Rani and her gossip-mate

Chandra side by side with their eyes closed in meditation. On Chandra's other side sat her faithful maid Upaseni. Even she was still and stoic in her peace.

Beside Samavati, Gavinna sat with a look of intense calm and resolution, she held the hand of the sturdy Kesini who was one of those there least prepared to breathe her last. Samavati poured forth all the compassion she possessed for the smoke-choked girl, now coughing and weeping, and she was glad to see that Gavinna was able to help give her some support.

She cast her mind around the room sensing, in some deep recess of her being: "Everyone here now has no need of water to quench these flames, for they have entered the stream of enlightenment itself. Every one is destined for full liberation within their next seven lives."

As the flames rose high and roared before her, all around her, Samavati was suddenly revisited by the vision she had had at her mother's pyre – of being by the River Ganga near Varanasi and there was a man, some kind of yogi who sat before her, amid the flames. For some bizarre reason she could not fathom, she felt she desperately wanted him dead, so she wouldn't get into trouble – she heard her own voice, as if from a distance, "Pile on more wood, more wood..." Then he was gone and, in his place, sprang the image of her little sister Tamba, whom she had waited for by their mother's burning body, and she never came...

"So, I'll not see Tamba again after all, nor feel the warmth of her touch. She wasn't able to come and rescue me this time."

The flames began to scorch her skin and the pungent smoke grew thicker.



Krishna held on with a will of steel as the ride of his life ripped through the night. His eyelids were pulled wide open by the pressure of river-swirl even though they were travelling with the current. Samuddaja seared through the waters of the Vipasa leaving a trail of electrified bubbles and some stunned river-creatures in her wake.

They hurtled at mind-numbing speed past rocks and river-shoals, hopping the weirs in serpenthyme, past stands of rush and water-flowers, startling night-fishermen, rapid-shooting the bends, rill-ringlets shaking in the tendrils of her streaming horns, Samuddaja unleashed every fibre of swiftness.

They hit a broad pool where some naiads were gathered, whirling the long-locked river-daughters into eddies of disarray, for they knew not what the green and golden rocket was, lancing through the murky deeps beneath them.

The naga queen projected a question to Krishna, in truth it was more of a warning: "Ready to rise?"

The pool was at the junction of the Vipasa River and the Cinabhukti. The naga broke the surface and tore into the air. Krishna gasped as the land fell into distant moonlit blackness beneath him. They raced into the dawn over Kurukshetra and, as Krishna shivered with equal measures of terror, cloud-cold and exhilaration, the colours in the land beneath them blossomed.

Samuddaja felt a howling fear now tear through Krishna's mind. Through her thoughts she suggested, "It's a beautiful sight but, at this speed, I would refrain from looking down if I were you." Then, in as cool and matter-of-fact a tone as was her usual style, "Hold tight, here comes the Yamuna."

They hit the river's surface at the speed of a battle-arrow, just south of Indraprastha – Krishna hardly thought it possible but the naga really did seem to speed up underwater and now, in this greater river with more room to manoeuvre, the shock waves of her passing left myriads of river-mussels and water-weeds plucked from their muddy moorings; wharf-stones shuddered and ramshackle jetties buckled in the wake of their passage. Waterside trees had their roots unplugged and shoals of dozing fishes collided with frogs thrown into somersaults.

Their bow-wave rocked Madhura mid-morning. Dobhi-wallahs at the ford were wide-eyed at the flushing that the rivering waters gave their laundry-loads that day, those that weren't plucked clean from their hands.

Past the inflow from Ujjeni of the River Carmanvati, the Sindhu and the Vetravati, deloothering water-meadows with her backwashing spray, she cornered faster, ever faster as the current-heave intensified. Whipping, snaking with every bend, chittering waters flying out from Krishna's streaming feet, long since pulled away from the naga's hood. Hithering-and-thithering they careened around the final bends, bringing into sight the city walls. Kosambi rose from the river-bank, a solid cliff of ponderous grey stone.

Samuddaja slowed and nudged the jelly-legged Krishna quivering onto the grassy bank. She resumed her stately humanesque form. Side by side they looked at the plume of grey-white smoke rising from behind the walls of Udena's palace. There was the scent of perfume in the air and the odour of dread within their hearts that they had arrived too late.

CHAPTER 24

THE INVITATION



How can the King be so stupid?" Krishna was sincerely aghast.

"You're asking me how a monarch who inherited his throne as a teenager, who has wielded unrestrained power for thirty-five Rains, and who drinks a flagon of puppharasa a day can be stupid. I think you should think about the question."

"You mean how could he *not* be stupid?"

"Brilliant!" The wrinkled monk with the bone earrings gave him a congratulatory nod and wagged his head from side to side – a favorite gesture of his indicating approval mingled with a long-suffering patience and a dash of well-isn't-life-always-like-this?-ness

Krishna was, in turn, both frustrated at being treated as if he were an ignorant fool, and delighted beyond all telling to be back in the company of Dusaka once again.

"But how can he be rewarding her and making her his Queen after she killed my sister? I mean, everyone around the town – even the monks here in the Ghositarama – seem to be sure she was behind the 'accident' and, by all accounts, the King revered Amba, I mean Samavati." The young wanderer was deeply anguished but Dusaka knew that simply repeating the things he had said dozens of times over these last days would do little to ease the pain. Only time and wisdom, together with some forgiveness, would be able to set Krishna's heart at rest.

This time he refrained from saying anything but raised both his scabby eyebrows, this was enough to remind his young friend that he had asked the same question far too many times already. Krishna looked down at the grass mat he was sitting on, underneath the bamboo hut that he and Dusaka were sharing. The open

space below the kuti provided some shade, although the forest around them was thickly leafed and the fierce midday light broke through only in motley patches.

“Come on,” Dusaka prompted, “it’s past noon and Tingri and I need a nap.” As he was saying this he was uncrossing his legs and stretching them out along the low bamboo platform he had been sitting on. Tingri, meanwhile, had taken the initiative of seeking the even deeper shade under her companion’s bench, and was in her ‘hot-season afternoon, tongue-lolling snooze’ posture. One of the many things she had learned over years of travel was how to relax in all climates.

Krishna placed his folded blanket under his head and stretched out on his right side. He was as hot as the others in the stillness of the forest but his mind was far from restfulness. It was more than three days since the palace had burned. Ashes continually drifted down; the smell of charred timber and human flesh, and singed sandalwood, tinged the air; stories churned through the gossip-mills of Kosambi. The shock waves following the death of his long-lost sister, Queen Samavati, along with her whole harem still agitated him to the core.



He had emerged from the river with Samuddaja and, at the sight of the smoke from the city above them, he had immediately started running. There was a general panic within the streets as people either tried to bring water to extinguish the great fire, gathered around the gates to see what was happening, or ran to protect their own homes, belongings and families in case the blaze should spread.

Samuddaja could not be seen by most of the population so she rose and flew into the palace grounds to find the elder naga couple who lived within the garden lake there. Burning embers and scraps of cloth were being thrown up by the furnace of the seraglio and were then raining down upon the palace grounds, on the onlookers and the nearby houses. Samuddaja made it to the lake and found the nagas watching the conflagration with a helpless pity in their eyes. They greeted her respectfully as their Queen but she could do as little as they in respect to the fire – it was far beyond their aid.

Krishna battled his way through the fluster of the streets to reach the palace gates. What view he could get of the burning building, as he was jostled and shoved in the crowd, caused his heart to sink. Flames as tall as seven palm trees roared and thundered, their sound no longer buffered by the palace walls; the heat beat the people back in waves, even at this distance from the centre of the tumult. Smoke, as if from a perverse hell of sandalwood bit into his nostrils and stung his eyes. It poured from the upper windows, spat out by tongues of scarlet and copper, unreeling into the atmosphere like unholy bolts of scented cloth rippling into the airs of Kosambi. The roof

had disappeared, either masked by the sheets of flame or because it had collapsed and was imprisoning the harem in a roasting chamber like Avici Hell.

"No one is going to get out of that," he heard someone at his shoulder say. This nudged him into action as he realized he had been standing there gormlessly like a puppy staring into puddle. He pushed up to the guards at the gate: "Let me in, I have to help! I can get in!" He was sure, now he thought of it, that his mangala would protect him from all harm. "Let me in – my sister's inside!"

"Who is she then?" One of the guards kindly asked, assuming this dark boy must be the son of Khujjuttara or one of the cleaning women.

"The Queen, Queen Samavati's my sister! Thank you Sir." But when he said this the guard's mood shifted at once.

"This is no time for jokes, son. We've got a crisis on. Get on out of here." He scowled at Krishna and pushed him away. The press of bodies and the reeking smoke were causing him and the other soldiers at the gate to grow impatient. "Go on, all of you! Get back! There's nothing you can do here. The doors are jammed, no one can get in to help and no one has been able to get out. Go on, get back."

"You don't understand, she *is* my sister; she was Amba, I'm Krishna; I have a mangala that will protect me."

"An' I'm Lord Shiva and I've got a cudgel here that you're going to get an earful of if you don't back off." He pulled the weapon out of his belt and raised it threateningly. Krishna was in a state of doubt as to whether he should try to charge in past the guard or whether he should give up and go away. He was about to launch into a sprint, after turning his back to fool the guard, when he felt something sharply pointed tugging at his ankle.

"Oww!" It was several somethings actually, needle-sharp somethings, and when he looked down he was more than astonished to see a very familiar small, hairy, black and white dog affectionately gnawing at his leg.

"Tingri! What are you doing here?" He looked around to see if he could spot Dusaka nearby and, sure enough, tucked in a doorway across the street from the palace walls, there leaned his ragged mentor, his lame foot resting, hair in a heaped-up tangle – not unlike his own but less well-groomed – and a twinkle in his eye that was visible even through the smoke and at this distance.

It didn't take long to fight his way through the throng of bodies coming and going at the palace gates, and in a moment he was at Dusaka's side.

"Fancy meeting you here," he grinned and held the old monk in a prolonged and absurdly happy gaze.

"You don't think it was an accident, do you?" replied Dusaka. Krishna was unsure if he meant the current meeting, or the fire that had seemingly claimed his sister.

“We’ve only just met up and already you’re testing me with double meanings.” Krishna grinned again, overtaken by a glad-hearted giddiness at being back together with his great friend.

“No time like the present, eh?” And Dusaka grinned in return.

“So...” Krishna turned again to face the mounting blaze behind the palace walls, his voice testing the air for any hope.

“No,” Dusaka responded to the unspoken question, “there’s nothing you could have done. There’s a spell on those doors that will stay until they have turned to ash and the walls they sit in are burned up and gone.” They stood side by side, quiet at last. Krishna felt hot tears running down his cheeks, carving dark runnels through the veneer of ash that had settled upon his inky skin. The tough guy in him claimed that the smoke was stinging his eyes but the rest of him knew it was his memories of Amba, and his present love for her, that were the fount from which that salt-spring flowed.



“Make way for the King! Make way for the King!” The cry from the heralds resounded down the street. Krishna stood close beside Dusaka as the royal party that had been at the festival surged towards them, the previous occupants of the thoroughfare now scattering to make room. The guards stood aside as King Udena strode with a intent look in his eye, taking in the full horror of the mount of flame and gouts of perfumed smoke billowing before him.

He stopped in the gateway, his own senses now telling him what had been clear to every other onlooker:— There was no hope of survival for any trapped inside.

They heard the captain of the guard report all he knew of the cause of the disaster and heard him relate also that no one seemed to have been able to escape.

Not long before, King Udena had been enjoying a merry post-ceremonial ride up the river, entertained by Magandiya’s musicians under the undulating shade of the royal barge’s embroidered awnings.

He was now totally sober and, as the odour of sandalwood flooded his sense of smell, it reminded him of the puja at the river-junction and a cascade of thoughts tumbled through his mind. He said nothing but stood and stared at the roaring pyre, transfixed by this immolation of his queen and her entire household. To those around him he seemed numbed, stupefied by the wrath of the bellowing monster.

Finally he turned to Satagira, the Chief Minister, and said, “Well, until this moment, no matter what I was doing, I always felt apprehensive and suspicious of Samavati; I always had a gnawing anxiety that she was looking for a way to betray me and to do me in. Now my mind will rest in peace and I will be able to lie down to sleep in complete ease at night.”

“Do you think this was an accident Your Majesty, or do you think this misfortune was by somebody’s design?” Satagira chose his words carefully as he knew how prickly and reactive the Royal Mood could be.

“If it was an accident – well, it was a happy one – and if it was not, well, it must have been someone who truly loved me that caused it.” Udena was talking only to Satagira but, positioned as he was facing into the street, not only Krishna and Dusaka but many others could hear his words quite clearly. Magandiya was close by and her heart jolted with exultation at catching this brief remark.

Somehow the lightest of touches by Dusaka on Krishna’s arm was enough to stay him and prevent him from attacking the person of the King. He was indignant and enraged that he saw not a shred of sorrow or pain on Udena’s face. The heartless demon seemed genuinely happy as he proceeded into the place grounds, to see that the rest of the buildings were being protected from igniting.

“How can he...” Krishna surged, then felt that needle-pointed nipping at his ankle once again.

“Come on, let’s find a place to stay in some more noble company.” Dusaka led him away towards Ghositarama.



They found that the intense strife which had riven the monastery in two had, by now, been long settled and the monastic community were dwelling there ‘as friendly and undisputing as milk with water, looking upon each other with kindly eyes.’

Samuddaja came and found them after they had been assigned a kuti to share and let them know that, since she could be of little use in Kosambi, she was going to rejoin her husband, Lord Virupakkha, now back from the raid on the asura chieftain Vepacitti. After they had made sure that the newly-rescued kinnaris were all safe and sound, they would repair for a while to their home in the naga capital of Tacchaka, under the mountains of the Himavant.

“I am deeply sorry that we were unable to reach your sister in time, Krishna, but we did our best – I’m sure you will agree. The Venerable Dusaka,” she put her palms together and bowed to the scruffy old monk with great reverence, “will take care of you and help with what you need to do here – I feel your business in Kosambi is not yet completely done.”

Krishna thanked the regal naga sincerely and it was true, he could clearly see, there was nothing they could have done to get here faster, not without his flesh having been stripped from his bones by the elements they had hurtled through.



“Your Majesty,” Magandiya had waited until they were completely alone together. She lazily twirled a thick lock of Udena’s hair between her fingers, “Do you remember what you said earlier today?”

“About what?” The King was mellow and affable in his cups. He had his head on Magandiya’s lap and seemed markedly calm and happy.

“You know, how it must have been someone who truly loved you who had done away with Samavati; that is, *if* it was no accident.” As was her habit she pronounced the carefully arranged words with great precision.

“It’s true, I meant every word,” he looked into her smiling face.

“Well, I must confess, dear husband, that it was I who performed this act of love for you – made this sacrifice for your safety – I sent for my uncle, the brahmin Slyma, and he carried it out under my orders.”

“I *knew* it!” The king’s eyes were alight with more love and appreciation than Magandiya had ever seen him display before. “Other than you there is not a single living being who really loves me!” He sat up and clasped her to him in a close and tender embrace.

“What can I do for *you* in return?” His eyes searched hers and he smiled broadly again, as if some inspiration had just struck him. “You must send for all your relatives; I will make a Royal Invitation to them, to one and all, to come to a Festival of Great Joy. In a week’s time I will make a special announcement and publicly bestow my most heartfelt reward upon you, my dear Magandiya, and on all your family.”

Thus it was that the proclamation went out that, in seven day’s time, there was to be a special festival held on the tourney-field outside the walls of Kosambi and all the citizens were expected to attend. The Chief Consort was formally to be honoured.

Despite many of the townsfolk feeling aggrieved, and believing that the much-beloved Angel of Kosambi had been murdered by a jealous usurper, the King had absolute power so, if he wished it, the Lady Magandiya would be installed with the Royal Sprinkling and made the new High Queen of Vamsa.



Magandiya was in her private apartments, once again alone with her uncle. “It all worked unbelievably well. You truly are a genius as well as a magician, Uncle, although it was a little regrettable that so many had to die. Once I have received my reward at the festival you can be sure that I will be abundant in my expression of gratitude to you.” Her eyes glistened with joy and she smiled at him with unabashed admiration – he was the agent by which all her dreams had now come true, or would do so wonderfully soon.

“Thank you, Niece, I appreciate your sincerity and I agree, it did all work rather well. I am especially pleased with the soma-charm I put on the oil. The fumes from this most ancient and sacred of pacifying narcotics rendered all of those to be sacrificed in a most agreeably placid and unsuspecting condition.

“By the way,” he looked slightly askance as he said this, “please use the word ‘mage’ or ‘sorcerer’ or, even better, ‘thaumaturge’ rather than ‘magician’ – the word does carry with it unfortunate connotations of fairground trickeries that are such a vulgar adulteration of the art.”

“Excuse me, Uncle, I meant only to compliment you and to express my indebtedness for the absolute success of our plan,” she was a little flustered by his admonition; this was the first time he had ever been other than subservient in his manner towards her.

“No matter, it’s just a small thing, but it is pleasing when matters are expressed as well as enacted appropriately. Incidentally, the plan was not an absolute success as you put it, it seems that surprisingly there were some survivors.”

Magandiya gripped the cushion beside her and a fear that she was to be frustrated yet again lanced through her heart.

“I assumed...” she began, but the brahmin silenced her with a mere raising of his fingers and the slight movement of his head.

“Do not be concerned, it was not the Queen – or the *late* Queen I should say – no, only a blind crone from the house of Vasuladatta and her maid. It seems they were trapped under a fallen beam and were screened by debris from the worst of the heat, but never mind, their survival is no great loss or injury to us.” Slyma smirked at the wicked humour of his choice of words. “It also seems that Samavati’s ever-faithful servant, the hunchback, was away at the market during the fire. This is an irritant, for she is an inveterate trouble-maker, but I do not feel we need to torment ourselves on her account. She is only a crippled slave after all.

“Apparently she did all she could to beat her way *into* the burning building, to no effect of course, and the guards had to drag her off before she added herself to the sacrifice. She has stirred up such a to-do since then that the King has had to banish her from the palace. She was making all *kinds*,” and, as he was wont to do, Slyma teased a few extra layers of acidic wit out of the word as he pronounced it, “of *wild* accusations,” he smiled at his niece, “about the Chief Consort and her uncle.” His self-satisfaction was thick enough to slice and just a small helping of this would have been enough to poison every fish, frog, eel and crab in the River Yamuna.

“She has been sent back to wash pots in the house of the finance minister’s chamberlain, where she started life – she is under the Royal Admonition to express no further slanders, under pain of mutilation (in addition to her natural disorders), or death should she refuse to comply. I do not feel we need to be anxious about this vermin.”

Slyma leaned back against the cushions piled on the couch they were sharing, his face etched with an aura of entitlement.

"I am very pleased, gratified to hear that you intend to express your 'indebtedness' to me in some concrete forms. We are, of course, now partners in... a misdemeanor, in the eyes of some and, if we wish to keep this and any other extremely private and personal matters completely confidential," he spoke the words as if inscribed in bold red print, "then we, as black-haired brahmins of pure birth, need to trust each other's discretion completely."

His eyes were as coldly intent as his body was relaxed. He seemed to be scanning her face closely. Magandiya followed every flicker of his gaze. He seemed to be pointedly noting her earrings, or may be the downy whorls on the angles of her jaw; and now staring at the jewelled bands around her upper arms, or was it her shoulders with the candle light behind them. Did he think she was poorly groomed? Some kind of gross country bumpkin? Or had she forgotten to dye those featherings again? She couldn't recall... She should wax them off... She'd become slack because the King was always too sozzled or goat-drunk ever to notice. Her heart began to thump fretfully but her uncle smiled benignly and chose to say no more.



The Royal Invitation had duly been sent out to all Magandiya's relatives, together with her own enthusiastic addendum: 'The King is highly pleased with me and is granting me a great blessing. Please come immediately for His Majesty's wish is to render high honour to all my family.' The rumours were rife that rich gifts were to be bestowed so that even people who were in no way related to Magandiya, when they heard about this opportunity, paid bribes and came saying, "We too are relatives of Lady Magandiya."

The tourney-field was a hive of activity. It was usually used as a place for the army to exercise, to carry out weapons training or to have chariot races, but from time to time it was employed for grand fairs such as this.

Stands were erected all around the open area of the field and a substantial platform was built at the centre of one side to act as the podium for King Udena and the royals.

All was neatly fenced around and tall flagpoles were set up, each of them streaming with gay banners and pennants that flapped and fluttered in the warm winds off the river – it was certainly going to be a grand event, regardless of its cause.

The buzz and flurry around the preparations for the Festival of Great Joy had, as a grim counterpoint, the ever-present tang of smoke residue and the still-raining ash that had to be wiped from every surface every day. It had an acrid as well as an

oversweet smell. The nauseating mixture reminded everyone not just of the timber building that had burned, but also of the oil that had been the fatal fuel and the charred flesh of so many dozens of people who had been incinerated while they lived.

A crew of workers had been assigned the task of clearing the wreckage of the building and collecting what bodily remains they could find. It was this work-party that had uncovered the awe-inspiring composure of most of the bodies – almost all had died in the cross-legged, meditation posture and their bones had been charred or melted, vitrified into jewel-like stones in that position, as if as a permanent sign of their spiritual resolution.

They were also the ones who made the even more startling discovery that the two visitors from Vasuladatta’s chambers had survived the holocaust. They had been injured, certainly – Gavinna’s lungs were in terrible shape and she had lost much skin on one side; Kesini’s arm was badly mangled and scorched, probably beyond repair – but if infections were kept at bay, by the assessment of their nurses, both of them might survive. The alcove in which they had been sitting had protected them when the ceiling collapsed around them.

Stories spread rapidly through the town about the saintliness of the women who had died but King Udena only allowed that the bones were to be carried out to a safe place and he would not permit anyone to visit them, search for a relative or to utter prayers over them. No discussion was being tolerated by him on the matter, for all his attention was committed to the preparations for the festival. He was being more fondly solicitous of Magandiya than ever and even spent time helping her to select jewelry from the royal treasury that would be suitable for the occasion.

The one blight on her happiness in these dizzy days of preparation for the big day was the news that her mother had refused the invitation. Magandiya’s father made some lame excuse: “I think she’s afraid that more crocodiles will get into the water jar.” For he dared not pass on to her what Mariam had actually said: “If it’s true, as the stories run, that our daughter is party to a mass murder, I want no portion of whatever is her reward for it.

“I fear, husband, that we have nursed a viper in our home and that my brother has taught her how to use her fangs.”



While the deva-commando raid was in progress in Pubbavideha, deep and fear-filled suspicions circulated through the Vejayanta Palace, and all around Masakkasara, like toxic currents of distrust in a swamp of rank uncertainty. Lord Vepajitti was Queen Suja’s own father and Grandsire to the four Princesses and to Prince Suvira:– If there was war, who’s side would they be on? Would this tear the Heaven of the Thirty-three

Gods apart? Were some of these grandchildren already involved in the conflict? The princesses Hiri and Siri, 'Honour' and 'Glory,' were of the Kalakañja-asura type – horse-faced, with large hairy lips, protuberant bellies, crooked noses and bent backs – while Asa and Saddha, 'Hope' and 'Faith,' were like their brother and their mother Suja, of whom it was often said she was 'fair and golden-skinned, endowed with beauty and comeliness the like of which had never been seen before.'

It was because they had loved each other in many lives that Suja and Indra came together again, even though she was the daughter of Indra's sworn and bitter enemy Vepacitti. Could she now be relied upon to be faithful to her husband rather than her father? Were the 'dark and deformed' daughters already plotting with Vepacitti to foment a new war so that the asuras might conquer the devas once and for all? They certainly *looked* wrathful, with fearsome features that made them stand out *so* much, looking like Kalakanni, 'Misfortune' herself. Not like the angelic and radiant Asa and Saddha of whom you'd almost never guess, just by looking at them, that they had so much as a drop of asura in them...

And on and on it went – the rumour-mill turned without pause or rest, even in this abode of bliss.

Suvira did not have a shred of affection for his asura-like sisters and passed comments to his father, and whoever else would listen, that they were jealous and vengeful, warmongering because of their 'impure ancestry.' It had been pointed out that there was a flaw in his logic – to wit, that Suvira's ancestry was identical to theirs – but this detail had no effect on his diatribes.

"They want Vepacitti to take over, father – see how resistant they were to the raid – they were dead set against it. They have a secret plot to overthrow you; they are his pawns right here in your own palace. Really, we must do something about it." Asa and Saddha readily agreed with him as they found their Kalakañja-asura sisters equally distasteful. Like their brother, they relished their own 'exalted-asura' characteristics which rendered them far more like all the other devas of the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods. Although it was often remarked that they were just a little taller, and their features a fraction foreign to other devas' discerning eyes, so it was always known – to their eternal regret – that they had had 'a touch of the bristle brush' in their royal ancestry.

"Suvira, I have told you many times that I do and always will love my children equally. I will not side against Hiri and Siri simply because they are big and clumsy and offend your preferences for the ideals of beauty. Besides, in many of their qualities of character, I have to say that I find them much more pleasing than some of those exhibited by you, and by Asa and Saddha," he leveled a pointed look at Suvira as if to say: "Do you really want me to spell out your short-comings?"

For, in truth, where the pretty ones were vain, conceited pleasure-seekers, Hiri and Siri were kind, humble, unselfish and, all in all, thoroughly admirable devas. No

one in their right mind could ever conceive of either of them secretly plotting anything, for they were guileless, open and incapable of any deception, as all devas with an unbiased attitude could see.

The reason they had digressed from their father's point of view on the raid to capture Vepacitti was not because he was their grandfather but, rather, their asura-tuned nostrils had twitched in another direction when the question of the kidnap had come up. Both of them had had the identical intuition; the trail might point straight to their Granddad but their whiskers told them not one asura was involved in this plot.

Suvira had also been deeply offended by them when he had tried to get them interested in the Amatagandha perfume that he and his other sisters wore all the time.

"Honestly, you'll love it. Not only will it make you smell a lot better than... well, let's say it always smells like the favourite aromas of whoever breathes it in so, wherever you go, people will be pleased to be in your company rather than having to put up with... well, try it – you'll see what I mean."

The two coarse-featured devas splashed the perfume on themselves liberally. They were highly delighted to find that their own natural fume, which was somewhat unique in the Tavatimsa Heaven – a vigorous musky pong that those who have ever visited horse-stables at the end of a hot, wet summer would recognize at once – broke through the screen of this fragrant pretension and planted itself easily in the fore.

"We'll need something a lot stronger than this to make us smell half sweet! *Whaw haw whaw!*" They laughed uproariously but their brother was affronted. He had tried to be nice and civil to them for a change, even introducing them to this new enthusiasm of his, and they had just spat it back in his face, literally, as their laughter had a way of including a liquid element and one had often to duck to avoid being bespawled by it.

"Don't you notice how your mind gets so much clearer and brighter when you smell it? How content and happy it makes you feel? 'Amatagandha' means the fragrance of the Deathless – can't you sense it? Doesn't it make you feel completely alive and fresh to everything when you breathe it in? How it carries the essence of the fertilizing, life-renewing spirit of the flower-heart nectar? The very power that drives the force of life itself – the *jivita*? Can you feel it?!?"

"Nope – *hwah haw hwah!*" The two sisters were again vastly amused by the ineffectiveness of this supposedly magical brew. "Maybe we're as alive as we can get already."

Hiri handed him back the vial "Keep it for yourself brother – it's a bit wasted on us but thanks for thinking of us too."

Muttering to himself, "This fragrance is the signature of eternity! How can they be so clueless?" Suvira took off with the vial held firmly under his nose. He was disappointed as not only had he wished to get his asura-sisters interested as a brotherly gesture but, had they become so, that would have secured another pair of reliable customers, for once one started to use the perfume on a regular basis, it was hard to

stop. And to be able to afford a continual supply of his own, he needed to keep filling his coffers somehow.



When Vessavana, Virupakkha, Irandati and Punnaka, together with the rest of the raiders, arrived back at Masakkasara, they brought a furiously enraged Vepacitti with them. He had cursed and yelled, fought his captors every finger-breadth of the way from Pubbavideha. The return journey had been much swifter but, accordingly, it had been arduous nonetheless. There was no need for stealth or surprise to slow them now and, besides, they had a gang of pursuing asuras on their tail. Two of the nagas, five yakkhas and a dozen deva-warriors had fallen in the attack but it had, nonetheless, gone very smoothly. Their ruse of the storm-cover had worked perfectly and their breach of the castle walls had been both sudden and complete.

Now they held the asura-chieftain in bonds fashioned by Lord Indra himself. He was fastened by his neck and his four limbs and these magical fetters had a way of tightening the more that you struggled against them. Even so, wrangling a highly reluctant asura across so many leagues, and also carrying a number of the dead and wounded, had been a toil for them. They were glad indeed to return to the Vejayanta Palace and to secure Vepacitti in the dungeons. Soon Lord Indra would bring him forth and interrogation would begin.

Up in the Sudhamma Hall, at the centre of the palace, they could easily hear the loud cursing and the torrent of invective that Vepacitti was pouring onto his son-in-law, his faithless daughter, grandchildren and the entire host of the Heaven of the Thirty-three and the Realm of the Guardian Kings.

As they took care of the wounded and conveyed the dead to their families, Gumbiya requested permission to go and help his friends who had gone off on their side-mission. Even though Vepacitti had been successfully captured there had been no sign whatsoever of any kinnari traces at his stronghold, or anywhere nearby. There had been the trail that the raiders had followed but nothing of the lost kinnaris at the end. This lent Gumbiya an increased urgency and also prompted Lord Vessavana to think that perhaps the kinnari Paduma had been right after all. He gave Gumbiya a cintamani, one of the blue thought-jewels, and instructed him how to use it.

Once the detachment of deva-commandos – the devas, asparas, gandharavas and yakkhas, nagas and kinnaris – had all arrived and the expedition was formally closed, they dispersed with the gratitude of Lord Indra being expressed to them with rich gifts. At this point Suvira and his sisters Asa and Saddha, with Pitipuppha and his brothers Vamagotta and Bhaddasena, also took the opportunity to leave the palace and go on their way.



The next morning Lord Indra instructed the guards to bring Vepacitti forth from the cells deep beneath Sudhamma Hall.

The asura was still bound by his neck and four limbs but he had found, during the night, that if he reflected: "These devas are righteous, they have brought me here to this city of theirs without harming me," then he found his limbs and his neck free from bonds. If, on the other hand, he thought: "These devas are shameless criminals – how can I get back to my own country?" Then the bonds reestablished themselves on his four limbs and his neck, and he was cramped and tied down once again.

At one and the same time he thus admired the craft in forming such bonds and deeply resented being fettered by them.

When they came for him the next morning he was led before Lord Indra and the court of devas, including his daughter Lady Suja, Vessavanna, King of Yakkhas and Virupakkha, King of Nagas.

Rage boiled up in him to see his abductors face to face and he fell down under the weight of his subtle bonds once again. He cursed those who stood in judgement over him in harsh and colourful language, condemning them all in as abusive a way as possible. Indra, however, was patient and did not react violently or angrily in return.

Seeing this, his charioteer, Matali, addressed Lord Indra in verse:

*"When face to face with Vepacitti
Is it, Maghava, from fear or weakness
That you endure him so patiently,
Listening to his harsh words?*

*Fools would vent their anger even more
If no one kept them in check,
Hence with drastic punishment
The wise one should restrain the fool."*

Lord Indra replied:

*"I myself think this alone
Is the way to check the fool;
When one knows one's foe is angry
One mindfully maintains one's peace."*

*One who repays an angered one with anger
Thereby only makes things worse.
Not repaying an angered one with anger,
One wins a battle hard to win.*

*One practices for welfare,
Both one's own and for the other's,
When, knowing that the foe is angry,
One mindfully maintains one's peace."*

At this, Mara, the Evil One, then entered the mind of Lord Indra, saying, "Enough of this high-minded talk of peace and patience – the asuras are a blight on the world and this Vepacitti is the worst of them. He must be executed! It is the only way to be rid of this evil once and for all."

Lord Indra heard this thought as it formed in his mind and he felt the power behind it. He knew what this was and thus responded, "I know you Evil One, you have come here for your own ends." He paused and remained silent for a long time. His eyes rested on the fettered titan kneeling before him while he explored the mind behind those angered words that his prisoner had uttered. Then he spoke:

"Free His Majesty, Lord Vepacitti. He will stay here as our honoured guest and I will beg his forgiveness for the indignities that we have visited upon him."

Thus the bonds were loosed and the asura chieftan was set free.



The closer that the day of the festival came the more agitated and resentful Krishna grew. Dusaka seemed intent that they should stay in Kosambi at least until the big event had passed but for what reason he wouldn't say.

Krishna was bursting with restlessness the night before this ghastly celebration of the murder of his sister was going to be performed but his absorption in his agitated mood was interrupted by two familiar and rosy faces. Ant and Maggot had arrived, having come back to roost after their adventure in Uttarakuru.

They had brought back to their homes a couple of the more able-bodied kinnaris who had not been too seriously harmed by the leeching of their blood-essence. Most of the others, including Minti, were still being looked after in the safety of Visana, the capital city of Lord Vessavana, also in Uttarakuru.

"We didn't expect to find you living in our own home forest, this is great! How long have you been here?" Maggot was keen to catch up with the news although everyone had heard about the terrible burning of Samavati. It didn't take long for this

subject to come around and the mood of the reunion sank to a sombre key. As Krishna began to tell the story of his river-flight with Samuddaja and then the sight and sounds, the smell of the deadly fire, he found it hard to speak and his tears began to flow.

Maggot took his hand and, at that moment, Dusaka found them all gathered there under the kuti. Along with Tingri he was accompanied by a young deva of stunning beauty. She apparently liked to visit the Ghositarama from time to time and had now come, as she said, because the Buddha would be arriving there the very next day. Krishna was more than a little dazzled by the sheer brightness of this new arrival. He realized he must have been gauming, with his mouth hanging open, as Maggot gave his hand a slightly-sharper-than-necessary squeeze to bring him back to the present. He noticed only now that his tears had stopped.

Ant described the visit to Visana and how Bee had gone off on some mission with Gumbiya to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, summoned by Lord Indra himself. She was in the position of being a witness to the kidnappers' hideout and their gruesome kitchen.

Dusaka seemed to take it all in as if it were very everyday fare but to Krishna much of this was a whole new world he had scarcely glimpsed until recently. He had to knock himself on the head to remember that, less than half a moon ago, he was slaughtering pigs in the knacker's yard, was besotted with Sugandha, and had had no other way of life in sight. Now he was sitting in the Ghositarama, chatting with Dusaka and the kinnaris and this amazing looking deva from who knows where had just arrived. He caught himself staring at her once more but blinked, looking away, just before Maggot was forced to help him snap out of it again. And the Buddha himself was due to arrive here tomorrow!

He now recollected that he had been on his way to Kosambi in order to meet this great master even more than he had been to find his sister.

"The Buddha, here tomorrow... what a thought..." Krishna was amused and amazed by just how much his mood had altered in so short a time. From the world being a thorn-patch of frustration and injustice, it was now a glorious lattice-work of radiant beings strung through meshed dimensions of the universe.

"By the way," the shining little deva introduced herself, "my name's Ninka. I'm glad to meet you all. The deva world of the Thirty-three Gods has a lot of beauty in it but those who love the Dharma are strangely rare. It's good to meet some kindred spirits – no pun intended." She grinned and sat herself down between Ant and Dusaka and seemed very honoured to be able even to be close to the lame old monk. She asked many questions about the events in recent days and Dusaka gave her as full a picture as she wished for.

When the subject of the festival came up, Krishna's brow furrowed once again: "Don't you think – even though I don't have any more relish for killing – that Magandiya and Slyma ought to be executed, rather than rewarded?"

Dusaka pondered his reply for a moment, or at least he appeared to. He looked Krishna full in the face and said, "Sometimes, in killing, we destroy the very thing that is most precious to us. This despite the fact that the killing might have seemed reasonable, just and even pleasing. Afterwards all that remains are the corpses, the bones and the regret; but, if we're wise, there is also the urge to learn from our mistakes and to do better in the future. As you saw at the knacker's yard."

Krishna thought: "How on earth did he know about that?" But then he recalled the vision of Dusaka's face just before he nearly made a very serious mistake with the knife and the neck of the Headman's son.

"Do you want to hear a story?"

The question needed no answer. Dusaka settled his staff across his knees and those clustered there got themselves settled down to listen.

*"Full six hundred generations
Have birthed and died since then;
The clan trudged far in icy cold
And horned deer pulled their sleds.*

*They crossed a frozen island arc
In howling wind and snow
Less than two hundred were the kin
With babes strapped to their breasts.*

*They weren't the first nor were they last
To broach the realm of frost;
But they were first to make it through
The ice sheet had been crossed.*



*When they broke through onto the plains
Where grass-sea prairies rolled,
Their eyes could scarce believe the sight
The grazing beasts flocked thick.*

*They were the first two-legged wights
To tread upon that land,
The only beast that walked upright,
Whose weapons left its hand.*

*Herds of great camels lumbered there,
Beside the bison too
Strode burly mammoths, mastodons
And crowds of horses fair.*

*Vast cats with teeth a hand-span long
Fed on the grazing herds,
While in the forests, dark and wet,
Huge rodents dammed the streams.*

*The sun-bear roamed, tall as a tree,
So too the great ground-sloth –
It browsed high branches, gentle soul,
It had few enemies.*

*The tribe grew strong and multiplied
With food their bellies groaned,
Their children strapped with muscles thick –
A land of easy meat.*

*They spread both west and east and south
All flesh before them fell,
Opposed by only winter snow
And ageing's ruthless hand.*

*From sea to shining sea they cropped
With free abandonment,
They cared not for the things they killed –
Thought only of themselves.*

*The game grew less, the hunts grew long
Yet still they slew and slew,
Their footprints covered all the land
What they wrought, none yet knew.*



*The mammoths dead, the mastodons,
The horses, camels too,
And gone the fearsome sabre-tooth,
And dammers of the streams;*

*Gone the gentle giant browsers,
Slaughtered every last one,
This day the men are on the trail –
To wipe the sun-bear out.*

*Now at that time within the tribe
A single voice was raised,
With fearless wrath she railed against
The folly of her age.*

*Year after year she prophesied
The losses that would come,
“See! You cut out your very hearts!
You crush the life you love!”*

*She saw injustice; she unleashed
Her heart in the defense
Of living things of every kind –
She was by all ignored.*

*The priestess, though abandoned thus
Stuck with her hopeless task,
So when the men went for the bear
She stood to block their path.*

*“Aside old one – we’re off to hunt,”
Up spoke a lean dark youth
Who grinned and rolled his spear in hand
“Then, son, what will you do?”*

*What will you do, when the last bear
Has fallen to your spear?
When there are no more kin to hunt,
When the last creature dies?"*

*Fearless she faced that crowd of men
To fulfill her desire;
To respect all living beings,
To prize the life we share.*

*Tamba, your sister, brave and true
Called vainly for defence,
And you it was that brushed aside
Her wise and kindly plea.*

*You sought the sun-bear and it fell
As you desired, to you:
"It was the last, and I took it!"
Your glee was rich and strong.*

*It took twelve men to carry it,
The bear-corpse back to camp
And when she saw it Tamba wailed,
As if the Earth had died.*

*Dear Amba was your daughter then,
Your own compliant child,
And when you said to her, "Skin it,"
She thought not, but obeyed.*

*As you and friends rejoiced the kill
Tamba sang her lament,
And midst your bear-meat eating flush
Through her the Earth gave cry.*

*A shadow crept across your heart,
The spirit touched you all;
Earth-mother's cry for her lost child
Changed what was in your hand.*

*No longer was it 'meat for me,'
It was a life we share,
And from that day the heart transformed –
The gift of the sun-bear.*



*On that fair day and from the grief
For all that you had lost,
You undertook lone journeying
Upon the hunt again;*

*No longer after things to kill
But rather to protect,
To see if all the mighty beasts
Were truly lost and gone.*

*From that time on your ways were changed,
'Twas Tamba's legacy,
Each animal that had to die
Was stilled respectfully.*

*You saw, at last, the sanctity
Of every living thing;
To take no life is the gesture
Of which all wise ones sing.*

CHAPTER 25

THE IRON SKILLET



ates on a public festival? And so many guards? I am beginning to dislike the look of this event more and more.” The brahmin Slyma’s thoughts were running swiftly. His eyes darted this way and that as the joyful procession approached the arena that had been set up in the tourney-field.

“Why would the surrounding fence need to be so high? There are no gaps either – just the one gateway...” He had been trying to probe the King’s thoughts all through the period running up to the Festival of Great Joy but all he had found was a consistently weak, boozy blur. But now these signs all bothered him, especially how the guards were arranged around the one hundred or so family members: “They seem to be more in a formation intended to be herding rather than just protecting.”

The King was walking further in front of him, about twenty paces ahead; Magandiya was beside him. Slyma once more inclined his mind to read the King’s thoughts, to see if he could discern any treacherous plot there.

As the King and his consort approached the gateway, Slyma found that the King’s mind was absolutely sober and free from all thought – this made him more suspicious than ever for sometimes the absence of signs is a sign in itself, that someone is keen to keep something hidden.

As the royal couple entered the arena, passing through the great gateway, Slyma picked up the very distinct thought: “*Now* she can’t get away!” The King had let his emotions make him slip; now Slyma had to act very fast indeed.

A loud noise erupted suddenly on the other side of the procession – like some kind of collision or something breaking – and while everyone’s head was turned to see

the cause of the sound, two very unusual things happened: a guard, who had been walking beside Slyma in the parade of guests, vanished and Slyma himself appeared in the exact spot where the guard had been; secondly, from the place where Slyma himself was but a moment ago, a pair of footprints formed in the dust of the path with nobody seemingly there to have made them. They then multiplied into a line of identical prints, leading at right angles to the flow of guests to the ceremony.

In the commotion, this odd patterning of the dust was not noticed by a single person.

“I do not think that I will choose to die in some ignominious fashion in this pathetic little backwater of a kingdom, squashed on some spit of land between two rivers. Whatever did I think I was going to gain amongst this collection of shanty-dwelling yokels and their vulgar, impious, unobservant, so-called royal family?”

“That presumptuous little fraud who calls herself a black-haired brahmini – she’s no blood-born... more like born of Brahma’s... well, not His mouth... I don’t know how my half-sister passed her off as one of us all these years... I should have suspected. Mariam barren for so long... only child of the marriage, the mother past 40 Rains... I should know better... why didn’t I think to look into the girl’s memories sooner? To think: the worst that I was worried about was that her hair was not black by nature... I’m getting careless with my age... I don’t know *what* kind of waif or changeling Mariam dredged up to call a daughter... if she had been genuine family, of course I would have saved her too... no... she deserves what’s coming to her.”

The brahmin Slyma stole away as quickly as he could; slinking off and aiming for stony ground, trying hard not to leave too many footprints mysteriously appearing on dusty tracks.



The other ‘Slyma,’ meanwhile, was causing a disturbance in the otherwise smooth procession of arrivals at the festival.

“I don’t know what’s happened! I’m not a brahmin! Sergeant – it’s me, Punna. Punnamukha, you know me!” The tall gray-haired priest was acting in a most unpriestly manner.

“I don’t care who you say you are, sir, please just stay with the procession and go in through the gates with the others.”

The rest of the guests continued to stroll past this altercation, chatting and exchanging news with each other and making comments on each other’s finery.

Sonakara, Magandiya’s father, had been towards the rear, keeping pace with one of his own elderly relatives who had made the arduous journey to Kosambi solely for this unique occasion. Before his daughter had achieved her royal status he had always

been treated very dismissively by his brother-in-law at the very few family gatherings when they had both been present – the priest always held himself to be so much above his country cousins – that it was a surprise to see him upset and making such a scene.

It was difficult to follow just what the dispute was about but with some satisfaction Sonakara decided to let his superior brother-in-law suffer on his own. Even though it was somewhat true to form, he did think it was very strange that, when he gave a polite nod to Slyma as he passed by, the priest did not deign to acknowledge him at all. This irked him, so he decided to stop and commented:

“Even when you are in difficulties brother-in-law, you still will not stoop to acknowledge my presence, despite the fact that it is only through my daughter that you now have the chance to rise to some prominence. You really are *too* proud.”

“See Sergeant! I don’t have a clue what he’s talking about – I don’t even know this man’s name and he’s talking to me like I know him – like I’m family.”

On hearing this, Sonakara made the reasonable deduction that the priest must have worked a few magical spells too many or had had one back-fire on him, for now he had plainly lost his mind, and he commented to this effect to his elderly uncle.

Not being at all unhappy about this turn of events, Sonakara nodded his head by way of farewell to Slyma and continued into the arena. The Sergeant meanwhile, had taken note of the impressive look of non-comprehension on the face of this ‘brahmin’ during the exchange with his supposed family member and, for the first time, wondered if some magical trick had actually been pulled.

“I tell you Sergeant – it’s me! Punnamukha – we were gambling last night. How could I know that if it wasn’t me? You won seventeen masakas off me – but...” he hesitated for a moment then said, “... but three of them were fakes. Check your pouch and I’ll show you which ones.” The elder guard was impressed by this but he felt that this might just be some more magical brahmin trickery, if this character was reading his mind right now:– But then, what about the forged coins?

He pulled the small money-pouch off his belt and poured the coins into his hand. The tall brahmin scabbled through them in a very unbrahmin-like fashion and eventually selected three coins. The sergeant took them and examined them closely, biting a corner. Sure enough, they were soft-metal fakes.

“I’ll have you in the lock-up for that,” he grinned, “so, what’s it like to be a brahmin?” They both laughed, young Punna with considerable relief. They then realized that they had a duty here. The sergeant rushed along behind the last of the guests now filing in and whispered the information to the captain of the guard. He had had express, non-negotiable orders from the King:– All family members were to be conducted into the arena and if any found excuses to depart they were to be sought out and brought in, whether they wanted to or not.

The captain then came up to the King and whispered that the brahmin Slyma seemed to have made a run for it, probably in deep disguise. The King whispered in

return, inclining his head away from Magandiya, who now sat at his side on the podium:

“That maw-worm must not be allowed to escape – go to his rooms at the palace at once – find him or it will be your neck!”

He inclined his head back toward Magandiya and smiled at her with immense satisfaction. He seemed unnaturally pleased about something, to such an extent that she even found his expression slightly unnerving. She shrugged the feeling off, however, and looked about her, taking in the crowd and the gathering of her entire ebullient family – including quite a few she did not recognize – this was certainly going to be a day to remember.



Dusaka had got Krishna up and out of the Ghositarama early that day and they had found a place to sit on the array of stands, just beside the flag-bedecked rostrum of King Udena and the royal party. They had been sitting there for some time, with Krishna stewing a self-brewed pool of resentment at being dragged along to watch his sister’s memory being disgraced and insulted. All he had managed to coax out of Dusaka on the subject was: “It’s not going to be the event that everyone thinks it is.” More he wouldn’t say, although he did add – after his supply of patience in dealing with Krishna’s incessant sniping at Magandiya, her brahmin uncle and the King wore thin to the point of snapping – “We are here because we might be able to help. Wait and see.”

This even more cryptic comment did very little to calm Krishna’s reactive nature but it did give Dusaka a few moments respite while his young student digested what he might mean, and before he came up with another question or complaint.

Finally all seemed to be ready and the great gates were closed behind the late arrivals. The open area in the centre of the arena had small mats placed at equal intervals in a large rectangle; there seemed to be about one hundred of these bamboo coverings arranged in eight long rows.

The master of ceremonies was the Chief Minister, Satagira, and he invited all of Magandiya’s family members to come into the arena and to stand behind one of these mats.

King Udena leaned over to Magandiya and, with that same disquieting smile, said: “I’d like you to see your family receive their share of the reward first.”

Magandiya’s father stood behind his mat with a great deal of anticipatory satisfaction – he felt sure that palace servants would soon come trooping out, bearing armloads of golden and jeweled offerings, to heap them high in front of each one of

them on these sturdy mats. To his surprise a large troop of soldiers then came into the arena and then stood themselves in pairs by each of the family members.

"Maybe these strapping fellows are here to help us carry the pile of riches we are to be given today." He was almost salivating at the thought and he hoped they would hurry up, not only because the suspense was hard on his system but the temperature of the day was increasing rapidly.

When all the soldiers were in place the brahmin Maha-Baka blew a conch and Satagira declared in a loud voice:

"The Ceremony of Just Reward will now commence!"

To their surprise each of the guests in the arena felt a spear-point in their back and the second soldier with each of them then pulled away the mat. They revealed holes that had been neatly dug in the ground, each one somewhat less than a fathom deep. The thousands of Kosambians in the stands, most of whom had had very mixed feelings about the event up to now, gasped with a single breath and a murmur flew throughout the crowd.

Each of Magandiyā's family members were prodded forward and, regardless of age or infirmity, were forced to clamber down into these holes. When they stood, most of them had their head above the lip of the pits, although some of the elders and the children were out of sight.

"Husband," Magandiyā's heart was starting to race furiously, "what is happening?"

"Your karma," said the King, with the selfsame wolfish smile of intense satisfaction, "is ripening, at least that is how I believe the Master would phrase it." His voice had now lost its veneer of charm. "Watch," he commanded.

Magandiyā was about to start from her seat but felt knife-points pressing at her throat from either side; the guards kept her rooted to her throne.

"Watch," the King repeated.



The rumbling of voices through the crowd continued to gather strength. No one moved as guards were by now stationed all around. Nothing was announced but everyone understood, there was to be no intervention or even a protest uttered. The grim expression of the guards and the terror on the faces of the people in the fox-holes were in eerie contrast to the brightly-coloured banners that flapped and danced in the morning breeze and the glittering baldachins that billowed above the thrones.

Dozens of carts laden with straw and firewood were pulled by servants along the avenues between the holes and their occupants. A cry went up from the prisoners as the fuel was heaped around and onto each one of them. They were kept in the holes by the

spears of their guards; their protests and wails of anguish, declarations of innocence fell onto deaf ears, and were muffled one by one as the kindling wood and bundles of dry grass submerged them.

A frightful hush gathered as the last victim was covered over. Although Magandiya could still hear the violent plea of her father emerging from the ground before her – he had loved her so well, so boundlessly and now...

She tried to turn to the King to beg for mercy for her parent. The knife points pressed tighter to the hollows of her throat.

“Don’t look at me,” said Udena, “rather look at what you have wrought.” He gave the faintest nod to the Minister. Satagira called out: “Fire!”

The state executioner, a fearsome-looking, scarified ex-bandit called Tambadathika, ‘Copper-teeth,’ strode forward bearing a firebrand in either hand. With no expression marking his face, other than grim duty, he walked briskly along the length of the arena touching the flames to the piles of kindling as he passed. The four turns up and down did not take long to make and the pairs of soldiers each stood by their captive until the hundred fires had flared and done their work.

The thousands in the stands that surrounded this execution were seized by an utter silence as the flames roared and the air swirled with smoke. The flags swirled and waved, jauntily indifferent to the events that they surrounded.

Once the fires had died down, and the charred, smoking corpses could be seen in each of the holes, the great gates opened again and in came eight teams of oxen. The oxen-handlers lined up their animals at the end of each of the eight rows – many of these men looking more than a little horror-struck at the duty they had received the Royal Command to perform – and then they hooked their iron ploughs in place.

The blades cut unerringly straight furrows, causing the corpses, with their crisp-burned skin, to be broken up into pieces and mashed into the ground.

“Now it’s your turn,” said Udena, rising from his throne, all trace of charm and humour utterly gone.



A tall pillar had been fixed in the ground, just in front of the royal rostrum, a few paces from where Krishna and Dusaka were sitting. The young man had been soberly transfixed throughout the immolation that had just taken place. Now Magandiya was being led to this standing pole and her arms were being shackled behind her. The King stood before her and addressed both her and the whole assembly, his voice accustomed to commanding regiments and carrying across a battlefield.

“These jewels have been defiled by your use of them – they will be destroyed.” He reached forward and abruptly ripped the heavy gold earrings off her and threw

them to the ground. He then tore her necklace away and cast it down as if it were covered with some toxic filth. He turned to the guards and said, "Remove the rest."

Her bangles, anklets and armbands were broken off and the chains tethering her to the pillar were tightened. A large charcoal brazier was then brought forward and placed before her. Tambadathika produced an iron skillet and poured oil into it, placing the cooking vessel on top of the red-hot coals. As the fumes rose from it, and while the contents were brought to a boil, King Udena announced:

"You have consumed the life of our beloved Queen, the pure-hearted and innocent Samavati, in your selfish quest for power and influence. She and all of the good women of her household, your greed chewed up without mercy. All that has been devoured by you, that you have made yours by theft and treachery, you shall now eat again to teach you, if to be taught is possible, the foul bitterness of your evil actions.

"Begin the cutting."

The executioner began to slice portions off Magandiya's body with a razor sharp knife and then place them, one by one, in the skillet where they were fried like cakes.

Then King Udena, taking a pair of tongs, picked the pieces up when they were cooked and forced the weeping woman to eat them.



Krishna could not bear to watch this terrible torture and was about to try and persuade Dusaka that they should leave at once when a loud clamour was kicked up in the area around the entrance. The gates were now open, since the oxen had come in, but the exit was still guarded by a line of soldiers.

He saw a hunchbacked woman break through the guards and rush, despite her limp, at the King and the dying Consort. He realized it must be Khujjuttara, about whom he'd heard so much from his kinnari friends. She too was weeping and agitated.

"They tried to keep me shut up so's I wouldn't make a fuss – well I don't care what you do to me!" She hobbled across the open space towards where the pillar stood. She could not see exactly what was happening as her eyes streamed with tears and the King was standing between her and Magandiya – for all she knew Udena was at this moment crowning Magandiya, having her sprinkled with holy water and made into High Queen.

"You killed Miss Amba! You bitch! You evil demon! Miss Amba's dead and *you* did it!"

Magandiya was now weak and dazed from pain and blood-loss but she clearly heard what Khujjuttara had said.

"Amba... my big brave sister... don't tell me she's come to join the party too..." this attempt to shield herself with cynicism crumpled as soon as she voiced it – "my

sweet sister... has she come to rescue me? It always used to be the other way around... *She* loved me... someone loved me... *Amba*..." She swooned.

"She's *not* your sister, and you *killed* her, you evil stinking..." Khujjuttara was getting closer and had caught the attention of the King. He knew her well as the devoted friend and servant of the Queen so now he stood aside, almost like a conjurer revealing a transformation to startle his audience, and she saw the horror of Magandiya's execution.

The wounded woman raised her head again as blood poured from the many lacerations in her arms and legs, upon her body. "No... I tried to save... mum, I had to save her... ran for help... ran and ran... couldn't..."

"Tamba?!" Krishna lurched forward from the bench where he was seated. The vision he had seen in the grove of the ascetics came back to him in a flash. He saw the girl in the upper room, combing out her mother's hair – he saw the bleeding woman in front of him and raced down into the arena to get closer, to try to see her face. It was the girl from the vision now grown to womanhood but her hair was no longer chestnut and auburn but rather an inky black. A blackness he now saw dripping out, mingled with her blood, her tears.

As Magandiya dipped into semi-consciousness again the sound of her old name and the memory of that distant time seemed to send her back – the fifteen Rains that had passed since then were rewound onto the spool of time and she was a little girl once again.



When she emerged from sleep, nestled in the Bodhi-tree root, it was after daybreak. Tamba shook herself awake and started running at once, ever onward through the forest. She was hungry and thirsty now but she was determined to keep going.

Eventually she came upon a clear track which broadened into a full-scale path and led her to the edge of a village, which was surrounded by some fields that had been carved out of the neighbouring forest.

There were plenty of signs of life as it was well past dawn now but she was uncertain whom she should talk to. There was a big house just near the edge of the village. A woman there was pouring water into a small earthenware jar at the foot of the steps that led up into the building. She seemed a kindly-looking person so Tamba ran straight up to her and poured out her story:

"Please missus can you help? My mum's been hurt by something, a snake bit her we think and she needs help and my sister's with her and she's injured too and I've run all night – please can you help?... And could I have a drink of water, please?"

"Now, hold on dear, what's all this? Try to say that again slowly." The friendly woman handed her a ladle-full of water and Tamba swallowed the whole lot, wiping her grubby mouth with the back of her hand when she finished. The ladle was refilled and the second helping went down only slightly slower than the previous one.

"You are thirsty, aren't you? So, let's try to work out where you've come from and see if we can't find your family."

Of all Tamba's attempts at a description of how she got there, the only thing that made sense was 'the road from Ujjeni to Kosambi.' The kind woman said her name was Mariam and she was soon joined by her husband. They took an immediate liking to Tamba, this lean copper-coloured ragamuffin with her fearless forthright character, and decided they would do all they could to help her. The Kosambi road, though, was quite a way off and they found it hard to believe that such a skinny little thing of only five or six Rains could have come all that distance in one night.

"Well, she's a determined one, that's for sure," Sonakara remarked to his wife as they set off to begin the search. Tamba was madly impatient with how slow they were going and how long it took them to get to the road to Kosambi. She kept racing ahead down the forest paths, looking for familiar signs and then rushing back to the couple.

"Don't you get lost again," Mariam called, "we wouldn't want you to go missing." She heard her own words and then looked to her husband. He was obviously having the same thoughts:- This was a sweet child and they had never been blessed with any of their own... if it turned out that she was now an orphan... well, even though brahmins didn't usually adopt children, and even though it sounded like the child was from a merchant family... things could be worked out... her arrival seemed like a blessing from the gods... after all her husband was the Headman of the village and he could pull some weight...

It was late afternoon by the time they finally found the big banyan tree by the Kosambi road. Tamba was thrilled to have spotted it and, once more, raced ahead. "There it is! The tree! The tree!"

When she got there, there was, to her dismay, no sign of Amba or her mother. The road was marked all over with elephant footprints, cart-tracks, horse-hoof prints and all the other signs of the royal procession so they concluded that Tamba's mother and sister must have been picked up by the King's party. It was getting late by then and, not wanting to be walking the forest trails by night, they decided to go back to their own village, Harittananda, for the night. Now they thought they knew how to find the girl's mother and sister it should be easy to continue search for them on the next day.

By this time, after the long night and the day of rushing back and forth in the search, Tamba was dead on her feet. Despite her insistence that she didn't need help she accepted when Sonakara offered to "save her feet a little" and carry her on his hip for a

while. She was snoring before he had taken twenty paces.



Early the next day they returned to the Kosambi road via a path to the north of Harittananda and, asking at the first village after the big banyan, they found out that the King had indeed passed through there and that the royal procession had spent the heat of the day in the forest glade beyond the edge of the hamlet. The villagers said they had also seen a lot of smoke go up so they suspected there might have been a funeral but none of those from that place had been present. Tamba felt a sense of foreboding but said nothing.

She and her new-found helpers discovered the turning off to the clearing and decided to take a look there, even though they were now trying to catch up with the royal party.

She was always a compulsive explorer so it was Tamba who discovered the burning ground – half in the hope that it would be seen that it had been used for someone of the King’s court, half in dread of what she wouldn’t let herself think about.

She stood staring at the smouldering remains of the pyre. Off to one side Sonakara was looking up into the fork of a nearby tree. Tamba heard him say something to Mariam so she turned to see what they were talking about. There in the low branches were the familiar patterns of her mother’s sari and Amba’s own wrap too, along with a length of new white cloth.

“Bring it down,” she asked, but neither of the adults moved. She didn’t realize then how much of a taboo it was for brahmins to touch cloth that has been worn by the dead. They appeared frozen to the spot so Tamba shinned up the trunk and retrieved the pieces of cloth herself. She took the sari and Amba’s wrap but left the white material up there.

She jumped down and held the familiar pieces of clothing to her face – breathing in the so-familiar and beloved odours of her mother and her sister. She buried her face in them and wept and wept and wept.

When she opened her eyes the ashes of the funeral pyre filled her gaze. She could see charred pieces of bone there and the curve of her mother’s skull. She buried her face in the lap of Mariam’s warm embrace and broke into heaving sobs again.

“Don’t worry dear, we’ll look after you,” Mariam caressed her head and wrapped herself around the grieving girl. “You’ll be our very own daughter.”

Tamba then felt a sudden fear that, if she were not a brahmin like these people they would reject her, abandon her after all, so she said, “I am a brahmin too, you know...”

“What,” Sonakara chuckled, “with red hair? From Ujjeni? I don’t think that’s very likely.” He mussed her freshly washed locks, for Mariam had given her a good bath before they had set out that morning and the auburn lights in it glared brightly in the midday sun.

“Haven’t you ever heard of ‘the copper-coloured brahmins of Ujjeni?’” Tamba asked, trying to sound as authoritative as possible.

Sonakara gave her a long, warmly loving look. “There are no such people, my dear; I lived in Ujjeni once, many years ago when I was training in the goldsmith’s craft, so I know that for myself. There’s no need for tall stories between us. I think it’s more likely that you’re from the clan of the great merchant Sanjaya; he’s originally from Gandhara where there are many folk with hair your colour.”

Tamba looked at the ground and straightened her sarong, embarrassed to be caught in her lie.

“You’re right, sir,” she confessed, “he’s my grandfather but he’s moved to Savatthi now with all his family too.”

Mariam and Sonakara glanced at each other for a moment, saying nothing

“Now, listen to me,” he said, squatting down to look Tamba in the face, taking her slender hands and drawing her close, “my wife and I have never been blessed with children. That is until now that the gods have brought you. We are happy to make you our own, now that you have lost all your dear ones.” He felt sure that the other little girl must have perished in the night for some reason and, even if she hadn’t, he was keen to have this child think it so.

“There is no point in us pursuing the King’s caravan any more. Your mother and your sister have moved on to other worlds. You can come with us and you will be our daughter – in every respect – although brahmins, even humble country-brahmins like us, can be very proud and fussy with our laws and rituals. This means we’ll have to pretend that you are a niece or a child of a distant cousin of ours.

“I don’t like to deceive anyone but, if we are to give you a proper home, you’ll have to help us with this.” He shot a look at Mariam, just to ensure that she was of the same mind – she meanwhile was beaming approvingly at her husband who could often be over-finicky with the rules and a proud and pompous character himself.

“This will be our little secret; we’ll tell the rest of the village and our local family that you’ve come from our distant cousins in Gandhara – I carry enough clout around here for no one to question my word. The few rusty-headed brahmins that there are in those parts get looked down on by the purists from Varanasi and Taxila, but they are officially recognized as being as full-blooded as those of us blessed with the black hair of Lord Brahma Himself – or at least who used to be so blessed, before it started to turn grey.” He chuckled and smiled with genuine affection.

“We’ll teach you all the proper brahmin customs but you must never, ever, *ever* let anyone know that you were born of a merchant family. Do you understand? How does that sound to you?”

Tamba looked into the friendly face of this elder man, filled now with its entreaty to be accepted. She withdrew her hands from his, placed her palms together and solemnly bowed her head to him, while Mariam reached forward and wrapped her arms around the little girl. Tamba pressed her head against the elder woman’s well-fleshed torso.

“Thank you! Thank you,” she was crying again.



The painful memories of being trained in the infinite variety of brahmin customs, of always having to get everything right and the constant fear of being caught, cascaded through in a kaleidoscope of anxiety and strain. Always being told how only brahmins are pure, how bad it is not to be a brahmin, the ceaseless effort to become the best and most spotless of godly brahmin girls. The tearful mistakes, the patient efforts of her parents, the rapture of praise as she learned her skills – image after image, wave after wave of relived moods came washing through.

Amidst them all she recollected how, when she got lonely and felt oppressed, she would wonder if Amba had really died and if she should one day search for her again, but her father always pooh-poohed these concerns and persuaded her not to dwell on the past.

As she grew to womanhood she became more self-conscious. Although now, as ever, no one doubted her ancestry – or at least those that did chose to keep the Headman sweet said nothing of it publicly – she decided she was tired of being the only girl in Harittananada whose hair was not as black as midnight.

Her parents were happy with the idea of her dying it, very happy in fact, and her father went so far as to secure a supply of the very finest grade of black dye that could be purchased. A small handful cost ten gold kahapanas, for it was of the class used by the royal household themselves, mostly for graying heads, but he did not begrudge the expense even for a finger-snap. With the classical colouring of a ‘black-haired brahmini’ she would be able to secure the most exalted of husbands, he reckoned, as in his eyes she was the most exquisite and precious of beautiful jewels and only the very best of men would be worthy of her.

Indeed, she was growing into a dazzling beauty. The first time she emerged from her bath with her hair black as a raven’s wing, as she paraded in front of her adoptive parents wearing her best sarong and some of her mother’s jewelry, the two of them gasped at the sheer splendour of her loveliness.

"She is a queen!" Sonakara whispered.



When she had arrived at King Udena's palace she had always made sure that she bathed alone. She poured every trace of blackened water down the drain herself so that no one would know that she was not the purest of black-haired brahminis.

"I had to do it, to survive, to be the perfect brahmin daughter, and I did it! I did... I really did... I was perfect... Everyone admired me, loved me, wanted *me*... all the suitors my father turned away... I showed them all I could do it... no one ever guessed... not until that monk came... the impudent... because he knew – oh Brahma, he knew I wasn't really pure... I wasn't good..."

"Tamba! It's me, Krishna!" The guards had stepped up and grabbed hold of the dark stranger, not at all sure who he was or what he was up to.

"Tamba!"

She lifted her head up – she had only blinked out for a moment after all – and took in the young man standing over her. He was tall and good-looking and his skin was the darkest she'd ever encountered, at least since she had last seen her little brother all those years ago.

"It's *me*, Krishna... don't you remember?" He struggled with the guards, and now the King was eyeing him intently, watching to see what this excitable youth was up to.

"Krishna... my baby brother?"

"Yes, it's me!" He then turned to the King, saying, "Your Majesty, I'm her brother. We were both born in Ujjeni. We have been apart since we were children, please..." he faltered, not sure what he should say next. The King paused, tongs in hand while the oil in the skillet boiled.

Krishna looked back at his mutilated sister and a wave of anguish rose in him; confused feelings chased each other through his mind:

"Didn't you realize Samavati was your sister? She was your sister Amba, *our* sister, how could you have killed her?" He too was weeping now.

Magandiya's eyes swam as she realized this was her brother whom she'd last seen when he was three years old at the gate of their old palace in Ujjeni. Then the words he'd been saying sank in and their meaning found its way through the fog of pain and dizziness, the terrible taste of the flesh of her own body in her mouth.

"No... she died...noooo... I saw the fire... they said she died... saw her shawl up in the... I climbed the tree... I kept her wrap, our mother's sari... hid them... taboo... I still have them... they're all I have..."

All around the arena ears were straining to hear this exchange. Khujjuttara was nearby, and was being watched over by a clutch of guards, but she seemed fixed to the spot. The crowd was wrapped in an electric silence; all eyes were watching the events unfolding in front of the podium. King Udena was following every word.

“No, Tamba, she didn’t die. She was rescued and adopted in Kosambi. She married King Udena.” Krishna’s voice was as level as he could make it, through the corrugated terrain of his emotions.

“N o o o o o... not Amba! *Aaaeeiyyyaah...!*” the tortured woman released a terrifying howl of grief wrenched from the hell of her heart, a wail of heartbreak that shuddered in ghastly sobs.

“I didn’t want her to die... I didn’t... truly... just wanted to be Queen... banish that hateful monk, show him what I was worth...” She began to weep more intensely, her torn belly heaving and her ripped cheeks cross-cut with a torrent of tears. No thought formed amid the avalanche of grief that now submerged her heart.

Krishna stood helpless, pinned by the guards, unable to console or reach her. The King still said nothing. Magandiya caught her breath.

“The snake, it was harmless, I took out the poison... when I heard the arrows missed, I was glad... thought he would exile her... just want to be Queen... show them all I... The fire... not my plan... the fire... Slyma, he... I was afraid... afraid he would tell... afraid he knew... so I agreed.” Her eyes rolled up in her head and she blacked out again. Her whole body was running with blood, her raw flesh and bone now exposed to the air.

Krishna sank to his knees and bowed to the King.

“Your Majesty, have mercy on Magandiya, I beg you! She had no idea it was her own sister that she intrigued against. Surely she’s been punished enough now. Surely the knowledge that she caused the death of her own beloved Amba, surely that is torment enough for her, especially when added to the pain and mutilation she has rightly endured today.

“Along with her scars, she will live for the rest of her days with the burden of remorse and the grief of having brought such grievous loss to you, Your Majesty. Isn’t that punishment enough? I am brother to both of your wives, for their sake I beg your mercy. Your Queen would never want even the tiniest living thing to be harmed on her account, let alone her own sister from whom she was parted for so long.”

King Udena listened to the boy’s impassioned appeal and weighed it all within him:– As far as he knew this tall black-skinned youth could be an actor planted to save Magandiya’s neck. And this far-fetched tale about the women being sisters – well, what proof was there? Especially as the so-called ‘brother’ was the colour of a candala from the deep south of Jambudipa. No, this day had been terrible enough, far more than strange enough already.

Yet... the last point of the boy's eloquent entreaty had touched him. If he thought of Samavati and how to honour her memory, it was true that she would be aghast at this most extreme of scourges being visited upon anyone, let alone her sister, solely on account of avenging her. If indeed it was her sister who had been the author of the crime...

He paused. All was still. The air in the arena drew as tight as a vina-string stressed up to the edge of snapping. Then Namuci, the Killer, entered the heart of the King, seeing an opening there.

The words Udena then uttered were icy cold even amid the rising heat of this day of blazing sun:

"If my Queen was indeed your sister, and the sister of this vermin shackled here, then her misdeed is all the more heinous," he turned to face Magandiyā. Her tears melded with the streams of blood that oozed from her. "I am sometimes known as 'Asoka' – 'without sorrow' – which also means 'without sorrow for others, without pity.'" He paused.

"Continue the cutting," he ordered. He jammed another piece of her own fried flesh into her mouth but his tears betrayed the sorrow that he felt.



Krishna felt a hand on his elbow and the touch of Dusaka lifting him to his feet. The guards seemed happy to let him go.

The old monk took Khujjutara's arm as well and the three of them headed for the gate. Despite the fact that no one was supposed to leave until the King gave orders, the guards at the gateway parted and let the two lame figures and their tall companion make their way out. For some reason the soldiers had the idea that this was part of their instructions or at least that these people were in some sort of official, if unclear, role.

"Well tried, lad," Dusaka had his staff in one hand and Krishna's arm in the other, "The Evil One wasn't able to get to you but he used Udena instead." He gave Krishna's arm a friendly squeeze.

"Never mind, you did your best, even though you weren't able to save her. You gave it all you had. I'm proud of you."

Krishna was so startled to be paid a sincere compliment by his ragged mentor, without any twists or riders on it, that his tears all but dried up at once. Almost the entire town was still at the tourney-field so they plodded along through empty streets, their footsteps a vacant tattoo on heated midday dust. Both Khujjutara and Dusaka were also glad to be walking with another halt-footed person for a change. This way they were not always under pressure to speed up.

"I'm not sure about your prophecy, though," Krishna thought he'd try the subject as they were being so open and the day had left them all so tender. Dusaka raised an eyebrow by way of asking: "What are you on about now?"

"You know, about defeating Death – I failed to stop Death taking both my sisters so..."

"So...?" Dusaka was using his logic-winch to haul a reluctant insight out of Krishna's muddy pool of thoughts.

"So... either the prophecy was all wrong," he risked a sideways glance with this one, "or, maybe the idea of 'defeating Death' has more to it than I realized."

"He's sharp, this one," Dusaka commented to a grinning Khujjuttara, "have to give him credit for that." Krishna found himself grinning too:– We were back to sarcastic jabs and on home ground once again.



The old woman, clad in rough garments, hobbled along the road out of Kosambi in the late afternoon. Her face was stippled with pock-marks and her skin wrinkled with weathered lines.

She trudged determinedly along for the best part of a league and then stopped to rest for a moment on an old log that lay conveniently in the shade of a tamarind tree. Some troops marched past, in groups of ten or twenty, and she watched them go by with apparent indifference, as one would expect of an old peasant on her way home after a visit to the big town. Anyone seeing her though would have been surprised to hear the thoughts that rattled through her mind:

"They would *never* guess that I would use such a guise... look at the idiots, tromping past, looking for a dignified brahmin priest... what kind of a fool do they think I am?"

"Invisibility has its advantages but in this dusty season... no, a full-scale glamour is far superior... I'm much more protected this way. I have: charms against weapons; perfect retention of this rather splendidly low-caste form, even while I'm asleep; soma rubbed into these widow's weeds to give a sense of trust to casual contacts; gold coins disguised as a pouch of dry rice... everything's covered. Now I just need to get to the pilgrim's rest-house at the next village and I'll be fine for the night."

As the old woman sat on the fallen tree and reflected she failed to notice the small viper with odd red cross-like markings on it that was sliding along the trunk towards her. She shifted her position and, on moving her hand, she nudged the snake which gave her a bite on the ball of her left thumb.

"Oww!" She reacted, shaking it off and brushing the creature aside with her hand. "Bah! I neglected to put the animal-protection spells in place – oh well, no matter,

it's just a little bite and I know all the mantras against such things." With that, she closed her eyes and quietly started to recite a string of ancient verses. Meanwhile she wove her hands in a rapid succession of symbolic patterns, her fingers and wrists bending and twisting as she performed the healing mudras. After a few moments she finished and smiled with satisfaction:

"Now I am completely safe."

CHAPTER 26

The Message



enogenesis is the term for it, I was told,” said Krishna, trying to sound wise and authoritative.

“For what?” asked Maggot, looking up into his face.

“Not resembling your natural parents,” he explained, “like me – both my mother and my father were quite fair-skinned.”

Maggot paused, “You know, you don’t have to try to impress me with long words – just being as you are is fine.”

They were sitting in the little bower that Maggot called her home in Ghositarama. It was woven from living vines, creepers, twigs and branches and interlaced with dry fronds of wiry flower stalks and grasses. To most of the monks who dwelt in the forest it would seem to have been just a dense tangle of the natural shrubbery; only the few who possessed the deva-eye would be able to see the ethereal occupant or be able to guess it was somebody’s dwelling place.

They had ended up here after Dusaka brought Krishna and Khujjuttara away from the horror of Tamba’s execution.

Krishna had been very upset and Khujjuttara too had been in a state of shock. The elder monk had comforted them greatly, in his own quirky and roundabout way, and even by the time they had reached his kuti in the Ghositarama their mood had begun to lift.

When they met with Ant, Maggot and Ninka, they immediately set about describing the King’s crafty ruse and the sorrowful destruction of all Magandiya’s family. The conversation was energized and, for a while, Krishna was swept up with the others in describing all the tragic details. It wasn’t long, though, before the sadness of the loss of both his dear sisters hit him again and the animated chatter going on

between Khujjuttara, Ant and Ninka, with Dusaka (and occasionally, even Tingri) chiming in at intervals, grated on him painfully.

Maggot had spotted this and suggested going for a quiet walk. This had led them to her nest, as her favourite place in the park, and thence to climbing into the cool and fragrant sanctuary together. The bower was shady in the mid-afternoon heat. There was no birdsong in the woods at this time of day but a pair of butterflies jiggled and fluttered around each other, then supped at the nectar of some of the flowers woven into the warp and weft of her haven.

Maggot suddenly felt a by-now familiar warmth in the blue cintamani she had tucked into her waist-band. "I think Ant's got a message for me," she said, as she fished the stone out of the folds of flower gauze and held it tightly in her hand.

"Maggot! Where have you been? I've been trying to reach you for ages. Anyway, he's back! The Buddha is here in Ghositarama – join us at the kuti quickly and we can all go over to the hall to pay our respects together." Ant was bursting with excitement.

"Oh, that's great news! I'd almost forgotten he was arriving today. We'll be right there." The two of them clambered out of the bower with Maggot flying swiftly ahead and Krishna scurrying after.



By the time Dusaka led them into the great hall, all of the monks and novices of the Ghositarama had gathered. Krishna, Khujjuttara and Dusaka found themselves a spot near the back of the assembly while their celestial friends hovered above them.

Of their group, Krishna was the only one who had never seen the Buddha before. When the Master appeared from the entranceway at the far end of the hall, the young wanderer was quite unprepared for the impact that this encounter had on him.

He had thought of the Buddha as a respected teacher, someone even Dusaka looked up to without any reservation. Unconsciously he had assumed he'd be like the gurus and elder sannyasins he had met at the grove of the ascetics or along the road. What met his eyes now was a vision that was utterly new to him. The Buddha seemed both more stunningly radiant than any deva such as Ninka, or even of the host he'd experienced with Dusaka in the garden, yet at the same time he seemed as earthy as an ancient tree of the forest.

When Krishna tried for a while to fix his gaze on the Master's face, his expression seemed at once both ephemeral, impossible to pin down, and yet completely open and straightforward. He felt an awesome presence; there was infinite power, yet also a peace that was so complete it seemed to bring the world to a stop. He knew now why this great monk was so revered, or at least he had a glimmer of an inkling of what he guessed was spiritual perfection embodied.

Krishna felt his own preoccupations and the memories of all his recent experiences fall away – the race from Kulluta, the deaths of Samavati and Magandiya – all these drifted from him like flower-down picked up and scattered by a summer breeze. He felt more intensely alive, awake and happy than he had ever been:– And the Buddha hadn't even sat down, let alone spoken yet.

Once the Master was settled on a raised mat, at the far end of the Hall, all the monks and novices, as well as the few visitors that were gathered, knelt and bowed three times in the traditional gesture of heartfelt respect towards the teacher. He invited everyone to sit comfortably and then began to chat, in a courteous and amiable way, with all those who were close by. "I hope you have been keeping well, bhikkhus, that you are comfortable and that you've had no trouble receiving alms-food recently."

Ananda was plainly delighted to see his beloved mentor once again and peppered him with questions as to how he had been looked after and where he had gone after he left Kosambi alone.

"Have no concern that I was not well-attended, Ananda, even without your careful hands and eyes looking out for my every need.

"When I left the community here, I headed east and eventually came to the forest of Parileykaka. I found a place at the foot of an ancient sala-tree and decided to abide there.

"Near to where I stayed there lived a bull elephant, all alone, and we communicated, one with the other, in our thoughts. It seems that, just as I had been living here in Kosambi hemmed in and burdened by the recalcitrant and argumentative, bickering bhikkhus, so too had this great tusker been hemmed in and oppressed by other bull and she-elephants, by calves and sucklings. They ate the branches he had pulled down for himself; they muddied the water before he had time to drink it; he was forever jostled and barged by his herd. Thus he considered, as I had, 'Suppose I were to live alone, secluded from the crowd,' and he too came to the forest of Parileykaka.

"We became good friends. He kept my place beneath the sala-tree free of fallen twigs and undergrowth, and brought water in his trunk for me to use for bathing. He was also joined in his kindly efforts by a monkey that liked to go foraging for wild honey and fruits in the high branches that my friend the elephant could not reach. The delights of such solitude were enjoyed by us greatly. I reflected:

*"Tusker agrees with tusker here;
The elephant with ivories as long
As chariot-poles delights alone in woods,
Their hearts are thus in harmony.*

“Once the Rains were over I journeyed to Savatthi and it was there, at the Jeta Grove, that the arguing monks from this Ghositarama came and found me. They let me know that the dispute had been settled, and they admitted their embarrassment that it had been more the voice of their growling bellies that had forced them to see reason, rather than the voice of the Tathagata.” At this remark he smiled with a warmth of understanding and compassion that caused Krishna to both shudder and melt with wonder – there was no trace of a scold or recrimination – but there was also a wry tipping of his glance at them that echoed the absurd humour of it all.

“Now that harmony has been restored the resolution arose in me to return here. A boat brought us down the River Aciravati for a distance, thence to Varanasi on foot, the final leagues were again by river as travel in the Hot Season is arduous away from water, even for the Tathagata.”

The elder Anuruddha confirmed that, indeed, the Sangha at Kosambi had been very harmonious once the dispute was settled. Nevertheless they took the opportunity to ask forgiveness communally from the Buddha for, after all, they had driven him away from his own monastery with their petty squabbles:

*“For whatever we have done –
intentionally or unintentionally,
by body speech or mind,
consciously or unconsciously –
that may have caused you discomfort, Venerable Sir,
for that, we ask your forgiveness.”*

The whole community recited this formula with a single, sincere voice. In return, the Master responded with the time-honoured rejoinder:

*“I forgive you; and I ask you to forgive me
for any hurt that might have been caused
from this side also.”*

Despite being a somewhat stylized exchange, the expression of the acknowledgement and the art of forgiveness had, as always, a subtle effect of clearing the air. It was a new beginning for the community at the Ghositarama.



There was a moment's pause after this little ceremony and, in that space, Ananda realized he should inform the Buddha about the burning of Samavati and the execution,

that very day, of Magandiya. Through his own powers of insight and penetration of the minds of others the Buddha was already well aware of the events. Nevertheless, it seemed appropriate to bring the subject up and to see what light the Master would cast upon the woeful drama.

Ananda told him how his faithful disciple Samavati had been burned to death together with her household and how, when the corpses were found, that almost all were seated in the cross-legged lotus posture. He then described how, in turn, the King had contrived to exterminate Magandiya and her entire family; adding to this the rumour that it was being said that, unbeknownst to both of them, Samavati and Magandiya had been sisters.

The Buddha listened to the stories with a sober attention; little expression showed upon his face. When Ananda had completed his account he sat silently for a time, then spoke:

“Those that are heedless – unaware of the nature of the life they lead – they are as if dead already, even if they live for a hundred years. Why so? Because every hope and fear they are born into – every love and hate, every success and failure, every gain and loss – when their hearts are born into it, they plant the seeds of their loss, their death from it as well.

“Those that are awake and aware, mindful, they are truly alive, regardless of the state of their bodies. Why so? Because when such ones experience love and hate, success and failure, gain and loss, they are not born into those states. They do not get lost in them. Rather they know them simply as aspects of nature, arising and passing away. As they are not born into them within their hearts, accordingly they do not die with them.

“Magandiya, while she yet lived, was as if dead already. Samavati, and all her household, though they are dead, yet they are truly alive; the mindful never die.

“Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless;

Heedlessness is the way to death.

The mindful never die;

The heedless are as if dead already.

The wise ones who know this clearly

Are mindful and rejoice in that;

They are ones who find delight

In the domain of the Awake.

They that choose to meditate,

That persevere, sincerely strive,

They, the wise, will know Nirvana,

The ultimate, the highest bliss.”

Krishna was deeply perplexed as he listened to these words of the Master. He could feel their perfect truth yet they were also so paradoxical, cryptic:– What *did* he mean by ‘the mindful never die?’

While he was in the midst of a tangle of confused thought, trying vainly to mesh the teaching he had just heard with his own ideas on life and death, and his own spiritual endeavours, one of the bhikkhus asked the Buddha:

“It doesn’t seem right, Venerable Father, that a devoted lay student of yours who was endowed with such faith and other spiritual accomplishments, should have come to such a horrific end. How could this have come to be?” He also knew that, when the situation called for it, the Master would often draw upon his own powers of vision into other lives and worlds in order to explain mysterious events such as this.

“If you regard this existence alone,” the Master responded, “it is indeed highly unjust that Samavati and the many women of her household should have suffered such a gruesome death. What they received, however, was the natural and fitting result of a deed they were responsible for in the distant past, in a previous birth that occurred in ages long gone by.”

The group assembled there all recognized this kind of phrase as the introduction to a story of the past. They were keen to hear the details, for speculation had been rife in the robe-dying shed – where much informal conversation happened while the community members washed their clothing – as to the cause of this incineration that the Queen and her harem had suffered. The silence of the hall swelled with expectancy and even Dusaka leaned forward to catch the words of the Master more clearly.

“Once upon a time, in Varanasi, there was a group of eight enlightened ones who were regularly invited to receive their daily meal at the palace. At a certain point in the year seven of these returned to the Himavant but one remained behind. He sat down on the bank of the River Ganga where there was a large tangle of grass, so that he could meditate in private.

“That same day the royal couple and all the women of the harem went to the river to bathe and to enjoy themselves playing in the water. The King left early on some business but the Queen and the women of her court were having such a delightful time that they carried on cavorting and swimming there, in that secluded place.

“When they finally got tired and came out of the water the sun was all but set, and they were stung with cold. They wished to warm themselves as they got dry so the Queen said, ‘Let’s find a place where we can build a fire.’ They saw the great tangle of grass, not realizing that the monk whom they revered and had often offered alms-food to was seated within, absorbed in meditation.

“They gathered round and one of the maids, who was skilled in practical matters, struck a flint and set the grass on fire. When the grass burnt down they saw the monk within and cried with alarm, although the bhikkhu sat there calmly amidst the flames. ‘Oh! What have we done?! The King’s teacher is burning up! If he finds out we

have harmed the monk we will all be killed.’ The Queen, fearing the authority of the King, resolved then and there: ‘We will have to burn him up completely – that way the King will never find out about our wrong-doing.’ So, at her direction, they quickly gathered dry branches from all around and piled it onto the fire. Once it was heaped up high they were confident all the evidence of their misdeed would be erased but, as all have seen, the effects of that cruel act have been felt this very day.”

He paused, then added, “The virtue of the Queen, however, was very great despite this grave mistake; she has now begun her last births in the human realm. She and all her court are certain of enlightenment. Some of those good women were stream-enterers, some once-returners, some non-returners. Not fruitless was the death of any of those noble ones. Every one of them will be liberated in no more than seven births.”



As the Buddha had been recounting this tale of Samavati’s past an image flashed before Krishna’s eyes – more than an image, for there was contained within it a clear succession of events.

First of all he saw an old bent woman, a ragged villager, hobbling along the roadside at dusk. She looked sick and uncomfortable; she was sweating heavily and her eyes seemed to swim in their sockets. He saw her reach for the trunk of a small tree by the verge, trying to hold herself up; then she sank to the ground, curling up on her side.

Her face was wrinkled and pock-marked, her clothes poor, and he saw that she was muttering to herself.

For a moment the sound of the Buddha’s words faded and, instead, he heard only the noises the old villager was making. It seemed to be a series of verses in the language of the scriptures and she was spouting them quickly and breathlessly, like a priest would in a ceremony.

“None of these are working! What’s wrong? I know all the snake-bite cures... What was it? Slender with red cross-shaped markings... I don’t know... One of these should work... Where’s the snake-doctor here?! Don’t have a name, a face... don’t know... must be a simple mantra...”

As these words formed in Krishna’s mind, agitated and anxious, other clear, lucid thoughts arose alongside them – bubbles of insight that surfaced amid the murky swirls of the vision: “There *is* a very simple mantra that would cure this bite, but he does not know it.

“This kind of snake does not occur in Gandhara, near Taxila.

“It was a katthamukha, a ‘wooden-mouth’ viper – not dangerous if you know of the antidote.”

Krishna recalled one of his companions at the grove of ascetics talking about the dangerous snakes and centipedes of the forest, even toads with poisonous skin, and he could now remember hearing something about the paralyzing bite of this little viper:– But who was this woman? Why did this cool voice of wisdom that sounded in his mind say ‘he’ rather than ‘she’? Why was this vision appearing now?

This whole sequence of experiences cascaded through his consciousness with great clarity but also very quickly, in just a few finger snaps, and at its end he saw other people on the dusty road passing by the crumpled figure under the little tree. They glanced at her and, one after another ignored her, scurrying on, seemingly trying to reach their homes by nightfall.

More of the strange, cool, calm bubbles of understanding welled up and burst at the centre of his awareness:

“They are afraid of being afflicted by the same spirits they assume he’s been assailed by.

“No one knows him so he is just some stranger curled up at the wayside – therefore not of their concern.

“‘It has been a day of ill-omen so it is best to leave all that smacks of any kind of bane quite alone’ – thus runs their thinking.

“He seems a pauper, although he carries much gold. Some who pass by believe that only risk will accompany any effort to help this fallen one. All compassion has dried up in the winds of the Just Reward.

“Others guess: ‘Perhaps she is only resting.’ Thus by all he is abandoned.”



Just after dawn of the next day Krishna was surprised by the sound of Khujjuttara’s distinctive footsteps along the path to the kuti where he and Dusaka stayed. The older monk was up in the cabin while Krishna rested on a low bench underneath, in the space between the stilts that held the structure up.

“Sorry to barge in so early – and I’m sure I’m not supposed to be here in this part of monastery by myself – but this one’s an emergency. Old Gavinna’s come round and she’s asking to see you. She’s still very sick – short of breath like she’s about to fade any moment – but as soon as she woke she said she had to talk to you; there’s a message she’s got to pass on.”

Krishna had been sitting in meditation but it took him no time to hop off the platform and to follow Khujjuttara down the track; around them a thousand birds of the forest were calling with their early-morning songs and, with the growing light of dawn, colour was washing back into the dense undergrowth all though the woods.

In the palace compound the reek of burnt wood and the cloying sweetness of the fatal oil still hung in the air and clung to the courtyards and buildings. The two of them sped through, as fast as Khujjuttara was able to go.

Gavinna and Kesini were sharing a room that had been turned by Vasuladatta into a sick-bay for them. It was usually her favourite sitting-room, with a broad open north-facing verandah that looked out over the garden and also caught cooling breezes off the river.

Kesini was up, smoothing the hair out of Gavinna's eyes with her one good hand. Her right arm now terminated in a clump of bandages about a hand-span below her elbow but she didn't seem to let this new infirmity get in the way of her tending to the one she loved so dearly.

"They're here, milady," the tall girl spoke gently to her, close by her ear. "Now don't be too long," Kesini assumed her most assertive frown, "She's ever so weak, in her body I mean, her mind's tougher than all of ours as usual."

"You think I couldn't guess we had visitors?" Gavinna chided, "with large male feet thumping on the floorboards and Khujjuttara's dainty tread? I may be blind but I'm not daft yet." She smiled and with her Kesini did too; it had been long days that her mistress had been unconscious and they had all feared she would slip from this life without ever waking again. To be teased thus was an especially precious treat:— Her mistress was almost back to her old self again.

Krishna stood at the end of the large bed where Gavinna lay, now propped up against a heap of pillows. Her red-gold hair, thickly interwoven with snowy white and grey, lay spread about her shoulders. He stared at the burn marks on her and, in amongst the scabs and lesions, the strange blue inkings that she had been coloured with in her childhood. On her unburnt arm these were much clearer and he saw that there were similar blue etchings at her temples.

"Another red-haired woman," he reflected, "I wonder..."

"You're a big lad aren't you?" The old seeress was sizing him up, despite having eyes like rocks of opal. "I can hear your breath coming from way up there – you're even a head above Kesini."

"*Almost* a head," the girl chimed in, being proud of her stature as a warrior-noble woman.

Gavinna inhaled heavily, gasping for a moment. The room went quiet while she settled and her breath evened out again.

"It's nearly gone... my air... my share of the airs of earth... Like the rest of my people, I sang with the voice of a gandharva... now, I search for just enough to make a lungful." She paused again and an expression of focused intent crossed her visage.

"I am glad you came," she spoke in a different tone now, no longer chirpy and conversational but from some denser, richer place. "My people are often gifted with visions, as are you, and some of them make more sense than others."

“When my sight was opened, in Taxila, many years ago, the very first apparition that appeared to me was the blessed Sanat Kumara himself. I did not know who he was then, just that a beautiful, long-haired youth stood before me and he wrote, in letters of fire in my own tongue, which I could scarcely read myself yet which I understood perfectly.”

She paused again and her lids closed over her vacant eyes. Krishna, Kesini and Khujjuttara all stood rapt, hearing only the sounds of their own breath and the labored rasping of the seeress.

“He wrote in runes of flame on the ground before me – I remembered them always but I did not understand them until now, now that Samavati and her ill-starred sister, your sisters, have passed on.” Each phrase was carefully spoken but seemed harder and harder for her to utter.

*“When the kindly queen has burned
And she who caused it has gone too,
The darkling brother will return;
Give him the key, this you must do.*

“This was the verse of flame, the rune that the Eternal Youth wrote for me that day... for you... the key...” Krishna’s heart pounded and his palms prickled with sweat. The blind eyes of Gavinna were wide open again.

“The key... The best way to evade the King of Death they say... to blindfold Mara, to defeat him... is to... remember... remember... LISTEN! **SWUN Y MOR** SWUN Y MOR...LISTEN: **SWUN Y MOR**... listen: SWUN Y MOR... The sages of the North say, ‘Merely turn your hearing round... To listen to your genuine true nature, which... which is the destination of the Path that is supreme.’ *Sûn úh... mōhr*... This is a genuine way... to break through... to enlightenment. This will lead you... to the Eternal... the Deathless... to the Other Shore. The sea... the sea – listen... ”

“You’d better go – she’s tired,” the blunt, anxious tone of Kesini’s voice jolted Krishna from his fixity on the aged wise woman and her mysterious words:– Perhaps he should insist on staying and asking more.

One look at Kesini’s concern-racked expression stopped that thought short; besides he reflected:– They could come back some other time and he could find out about what exactly she meant by, was it ‘Sûn? Suehn? Sûn? Soo-náh? Soon? Moor? Úh-more? Ohr-more? Mōr? Mōhr?’

“‘Sooner... More...’ What on earth did she mean by that?”



“His Majesty has invited us for lunch,” Lady Vasuladatta met Khujjuttara and Krishna in the vestibule of her apartments as they were heading out, wrapped deeply in conversation with each other.

“I’m very happy for you Ma’am, I’m sure it will be delicious,” Khujjuttara responded, somewhat automatically. Vasuladatta caught the misunderstanding in her tone of voice and clarified, “Not ‘us’ as in ‘the royal *we*’ but ‘us’ as in you two as well as myself,” she grinned – thoroughly delighting in the gobsmacked look painted on the slave’s dark features, it was a rare thing indeed to catch Khujjuttara by surprise.

Krishna did not quite comprehend the depth of strangeness, the shattering of protocol that such an invitation represented. His last few weeks had been colourful in the extreme, and he could call a naga queen one of his closest friends, so it was hard for him to understand why the normally unflappable, unshakeable Khujjuttara was now literally frozen in her tracks with her mouth hanging open like a gaping half-witted loon.

Vasuladatta swept up to her and took her arm, “Come on girl. Don’t just stand there catching flies. Let’s find you something suitable to wear – I have a feeling this is going to be a special day for you.”



The lunch was indeed a splendid affair. Khujjuttara and Vasuladatta were impressed to a high degree by the sincere warmth and solicitousness that King Udena showed them. Krishna, having been something of a favourite child, was always prone to thinking he deserved special treatment so he was a little more blasé about the Royal Favour that was now being bestowed so generously upon them.

“I am a warrior-noble king,” said Udena, now thoughtfully picking his teeth, “and thus prone to being a puffed-up, short-tempered, vain and fickle fool. However, I do learn, or at least I *can* learn, and I can offer rewards where they are due.” They all remembered the duplicitously named ‘Ceremony of Just Reward’ that had been the execution of Magandiya and her family.

“I did your mistress, the noble Queen Samavati, grievous wrong, Khujjuttara, in doubting her virtue and, through negligence, contributing to her untimely death. I cannot bring her back, either for myself, or for you – her most dear and faithful friend and servant – I can, however ask for your forgiveness for this gross fault of mine and for the way I was forced to treat you in the wake of your mistress’ death. I hope you now see that, in order to draw the truth from Magandiya and to bring about just retribution, I was obliged to still your protests, without explanation. Had I revealed my intentions in any way, the truth would not have been forthcoming.

“Anyway, despite your status as a slave, it weighs upon my conscience that your faithfulness to noble Samavati was insulted. In recompense I would like to release you from your bondage as a slave to the royal house and, from this moment forth, I grant you freedom, together with a pension of one hundred gold kahapanas a year until the end of your life.”

“Not wishing to seem ungrateful, or cheeky, Your Majesty, but, when it comes to freedom neither you nor anyone else can grant that to another person – not even the Buddha himself can do that – only wisdom liberates us. For, as you have seen for yourself, you can be a king on a high throne but your conscience can be weighed down with shackles that are heavier than those on any jailbird.” Khujjuttara delivered this impromptu homily with her eyes directed largely at the floor-tiles, risking only an occasional glance at the King’s face. He stayed quiet for a few moments, his expression betraying no emotion.

“Make that two hundred, no, two hundred and fifty per year,” he grinned, his face alight with fond appreciation.

“I must say, Your Majesty,” said Khujjuttara, now with a friendly open tone and less caution with her words, given that the King seemed to be in such a buoyant accommodating mood, “You did do a grand job of not letting anyone guess what you were up to – you ’ad everyone fooled. I’m not trying to flatter you to get even more cash,” she too grinned at that, “jes’ saying that you pulled that one off like a master.”

Again Udena waited a moment before replying, “I have often thought that, in addition to the Ten Qualities of a Noble Ruler that the Master has enumerated and would expound on so eloquently for me from time to time, an eleventh should be added – that of skilful dissembling. In the playing of the part of a king, if you wish to withhold some knowledge, for diplomatic reasons or suchlike, you have to hide the full facts even from yourself. You can’t let yourself *think* it, if you wish for the appearance to be fully convincing. One has to live the part one is trying to play with a total belief, only then will the impression one makes be fully effective. Obviously, in this instance, despite your flattering praise, Madame,” and he relished his first use of the honorific for the now former slave-woman, “I was not good enough at my part, for the brahmin Slyma managed to slip under the net when only a few paces away from being caught within my trap.”

The King’s attention then turned to Vasuladatta. “As I said, I *do* learn, or at least I *can* learn, and one thing that has come to me in the unfolding of this tragedy is that the search for fulfillment will never be consummated simply by the acquisition of something new and beautiful. That alone can never fully satisfy.

“Dear Lady, I have asked forgiveness from Khujjuttara for the wrong I did her and so I now ask for your gracious forgiveness also. After all of our years of love and friendship, can you forgive me for brushing you aside without a second thought? And,

before you answer that, would you also consider reassuming the throne as my one and only Queen?"

"Well, Your Majesty, I'm not sure if I fully recognize this new wise and humble Udena but, if I recall, he reminds me somewhat of the young prince I once eloped with, on the back of a charging elephant, nearly thirty Rains ago. That being the case, out of respect for the past, hope for the future and rejoicing in the present, I will say yes to both granting forgiveness and to ascending the throne."

The light in Udena's eyes was pure and bright, and free from the clouded fretfulness that had coloured them so often in recent years.

"This pleases me more than I can say in words, but perhaps a gesture that expresses my happiness and also my wish to honour both your graciousness and the nobility of the late Queen, is to undertake a vow of clear-mindedness.

"From this moment forth not a drop of flower-mead, or any of its relatives, will pass my lips again." At these words he picked up the flagon of puppharasa at his side which he had not touched throughout the meal, and turned it upside down, emptying every last drop into the roots of the large decorative fern that stood behind his seat in the dining chamber of his royal apartments. What this did for the fern is unknown but it was a gesture that stuck firmly in Udena's mind from that day onward.

Before they left, the King also expressed his regrets to Krishna; now being convinced that, through the ironic twists of karma, his two deceased wives had indeed been sisters and, strange as it may seem, this handsome night-black youth had indeed been their half-brother.

As they made their way out, Krishna asked the soon-to-be-queen-again Vasuladdata how it was that no one had seen that Magandiya had never really been a brahmin, also (even though it was hard to recall Tamba's colouring when he had been small) how come she seemed less copper-coloured now than when she had been young.

"Of course it was known that she dyed her hair, a whole crowd of women living together will always notice such things, but she seemed so keen to keep it private that no one made anything of it. As for her skin, well, again there are tricks we all use to make ourselves look fairer; she would stay out of the sun as much as she could and would always wear dark fabrics. These are common ploys, well-known to all of us who fuss about appearances.

"If she had spent as much time and effort on developing noble qualities as she did in holding up a façade, we would all have benefitted greatly. But, that's not how it was, was it?" She sighed, looking at Krishna with the kindest regard.

"Now you've lost both sisters, while we have lost dear Samavati and all those good women of her household, but some blessings have come from this misfortune as well, wouldn't you say? If nothing else the King is a sadder but wiser man, and he's given up the bottle – *and* the remarkable Khujjuttara has been granted her liberty – these are all a cause to celebrate."



Dusaka was stretched out on his side, resting his legs, on the low platform under the shade of the kuti. Krishna sat across from him on a grass mat, lazily scratching Tingri's head and occasionally, when she rolled over onto her back, the bib of white fur on her brisket.

Krishna was in full flow of a monologue, not quite sure if Dusaka was listening or dozing, but carrying on regardless. He was used to his flood of words causing people to switch off.

"I was at the edge of the village, Kulluta that is, just at day-break and my thoughts were running: 'You could have killed him easily, you could still do it now – go back and take the girl. She really loves you, you know the way she looks at you sometimes... Don't be a coward, a *weaking*, take what is rightly yours.

"Remember the feeling of the knife at his throat? Were you ever greater, more powerful than at that moment? His life totally at your mercy. Did you ever feel more alive? Was any moment ever so delicious?"

"Then I felt how it was strange that my thoughts seemed to be talking to me rather than coming from me. My mind was very cool and clear, like the autumn air high above the mists of the valley.

"Yes,' I said to myself, 'the bait was delicious and I ate it, but I didn't spring the trap.' Then, in that dawn grey-light, I had the strangest feeling of half of my thoughts in this dialogue moving outside of myself.

"I don't know if I actually turned, or if it was all inside me, but something shifted and there, not an arm-span away on the narrow lane leading out of the village, was a smoky dolorous haze, a swirl of somber shadow. I felt oddly calm, certain of myself: 'I know you, Mara,' I said, 'you are Namuci, kin of all the negligent, the Evil One. I can see you now. The thrill of wielding the knife was delicious, but all that goes with it disgusts me – I ate the bait and now depart, leaving the Hunter to lament.'

"I walked on, leaving that chill presence behind me.

"Game to you, puppy,' the voice of the shadow called out, snide and bitter – I turned to look at it again – 'but it would not be wise to gloat. Next time we meet, I warrant, you will not see me so easily.

"Besides, haven't you heard:

*No bribe can move relentless Death,
No kindness mollify,
No one in fight can vanquish Death
For all are doomed to die."*

Krishna went quiet for a while, reflecting on the verse he had just recited and the mysterious encounter that had spawned it.

"You were the one who saved me," he spoke in a softer, appreciative tone.

"I?" Dusaka cocked his head and raised an eyebrow; this was an odd sight as he was still on his side and had not yet bothered to open his eyes.

Krishna laughed, "Yes, just like that! Only you were standing upright, facing me. All you did was look at me and hoist one eyebrow, like you do. It stopped my stupid game in the slaughterhouse like an arrow bringing down a bird, or better, like releasing a trapped animal that was being baited. You came to me in that vision and it stopped me in my tracks; thank you for rescuing me, *and* that poor Jayanta, both of us should be grateful to you."

"No," grunted Dusaka, levering himself up into a sitting position, "it was *you* Krishna, I was busy elsewhere at the time," he raised both eyebrows now. "Sometimes our own wisdom puts on the guises of others, wears their faces, just to lend more weight to the message.

"It is not easy to evade the King of Death but on this occasion, Krishna, you did it on your own." Dusaka did not go on to say, "Therefore he'll never be able to catch you out again," nevertheless Krishna was so flushed with the compliment that he failed to notice this minor omission in Dusaka's encouraging words.

He wanted to affirm the power of this insight, that killing is an utter defiance of spiritual truth, but he was not sure how to sustain the realization.

"Something in me wanted to believe that that kind of dominance is true power over life and death, divine power, but it's not, is it? It's just the cheap thrill gained by the weak and insecure from having an edge of power over another. It's truly pathetic.

"Even this morning, when we were with King Udena and he was being so humble and apologetic; he really meant what he was saying but you could also tell that he was very happy to have been able to destroy Magandiya, my sister Tamba, in the way that he did. He expressed no regret about that at all. I found myself waiting for him to say something – but he never did. He still relished that illusion of power..." His words tailed off as he realized he was making assumptions about others that were based on little more than his own perceptions and guesses.

"Anyway, I see I need to be more monk-like. Killing is the exact opposite of the holy life. The monastic life runs so directly counter to that way of killing, disrespecting the lives of others in the most cruel and selfish ways, that I know I need to commit to it more fully." His tears began to flow with the welling regret for all the killing that he had done; the pleading, distressed faces of the animals he had slaughtered, and even his hand, writing the cruel words to his mother, floated up before him. "Will you promise me, whether you happen to appear in visions or not, that you'll help me to keep this vow – to never deliberately take life ever again?"

“Promise,” replied Dusaka, with a weather-beaten smile and a sparkle in his scabby face that made him look like the world’s most loveable uncle. Tingri ceased panting for a moment and barked her agreement also.



Later in the afternoon, once the heat of the day had abated, Dusaka heaved himself off the platform, announcing to Krishna, “Come on lad; if you’re serious about some proper monastic training, let’s go and talk to the Master about it.” He was already in motion before Krishna had much time to think, let alone say anything on the subject.

The old monk was heading off down the forest path with Tingri trotting at his heels so Krishna put all his hesitations aside and followed after. Along the way they picked up Maggot, Ant and Ninka, so they all went together to find the Buddha.

At this time of day he would customarily receive visitors in the large open space underneath the Gandha-kuti, ‘the fragrant chamber’ as his dwelling places were known, as there was always the aroma of a heavenly perfume hovering around those buildings. On the way there Maggot was very happy to see Ant and Ninka continuing their animated conversation, and that Krishna barely glanced at the radiant deva. She knew she should not be concerned about such things, especially when in a monastery, but she also knew that sometimes you just can’t help it.

When they reached the Gandha-kuti they saw that the Buddha was talking to a large group of nuns. They had come from the Pavariyarama monastery to pay their respects, having heard that he had arrived in Kosambi the evening before.

“That’s the elder Uppalavanna,” Maggot said quietly to Krishna as they approached, “she is an enlightened one and the greatest of all the sisters in her mastery of psychic powers,” she was indicating the peaceful bright-looking nun at the front of the group who was now conversing with the Master. The sisters wore ochre robes and had shaven heads, just like their brother monks.

Uppalavanna was of about the same age as the Buddha and was blessed with great physical beauty, as well as an aura of serenity and carefree ease. Next to her sat another nun in her middle years but whose expression was more severe.

“That’s Sister Khema, she is the wisest of all the bhikkhunis – if you ever have any questions about the teachings, she will have the answer,” Maggot’s voice was now down to a whisper as the group was endeavouring to arrive quietly.

Dusaka and Krishna sat themselves down to one side and listened delightedly to the teachings the Master was giving to the nuns. After a time the elder Uppalavanna noted the goldening light of the sun as it lowered itself toward the west and the lengthening shadows of the trees around them. The cicadas were beginning to wail with their eerie evening sirens so she took this as their cue for the nuns to leave.

“Venerable Father, the sun is falling and so we must take our leave, in order to be back at our monastery before dusk is upon us. We are delighted that you are with us in Kosambi once again.” She then bowed with the whole group of bhikkhunis and novice nuns and they rose up to withdraw.

Only when they stood up and walked away did Krishna realize that, on the other side of where they had been seated, was Khujjuttara together with some trays piled high with garlanded offerings of many kinds.

She shuffled forward on her knees and bowed three times to the Buddha. Then, one by one, she presented the trays of gifts. They could see that these consisted of some small bolts of cloth, flasks and packets of medicine of various kinds, incense, candles and garlands of many sorts of flowers.

“Venerable Sir, my name is Khujjuttara, forgive my awkward clumsiness in making these offerings but, until today, I had little means to obtain things that would be useful to the monastic community,” her face was alive with joy as she said this, “so I’m not very used to presenting things to monks and, besides, this body makes it tricky for me to do much in a graceful way.”

“I know well who you are, Khujjuttara, for you have attended many teachings and have listened more attentively than many of the bhikkhus at the Ghositarama. Indeed, although you know it not yourself, you are the foremost of the lay women who are learned in the teachings and able to expound the Dharma.

“Just as your mistress, the noble Queen Samavati, was foremost of those who live in kindness, so too have you surpassed all others in the accomplishment of learning and expounding, so you should be acknowledged for that excellence. You are one of the truly noble ones, Khujjuttara; but you knew *that* for yourself already.”

The kinnaris and Ninka, Krishna and Dusaka listened in happily to the dialogue between the Buddha and Khujjuttara as it unfolded. Ananda’s expression was aglow with sympathetic joy for this noble person’s spiritual achievements as well as for the knowledge that she would no longer have to live in slavery.

When she too had taken her leave, Dusaka brought his little group forward and they in turn paid their respects to the Master. He introduced the kinnaris and Ninka to him, using their formal names that he’d somehow picked up along the way. Lastly he told him about Krishna being half-brother to both Samavati and Magandiya.

Krishna had expected the Buddha to say something about this, or to make some kind of encouraging prophecy, but the Master simply looked at him silently for a few moments with no expression on his face. This caused a flush of discomfort in Krishna and he awkwardly asked, “So, you know each other, then?” in a painfully would-be-casual manner. The two great beings both gave rise to identical half-smiles.

“We have met...”

“... along the way.”

“This wanderer, who has been your teacher,” the Buddha expanded, “is one in the lineage of the Tathagatas. You are very blessed that he has given you so much of his wise counsel.”

“Yes, I am really grateful for all the help he’s given me. I’m afraid I am not a very good student though and it often takes me a while to get the point. Not like Khujjuttara – she’s sharp as a razor and never misses a thing,” at this Dusaka looked down at Tingri as if to say, “Well, at least he is aware he’s slow on the uptake, that’s something...”

The Buddha did not respond for a moment. He looked around the small group of visitors and the various monks and novices gathered there who were eager to hear whatever teachings he might impart. He spoke:

“Khujjuttara is indeed of rare accomplishment, not only is she the foremost in learning, as was said but, as she listened to the teachings last night she became one of the non-returners, one destined to realize full enlightenment in the higher realms, the Pure Abodes, and never to be born in the human realm again. In fact, so full is her spiritual achievement that she will be one of those who will be fully liberated at the moment she appears in that realm, just as did Ghatikara and Pukkusati.

“What is more, in future times, after the Tathagata has reached his final passing away, when all the Dharma teachings are collected together, there will be only one book in that entire collection of scriptures that will have been spoken by a lay-disciple. That one disciple will be Khujjuttara; truly she is most highly favoured.”

At this comment, the ever-astute and attentive Ananda chimed in. “Venerable Father, truly Khujjuttara is one of great spiritual achievements, how is it then that she was born in this life as a slave and with such infirmities as she has?” The monks, again, recognized this as being likely to lead into one of their Master’s infinite catalogue of karmic histories, and so they all leaned closer.

“In the same royal household as the queen who was responsible for the burning of that enlightened one – the one who became Samavati in this life – there lived a serving-woman who was intelligent but often playful.

“Of those monks who were supported by the royal family, one was slightly hunchbacked. One day that serving-woman, throwing a blanket over her shoulder and taking up a golden bowl in her hand, bent over and shuffled across the hall so that she looked like a hunchback, saying, ‘This is how our enlightened master walks.’ It was in consequence of this cruel jest that, in this lifetime, she was born in the same afflicted form.

“Nevertheless, she learned from and attended to those enlightened ones with great faith and resourcefulness and, during that lifetime she entered the stream and thus became assured of eventual enlightenment herself within seven births. That act of mockery, however, was an unkind one and, necessarily, it had to have its result eventually. For, as has been said:

*Not in the sky nor depths of sea,
Nor hiding in a mountain cleft –
There is no place one can escape
The consequence of harmful deeds."*

As the Buddha said this Krishna was reminded of the conversation he had had with King Udena that very morning and how the King had told them that Slyma the brahmin had got away. He was just on the verge of asking, "Then how come...?" when once again the scene before his eyes shimmered and transformed.



It was the same spot by the roadside that he had seen before, although now it was lit by the pale moonlight of early evening.

A small group of soldiers and a couple of village men were gathered together talking: "She's nothing to do with us, not from our village." "She must have died hours ago – look, she's as stiff as a board – poor old biddy's got no one to burn her." "If something's not done she'll stink the place up in no time in this hot weather." "It's the King's job to look after the highways."

The discussion rattled back and forth inconclusively. Then, more by way of getting these locals off his back than out of any real sense of duty, the Sargeant said, "All right, Punna, and you two, we'd better deal with her tonight; get some firewood from round here and we'll see her sorted."

The villagers directed them to a charnel ground in the forest by the road a few hundred paces away. Two of the soldiers picked up the now-rigid old woman and carried her body to the spot, in a small clearing away from the main track.

As Krishna watched these images unfolding he grew closer and closer to the old woman's face and then he seemed to hear her thoughts, bursting through into his consciousness:

"What are you doing?! I'm alive! Put me down... the poison will wear off. Can't you see!? Can't move... not even my eyes... Got to... How can I get..."

It was a man's voice he heard, and then those strange clear waves of insight started to bubble up to the surface again, with their clear cool tone of certainty:

"He set immovable charms in place to hide his form; now he can't remove them. Even if he could, the soldiers would then know his true identity.

"All volitional movement is now impossible but he's right, if they waited, the poison would wear off in half a day and he could walk away. But that will not happen now."

The soldiers gathered what fallen wood they could find, which was not much because of recent cremations at that spot. They heaped it up on the burning mound as neatly as they were able and unceremoniously placed the plank-stiff body on top.

"That's enough wood, I reckon; well it's all she's going to get from me. We've been on the trot all day, *and* in this heat."

The tense, terrified stream of thoughts broke through again:

"No... what are you doing!?! You can't do this to me... don't you know who I *am*? Stop! Stop it...! Don't!"

Then the vision dissolved.



"Krishna? Are you with us?" Dusaka was talking to him and Tingri was rubbing her cold nose up against his hand.

"Oh! Sorry, I..." He blinked himself back to the present, shuddering at the slowly emergent realization of what was occurring in the visions. The feeling of relentlessness in the turning of these karmic wheels shook him deeply, adding a hefty spur to his intuition that he needed to do something serious about his spiritual training. It then came back to him that they had come over to see the Buddha to ask about exactly this.

"I would like to be a monk," he said, then realized that he had been living as some-kind-of-a-monk for the last two years, "a *proper* monk, like these, like the Venerable Ananda, like you." He knelt before the Buddha. "I will try my best. Will you accept me?"

"How old are you?" Asked the Master.

"Eighteen Rains," he replied, worried for a moment that he might be too young, but then realized that quite a few gathered there at the Gandha-kuti were considerably younger than he was. Some were even children of less than ten Rains but they wore robes and had shaven heads, just like all the other nuns and monks.

"You are too young to receive full acceptance into the order of bhikkhus, that can only come when you have reached twenty Rains, however you can be given the going forth as a novice, a samanera. Do you have your parents' permission?"

Krishna felt a sickening wave of anxiety as he thought the Buddha might know of the circumstances of his mother's death but then he realized that there was nothing to do but hope that, even if he did know, he would choose to make nothing of it.

"My father left the home-life to be a wanderer long ago and my mother has passed away," he waited for an axe or at least a sharp and weighted comment to fall, but there was nothing.

"In that case, Ananda, please take this boy and have him avow the Three Refuges and the Ten Precepts with you. If there are no robes or bowls in the monastery

storerooms, please let Ghosaka know and he will be happy to provide since he has made an open offer for this. Also, since this would be for his adoptive daughter's brother, he is certain to be especially pleased to make available what is needed."



"Can you tell me about mangalas?" Krishna had been inundating the elder Ananda with questions throughout the head-shaving, robing and other preparations for the ceremony. The flood abated slightly while the formalities were being taken care of but, as soon as he had finished the 'taking of dependence' on Ananda as his mentor, it started up again. Now he was onto the subject of his keenest interest for he both treasured the powers his amulet had provided him with but also saw its limitations; he had been quite unable to stop the deaths of others.

"Well, there are many kinds of mangalas, which sort are you interested in?" The elder asked, ingenuously for, as infinite as were the questions Krishna came up with, so too was the memorious and eloquent Ananda's capacity to patiently respond.

"The highest! The best, of course!" Krishna replied, already having developed a great affection for this kindly and encyclopedically knowledgeable monk, and knowing he would be endlessly ready to provide all the answers he could.

"You *do* realize," he lowered his gaze at the new novice, "that this is one of the most famous and oft-repeated teachings of the Master..."

Krishna's somewhat slack-jawed expression revealed that, unfortunately, this was news to him. The look said everything so the Elder, almost automatically, began to recite:

*"Thus have I heard that the Blessed One
Was staying at Savatthi
Residing at the Jeta's Grove
In Anathapindika's Park.
Then in the dark of the night, a radiant deva
Illuminated all Jeta's Grove.*

*She bowed down low before the Blessed One
Then standing to one side she said:
'Devas are concerned for happiness
And ever long for peace.
The same is true for humankind.
What then are the highest blessings?'*

*'Avoiding those of foolish ways;
Associating with the wise
And honouring those worthy of honour.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Living in places of suitable kinds,
With the fruits of past good deeds
And guided by the rightful way.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Accomplished in learning and craftsman's skills
With discipline, highly trained,
And speech that is true and pleasant to hear.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Providing for mother and father's support
And cherishing family,
And ways of work that harm no being.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Generosity and a righteous life,
Offering help to relatives and kin,
And acting in ways that leave no blame.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Steadfast in restraint, and shunning evil ways;
Avoiding intoxicants that dull the mind
And heedfulness in all things that arise.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Respectfulness and of humble ways,
Contentment and gratitude
And hearing the Dhamma frequently taught.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Patience and willingness to accept one's faults;
Seeing venerated seekers of the truth
And sharing often the words of Dhamma.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Ardent, committed to the Holy Life;
Seeing for oneself the Noble Truths
And the realization of Nirvana.
These are the highest blessings.*

*Although involved in worldly tasks,
Unshaken the mind remains
And beyond all sorrow, spotless, secure.
These are the highest blessings.*

*They who live by following this path
Know victory wherever they go
And every place for them is safe.
These are the highest blessings.”*

Krishna would not have admitted it then and there but, throughout the sonorous delivery of the elder, he kept waiting for him to get onto the part of the teaching that referred to things like his amulet, or protective mantras, magical spells and suchlike. He grumbled to himself later, “He didn’t mention *anything* useful.”



Bee was unconscious for most of the long journey from the yakkha capital of Visana to the Vejayanta Palace. She was tucked inside the battle-jerkin of Gumbiya and lay draped across his chest, her weakened fingers instinctively clutching his bristly pelt in her drained narcoleptic daze. The naga princess Irandati and her husband, the yakkha-chieftan Punnaka, flew with them as guards for there was great concern they would be tracked and assaulted by the group whose captives they had released.

They were all relieved when they arrived at Masakkasara without incident. They were taken to a small quiet chamber by some of the deva-residents of the palace and Bee was given a chance to recoup her strength a little. Queen Suja had provided some healing draughts made of lotus-nectar and this helped Bee to regain some energy. Her skin was still almost transparent, glassy, and her eyes blurry, but she felt sure another night’s rest would be enough to restore her juices. She was determined to do her part as Lord Indra had requested.



The Sudhamma Hall was splendid, with vast columns, jeweled banners of coral and pearl, and cloth-of-gold draperies studded with the nine types of precious stones that seemed lit from within like living creatures: cat's eyes and garnets, corals and moonstones, diamonds, rubies, emeralds, and yellow and blue sapphires. It made the reception hall where they had gathered before the raid on Pubbavideha look pale in comparison. This was especially so now as Lord Indra and Lady Suja were throned at the centre and, at their side sat the fearsome asura Vepacitti, Suja's father. Arrayed about them were the Thirty-three gods themselves, the elders of this exquisite heavenly realm. The host of the deva court sat throughout the hall and all were dressed in the most delicate finery. The gandharvas decorated the air with soft melodies and the scents of celestial blossoms wafted through the chamber in fragrant waves.

Bee was dressed in her usual garnet-coloured flower-gauze, a little travel-worn and battered from the travails of the last few days, but concern about being poorly clad in such glorious company was not something that bothered her in the slightest. All her will was focused on walking with a firm stride into the midst of this assembly, to speak as a witness for this court of the high deities.

Some of the female devas who had looked after her the previous evening guided her along and helped her up onto the seat provided for her at the very centre of the court. Lord Indra welcomed her and thanked her for agreeing to help them discover what the truth was in the issue of the kidnappings and the raids they had all suffered.

Despite her assurances to the others that she would be plentifully strong to perform this role, she still looked deathly pale and worn, hollow-eyed, translucent. Somehow though she managed to draw sufficient vitality from the gathering and began her account of the rescue of the kinnaris from the cave in the Parvati Valley.

As her tale unfolded a worried Pitipuppha felt a glow of sweet relief:— She had only mentioned the guardian vajrapani yakkha and had not named any of those she met later. Perhaps this was going to be easier than he had feared.

“May be she's being discreet and intends to... accommodate us, for a price, I suppose... but still... Besides, how could a dumb animal like her ever *dare* to implicate royal devas, ones so much higher in station, and in refinement of being, than herself... she's practically half plant, like all the product.” Pitipuppha's thoughts ran on until he noticed that she had concluded her account. No word had been spoken of the devas' involvement. A self-satisfied smirk draped itself across his face. He pulled a small vial of Amatagandha out of the folds of his robes and inhaled with fulsome relish.

“Well, father, what a good job it was that young Krishna and his friends were there to come to the rescue, eh?” Prince Suvira blurted this out with relieved bravado, delighted like Pitipuppha that the kinnari was not going to betray them, for some reason of her own. He was also somewhat flushed with the emboldening effects of the perfume.

Lord Indra slowly turned to look at his son. "That's interesting. I wonder how you heard that the human boy was a part of the group that set the kinnaris free. The party that split off from the raiding commandos was composed of a naga, three kinnaris and two asparas, I believe."

"Ah, yes," Suvira opened and closed his mouth a few times like a gem-studded fish supping mayflies, "I, errhhh... Pitipuppha told me. Yes! You know how he's always got the latest word on things." He desperately hoped that his quick-thinking and resourceful friend would come up with a credible answer to cover their tracks.

Before the son of General Isana had a chance to speak, Lord Indra turned to him and said, "Perhaps that noxious perfume you have been using, Pitipuppha, has also gifted you with psychic powers for, before I entered this hall, only the kinnari Mahapaduma-sundari, Sergeant Gumbiya and I knew of the human boy's involvement and exactly how the kinnaris were freed." He turned to attend to Bee once more; she was doing her best to keep upright but her mind was swimming in and out of focus.

"Paduma, tell us, were there any signs of asura involvement in the capture and imprisonment, the mutilation of your fellow kinnaris?"

"None at all, Sire," she answered.

Lord Vepacitti grunted with titanic satisfaction at this response.

"You are quite sure?"

"*Absolutely*, Sire," she drew upon a rising wrath as the memory of that hellish leeching-den rose in her mind. Her voice was now strong and clear.

Suvira felt a growing panic, "Oh, well, that's splendid, isn't it? This means major conflict has been averted and Grandpapa can return home happily... All's well that ends well, eh what?"

His father did not deign to look at him, let alone acknowledge this vainly hopeless remark:- Did he think that the kinnaris had locked themselves up in that noisome dungeon?

The deva-king now rested his eyes gently on the frail nymph seated before him. "Do you recognize here any of those whom you saw in the cave?" His tone was low and level.

"Yes, Sire, I do." Bee's response was equally steady and sure.

"Can you point them out to us?"

Bee knew the names of the devas who had been on the raid with them but not the others, so she stood up and silently walked over to Prince Suvira, Princesses Asa and Saddha, then to Pitipuppha and his two brothers, Bhaddasena and Vamagotta, indicating them one by one.

"There were also two nagas who are not here at present, some eight or nine yakkhas of various families and several kumbhandas."

"The poor thing," spluttered Suvira, "she's suffered horribly, must have been hallucinating... I mean, how could anyone think..." but the thunderous look on the

faces of his usually beautiful sisters, and the equally enraged and also fearful expressions of the sons of Isana, said all that needed to be said.

“Would you like me to undergo a Rite of Truth, Your Majesty?” Bee was standing before Lord Indra, “To accuse your children is a serious matter, and I am only an ordinary kinnari. I have no fear if that should be needed.” She knew that to tell a conscious lie in such a Rite would mean instantaneous death for her.

“No, child,” it was Lady Suja who now spoke, “that will not be necessary.”

“Indeed,” Indra concurred, “we have seen and heard enough.”

Bee put her palms together and bowed her head, then slid to the jeweled floor, out cold.



Indra’s interrogation of his children and the other plotters revealed that Pitipuppha had first hatched the idea of distilling the perfume after hearing legends of the invigorating power of kinnari blood-essence. He had experimented on his own after studying the arts of perfumery with various eminent and honourable beings.

He had drawn Suvira in and then swiftly inculcated his own brothers, and the two vain sisters, as the scent was both so seductively fragrant and so addictively vitalizing.

It had been his idea to foment a fresh conflict between the asuras and the devas, the scheme being to use this ancient antipathy as a smokescreen to hide their true purpose – that of seizing as much ‘product,’ that is to say living kinnaris, as possible and to use their blood-essence to brew the concoction.

By the use of bribes and promises of power he had inveigled various unscrupulous or easily manipulated yakkhas, as well as nagas and khumbhandas to do most of the dirty work. At first they were hired to pick off stray kinnaris here and there, but Pitipuppha and his brothers had taken the lives of more than a few themselves in order to feed their supply. For they soon found that, once they had started to use Amatagandha regularly, if they went without it for any length of time, life became unbearably flat and dreary.

At the end of the long examination, Lord Indra concluded: “With so many devas eager for more of the entrancing perfume, they were willing to offer great wealth, to trade favours and influence, just to be sure that the supply would not stop. We are fortunate this has only been going on for... how long?”

Before the shamefaced perpetrators could reply to this, Hiri and Siri waded in with their customary bluntness, “How could you kill them innocent things, just so you could make *perfume*?”

“You nearly started a war over wanting to smell nice?”

"That's unbelievable!"

"How could you be so..."

Pitipupha couldn't contain himself any longer, "It's not *just* perfume! How could you scum ever understand? It's about being fully *alive*! It's being *awake*... Besides, they are only animals – what's wrong with killing them? They are scarcely more than plant-matter, really."

"It's true," Suvira jumped in, "I told you before; Amatagandha is *life*! It's *happiness*! For Pitipuppha..."

"It's wealth..." interjected Hiri.

"... and it's power..." added Siri.

"...and it's over." Indra's calm and steady voice was now laden with grim import.

"I have looked into this question already, far more than any of you realize. You have noticed that when you stop using the perfume, you become sad and depressed. If you have paid attention you will have noticed another effect as well," The deva-king now had all six of the chief miscreants kneeling before Queen Suja, Lord Vepacitti and himself.

"Just as the perfume smells uniquely delightful according to the tastes of the one who inhales it, in its absence the one who is addicted to its use will smell uniquely foul, according to those same tastes, and will be unable to mask its influence. You will also find that this effect lasts for a lot longer than that of odours experienced as pleasant.

"You are free to go – all of you except for Pitipuppha, that is – to go where you please, but whether any of the other devas of this heaven will choose to be near you and to be subjected to your foetid stench is up to them.

"Lord Vepacitti, please take this foolish being," he indicated Pitipuppha with a brief tilt of his head, "and do with him as you see fit. He was happy to implicate you and to see you shackled and shamed, so it seems only fitting that you choose some suitable redress for that, as well as for the loss of innocent lives." The deva-king's face wore a mask of terrible beauty as he said this. Hardly anyone dared look at him as the weight of his judgment sank in.

"The others who were involved in this gruesome affair will be handed over to their various authorities – Lord Virupakkha will deal with the nagas; Lord Vessavana, the yakkhas; Lord Virulhaka, the kumbhandas – they will be dealt with according to their various codes of law.

"All the stocks of this sickening distillate will be given back to the kinnaris; they will hold their own ceremonies of lamentation over this and will care for it according to their customs for the dead.

"That is all," he turned to Queen Suja and Lord Vepacitti, they nodded in accord, "this court is now dissolved."



The freshly shaven and ochre-robed Krishna sat down alone to meditate at the end of the long evening – it had been quite a day. Crickets rang loud in the forest night and the moonlight gleamed on the ten-thousand leaves of the undergrowth around the kuti. He could hear Tingri softly snoring in the room above his head. He felt intensely happy to have joined the Buddha’s order of monks. He closed his eyes and endeavoured to focus his mind upon his breathing.

In a flash the scene of the charnel ground appeared before him again, vivid in every detail now. The fire had been lit under the old woman whom he saw was charring but the body had hardly burned. There was not a lot of wood under her, but still it seemed strange that the fire was so well along yet she seemed almost unchanged beyond some scorching. Then the lucid bubbles of understanding started to rise and burst again:

“The soldiers have gone to carry on with their gambling. Punnamukha has regained his usual physical form and he’d like to win his masakas back as well.

“The skin won’t break because of the charms he laid upon himself but beneath it his blood and fat are boiling.

“The flames are stealing his breath but still he lives; now he is begging for death but it will not come because of the efficacy of his spells. His own skills are now the prolongors of his torture.”

Krishna saw that the flames had died down somewhat and, from the shadows around the area of the fire, a pack of scavenging stray dogs appeared.

The leader of the pack made a lunge for the burning woman’s arm and, with little difficulty, pulled the body from the glowing coals. The dog wrestled with the limb furiously, trying to wrench it free but the skin and the tendons would not break. The remainder of the pack moved in, each trying to sink their teeth in, and tearing all the harder when they failed to puncture the surface.

The cool inner voice ballooned into being once more: “His breath is fading as the life force departs.”

Then the other voice came in, as if kicking through this mellow poise, upsetting it like a tray of dishes knocked crashing to the ground. A howl of anguish sounded:

“Oh Brahma, Brahma help me! For the love of Braaahhh...”

With this the old woman’s body grew suddenly longer and stouter, the features of a man appeared as the wrinkles faded, his face torn open instead into a dying scream of pain and terror. With that sound the dogs could at last break into the flesh they smelled and craved. They tore limb from limb and wrenched red chunks of the charred skin and flesh from its bones.

The serene inner voice spoke one last time: "Such is the fate of the low, the impoverished and the worthless of the world – low and worthless in the eyes of the selfish and the proud."



"I think I've figured it all out." It was after Krishna's first meal as a novice monk and, ideally, he should have been doing some walking meditation for a while. However, he had been struck by all sorts of fascinating realizations during the course of eating the meal with the other monks and novices of Ghositarama and he was keen to share them with Dusaka as soon as possible.

"Merely escaping physical death does not equal 'power over Death.' Evading physical death is fine and good for yourself, very handy, but it can't save others from dying. So it's clear to me now how this mangala you gave me is not enough. Nor does the ability to administer death, the relish at taking life, mean that one is divine or has power over death either.

"To take delight in killing, assuming it gives one divine power, is the most terrible of delusions – in fact it is a gesture of hatred towards life itself, it is a true 'death-affirmation' – that's what I learned from my year at the knacker's yard.

"Instead, life itself should be fully affirmed, we should live it to the hilt. I realized that's exactly what Gavinna, the red-haired woman you said was so important, was telling me."

"She did? That surprises me." Dusaka raised a single scabby eye-brow.

"Well, you don't know *everything*...

"She told me the secret of evading Death is to go for everything 'Sooner!' Don't wait around. And always go for 'More!' Do everything to the hilt, to the limit; taste all of life to the full, right now – that's *real* freedom!" Krishna was highly pleased with the way this philosophy fitted snugly into all he had seen and heard so far.

"Are you sure she meant that? What she said *might* have been undisonant; are you certain she was even speaking your language?"

"Yes! It was *exactly* my language, my kind of ideas precisely. And that was also what the Buddha was saying about being mindful the other night."

"It was?"

"Yes! He as much as said that Samavati hadn't been mindful enough, or had used the wrong kind of mindfulness."

"He did?"

"For sure. What he said about 'The mindful never die,' it's obvious he meant Samavati had it all wrong... If just being meek and compliant, so obedient and restrained were the Path, she wouldn't have died."

Dusaka found it hard to credit that Krishna could have so radically misunderstood the Master's teaching but then, on reflection, he had seen that his young student had been so transfixed by the power and sheer radiant beauty of the Buddha's presence that he had probably missed most of the message in the dazzle. Rather than the meaning the Buddha intended all he got was a mess of his own confused projections:— So it goes...

"Hmmm... Are you sure about all that?" Dusaka now tried to steer him little.

"Absolutely! Isn't it right there in the word itself: 'mind-*full*-ness'? It means 'fill your mind' with life lived to the full: 'Sooner! More!' That's the Way!"

"Did you ever hear the story about the disaster at Vesali?" Dusaka thought he'd need to use an extreme example to get his point across. Krishna looked a little blank and Dusaka took this as a sign to carry on:

"The Master had been giving a lot of teachings about the unattractive aspects of the body, to help the bhikkhus at Vesali get beyond the feeling of lust. It's a well-known and oft-used teaching for monastics. Well, the Master went off to be alone in retreat and, while he was gone, Mara entered the minds of many of the inexperienced monks there. One in particular – who was fanatical, eloquent and strong-minded – stirred everyone up to believe they were supposed to hate their own bodies and that this is what the Master wanted them to feel. A whole crowd of them grew repelled and utterly disgusted with their bodies and they either took their own lives or they went looking for an assailant to do it for them.

"Mara, the Killer, entered into one fellow called Migalandika, a sham-wanderer, and he offered to do in any of the bhikkhus who wanted to end it all. In one day twenty or even thirty bhikkhus used his knife. It was carnage. That's what I meant by 'disaster.'

"Anyway, when the Master came back from his retreat he said, 'Before I left, Ananda, many bhikkhus were here in the assembly hall and this forest seemed ablaze with them. But now, after only half a month, the Sangha has become diminished, thin, scanty, like sparse foliage. What's going on? Where have all the bhikkhus gone?'

"Ananda told him what had happened. He then started teaching mindfulness of breathing instead, to those that were still breathing, that is."

Krishna was puzzled. "Why are you telling me all this? I've seen through that already. I know in my heart I never can and I never will deliberately kill anything ever again, not so much as mosquito, so I don't get what's in the story that's relevant for me."

"Perhaps the key element is how the monks radically misunderstood what the Master was teaching them, and how *that one little piece of wrong understanding led to much trouble and pain.*" Dusaka didn't usually like to spell things out so plainly, he preferred his charges to come to their own realizations as the lessons learned that way sank in far more deeply, however, he felt he should do his utmost to help Krishna get on track here.

“So?...?” Krishna still was not quite getting the point.

“So now you are a properly ordained novice monk, you might want to make sure you are understanding the Buddha’s instructions as he intends them to be understood.”

“Absolutely!” Krishna felt that at last he’d grasped the point Dusaka was trying to get across to him, “I agree completely!”



It then went quiet for a while. Krishna noticed that Dusaka and Tingri seemed to be having one of their wordless dialogues; Dusaka looking down into her shaggy little face while she snorted, snuffled and yipped a few brief barks. Dusaka then smiled again while the dog went to lie in the deeper shade underneath the platform.

Krishna had the distinct feeling he had been the subject of this inter-species dialogue and that he had not come out with quite as glowing a reputation as he would have hoped for. By way of changing the subject, and also because it had been on his mind, he decided to ask about his sister Tamba instead. To his surprise the old monk was quite forthcoming, there were none of the usual cryptic or sarcastic asides; it seemed that he too had been concerned about her:

“It was her father who urged her out onto the end of that limb by building up her sense of self-importance. She – being vulnerable and hungry for that kind of esteem – well, she didn’t see the fall that would inevitably come.” Krishna was touched by the sincere ruthless feeling in Dusaka’s description of his sister’s predicament; he even thought he saw the old man blink back a tear or two as he spoke.

“The Yonakas call it ‘hamartia’ – they have words for everything, that lot – the innocent but tragic flaw that ended up destroying her and her beloved sister. Tamba has always had an urgent need to set things right, for justice to be done at any cost. She got that mixed up and distorted with her own resentment for being left out, always left behind, and a desperate need to belong, to be chosen and to be loved. It turned into a fatal combination, in this life.”

“So,” Krishna probed, “will there be others?”

“Of course. Why should there not be?”



Bee rested, propped on a pile of pillows. She leant into them and breathed the floral essences that were so gladdening and strength-endowing to her. The cushions were laced with quickening herbs that made her feel as if she was inhaling diamonds that had lived and shimmered in the winds like radiant flowers of spring.

Musical patterns dressed the cool breezes that welled into her room from the gardens of Vejayanta. She felt the sounds and the aromas tingling in her being, slowly restoring her drained tissues to full life once again.

Amidst the dreamy currents of scent she had been enjoying, there appeared an unexpected but welcome note of bear-grease and leather, an insistent press of war-musk that crept into her nose and nipped it like overturned leaf-mould on the forest floor of the Himavant.

“Miss Bee?” She opened her eyes and was happy to see, through her dozy half-lifted lids, a somewhat familiar form standing in the doorway.

“You look smaller,” she smiled, her petal-pale features colouring with heartfelt warmth.

“Well, yes, this ain’t a very big room you’ve got ‘ere so I thought I should try to narrow down a bit.” The warrior-yakkha was trying hard not to be intrusive or clumsy but he really didn’t know what to say.

“Us yakkhas are not the greatest shape-shifters – not like yer nagas or some of the devas up ‘ere in the Thirty-three – but we can bend things a bit when we need to. Y’ know, pump ourselves up for fight or to give someone the willies, or shrink down a bit, almost to human size if we need to.”

“Really? That must be a tight fit.”

“It is a bit, to tell the truth. We gen’rally prefer our natural height – that’d be... what... a couple of kinnaris standing on top of each other – and we can’t get *that* small. Whenever we put on a human shape we’re always... substantial,” he wasn’t quite sure he was saying the right things but he carried on, doing his best to make conversation.

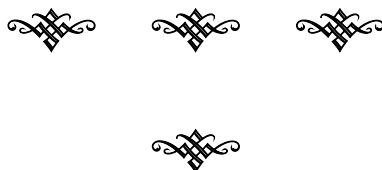
“You know – the fellers tend to be thick-set, strapping lads and the girls are always... ample.” Gumbiya was now stuck for words again. The room went still and quiet. Bee looked into his craggy, battle-worn face with its shy, tusky smile.

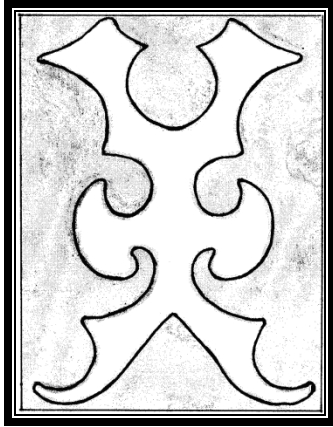
“You came back for me, all by yourself; that was very brave and noble of you. Why did you do that?” She cocked her head against the pillows, inquisitively.

“Well, miss, I er... I, er, *respect* you... a lot,” he turned his now almost bristle-free face to the floor and wasn’t sure what else to say.

Bee floated up from her bed and kissed the blushing yakkha tenderly.

“You know, Gumby,” she said after a while, “we’re really going to have to do something about those teeth.”





NOTES & REFERENCES:

Chapter 1:

1. Page 8 — **“I am He!”**... It seems very likely that the word ‘He’ used for this children’s game (in this case ‘off-ground He’) originally derives from the masculine pronoun, and the implication is that it is Death that the ‘He’ is referring to. Walter de la Mare makes this association in one of his poems:

*‘Twas life’s bright game,
And Death was ‘he.’*
‘Ding Dong Bell,’ 23

Often in this game the tagging person is known as ‘It’ rather than ‘He,’ but the neuter gender also fits in well with the idea that it is Death that is the catcher.

2. Page 10 — **in the local dialect...** In this story the language of the scriptures of the Southern Buddhist school, also known as Theravāda, is what is being referred to as ‘the local dialect’ – it is called Pali. It had no written script of its own and so, in this language, Buddhist teachings were originally passed on from generation to generation by rote learning of texts.

3. Page 10 — **the language of the ancient scriptures...** The language being referred to here is Sanskrit. This was a written language of the same period and it was used for all the sacred teachings of the Hindu religion, also known as ‘The Vedas’ – these books are what is being referred to here as ‘the ancient scriptures.’ Sanskrit was later employed to record Buddhist teachings as well.

4. Page 11 — **The Lord Buddha... in past lives of his... was also born with black skin...** For example in ‘The Jātaka – Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births,’ (PTS), the Kanha Jātaka, Jāt §440: “In the womb of this Brahmin’s wife was conceived the Bodhisatta, and from his black colour, they gave him on his naming day the name of ‘Kanha-Kumāra – Young Blackie.’

Chapter 2:

1. Page 16 — **The more she mulled it all over, the clearer the picture became...** The Buddha pointed out that this was indeed a very natural trait for people: “Whatever one frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of the mind.” ‘The Discourse on Two Kinds of Thought,’ M 19.6.

2. Page 17 — **One wooden masaka...** This was a coin of very small denomination that was used in those times; they were made of copper, wood or lac.

3. Page 18 — **“No, there aren’t any,”...** There is a well-known exchange, to be found twice in the Commentary to the Dhammapada, (to verses 17 & 382) concerning the pampered young Sakyan prince Anuruddha, who had led a life of such luxury that he had never heard the words, “There isn’t any” – for all his desires were always immediately fulfilled.

One day he was gambling with his friends and using cakes to bet with. He lost three times and each time sent a message home to his mother, asking for more cakes. She supplied them each time but eventually, when he lost the bet again, his mother sent the message back: “There isn’t any cake to send” (‘natthi pūvam’ in Pali). Since Anuruddha had never heard the words ‘there isn’t any’ before, he assumed this ‘natthi pūvam’ must be some new kind of delicacy so he sent back a message saying: “Please send me some there-isn’t-any cakes.” The Queen, intending to teach the boy a lesson, responded by sending the messenger off with an empty platter...

This was by no means the end of the story for, eventually, the spoilt child Anuruddha became one of the greatest Arahants.

Chapter 3:

1. Page 23 — **Angulimala... was now loose in these parts again...** The references to Angulimāla are related to passages in ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,’ pp 243, 250 & 274.

2. Page 23 — **a whole kahapana...** This was a unit of currency in circulation during the time of the Buddha. It had a value of four pādas or twenty māsakas.

3. Page 23 — **One, who was like a priest for the gang, even seemed to act like a father to him...** This reference is to Vājashravas, the brahmin; his fondness for Kāmanīta and his protection of him from harm by Angulimāla, is mentioned in Chs 9 and 11 of ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,’ pp 66, 68-9 & 82-3.

4. Page 23 — **he learned quite a few tricks of the business when he was in their company...** This facet of Kāmanīta’s life is mentioned in ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta’ on pp 69-71, 93 & 103.

5. Page 24 — **very partial to human flesh...** In a previous life, Angulimāla was indeed a yakkha fond of human flesh; the account of this is found in Jāt §513. In another life, described at Jāt §537, he was a cannibalistic king.

6. Page 28 — **the name of this type of snake meaning ‘take two steps and die.’...** This name, rendered into the local dialect, is indeed used for the banded krait in many parts of the world. In Thai this is rendered *deurn-nah-song-gau-leow-dai*. It is an accurate term for this most lethal of snakes.

7. Page 32 — **with the snake-bite doctor from the village...** It is common in Asia, a land of many snakes, to have one person in a village who is particularly trained and skilled to deal with such injuries.

Chapter 4:

1. Page 33 — **rukka-devas are usually right...** Rukkha-devas are tree spirits, one of the many kinds of bhūma-deva, or 'earth-spirits' in Buddhist cosmology; 'dryads' in Greek mythology are very comparable. Of the 27 heavenly realms, that of the bhūma-deva is the most down-to-earth.

According to Buddhist tradition there are a total of 32 different realms of existence, ranging from the hells, at the lower end of the spectrum, to the formless abodes of the highest brahma gods at the top end. They are grouped as follows, counting from the top down:

A. THE FOUR FORMLESS BRAHMA REALMS (Arūpa-loka).

- 1) The Heaven of Devas of the Sphere of Neither-Perception-Nor-Non-Perception.
- 2) The Heaven of Devas of the Sphere of No-Thingness.
- 3) The Heaven of Devas of the Sphere of Infinite Consciousness.
- 4) The Heaven of Devas of the Sphere of Infinite Space.

B. THE SIXTEEN LOWER BRAHMA REALMS (Rūpa-loka).

- 1) The Heaven of Peerless Devas.
- 2) The Heaven of Clear-sighted Devas.
- 3) The Heaven of Beautiful Devas.
- 4) The Heaven of Untroubled Devas.
- 5) The Heaven of Devas not Falling Away (Aviha).
- 6) The Heaven of Unconscious Devas.
- 7) The Heaven of Very Fruitful Devas.
- 8) The Heaven of Devas of Refulgent Glory.
- 9) The Heaven of Devas of Unbounded Glory.
- 10) The Heaven of Devas of Limited Glory.
- 11) The Heaven of Devas of Streaming Radiance (Ābhassara).
- 12) The Heaven of Devas of Unbounded Radiance.
- 13) The Heaven of Devas of Limited Radiance.
- 14) The Heaven of Great Brahmās.
- 15) The Heaven of Ministers of Brahmā.
- 16) The Heaven of Retinue of Brahmā.

C. THE TWELVE WORLDS OF SENSE DESIRE (Kāma-loka).

- 1) The Heaven of Those who Delight in the Creations of Others.
- 2) The Heaven of Those who Delight in Creating.
- 3) The Heaven of the Contented.

- 4) The Heaven of the Devas of the Hours.
- 5) The Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods (Tāvātimsa).
- 6) The Heaven of the Four Great Kings.
- 7) The Realm of the Earth Spirits.
- 8) The Human Realm.
- 9) The Animal Realm.
- 10) The Realm of the Hungry Ghosts.
- 11) The Realm of the Jealous Gods (Asuras).
- 12) The Hell Realms.

2. Page 33 — **the three kinnaris...** Kinnaris are a class of bhūmma-deva and are semi-ethereal, that is to say they eat material food, can be harmed by weapons but are not visible to all people. They are sometimes referred to as the ‘twice-born’ as their young are hatched from eggs that have been laid in a nest; for example: “soon the lady *kinnarī* was pregnant, and later brought forth two eggs.” (‘Three Worlds According to King Ruang,’ p 210). This has led to them being depicted, in some traditional Buddhist paintings and statues, as having a human upper part to their body but also having wings and legs like a bird. In the scriptures themselves, however, they always have a fully human form, indeed, the word ‘kinnari’ is usually translated as ‘fairy’ in Pali Text Society editions of the Buddhist stories.

Good descriptions of their nature and characteristics are found in the Jātakas – at Jāts §§481, 504, 540 and especially §485.

3. Page 33 — **difficult in the beginning...** This statement is a play on the frequent description of the Buddha’s teaching, the Dhamma, as: “lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle and lovely in its ending...” (eg at D 2.40)

4. Page 34 — **A huge burly red-eyed form ... unblinking...** “The eyes of ogres are red and do not wink, they cast no shadow and are free from all fear.” (Jāt §518, Vol V, p. 18, PTS)

5. Page 34 — **his favourite quarry, fresh human flesh...** Yakkhas, for such is this ogreish being, are a type of celestial demon — they are a class of beings in The Heaven of the Four Great Kings. Their particular king is called Vessavana or sometimes Kuvera.

Their fondness for human flesh is described, for example, in Jāts §§366, 398, 510 & 537. In Jāt §513 a yakkhini seizes two new-born princes and eats them “...before the very eyes of the queen, and crunching and devouring...” In Jāt §469 Ālavaka is mentioned as a ‘tree-demon’ who ate one person a day.

6. Page 34 — **all decked out in flowers ... like pollen-eaters...** The description of kinnaris as being decorated with flower-gauze and eating pollen can be found in Jāt §485

7. Page 35 — **“Stand not between a yakkha chieftain and his prey!” ...** This expression is borrowed from the declaration of the chief of the ring-wraiths, the Witch King of Angmar, to Princess Eowyn on the battlefield, in *The Return of the King*, by J.R.R. Tolkien.

8. Page 36 — **the name is Gumbiya...** This is the name of a yakkha in Jāt §366.

9. Page 36 — **studded with iron spikes and naga-teeth...** Nāgas are celestial dragons and serpents; they are another class of beings in the realm of the Four Great Kings. Virupakkha is their leader.

The word 'nāga' can also simply mean 'great being,' so it is sometimes used to refer to the Buddha or other enlightened ones; it is also used as a description for elephants.

10. Page 36 — **clad in flower-gauze of kanavera petals...** 'Kanavera' is oleander (*Nerium odorum*), a red flower common in India.

11. Page 36 — **it's not a matter of just reciting the words, you have to mean it ...** This principle was alluded to on many occasions by the Buddha; for example, in the Dhammapada: "Better than reciting a hundred meaningless verses is the reciting of one verse of Dhamma, hearing which one attains peace," (Dhp 102 – see also Dhp 258, 259, 393 & 394). Similarly, in the Itivuttaka: "It is through the Dhamma that one becomes a brahmin possessing the threefold knowledge; I do not say this of another merely because he can talk persuasively and recite," (Iti 99). A comparable sentiment is also expressed S 35.132:

*But these have fallen, claiming, 'We recite.'
Puffed up by clan, faring unrighteously,
Overcome by anger, armed with diverse [verbal] weapons,
They molest both frail and firm.*

*...Fasting and sleeping on the ground,
Bathing at dawn, [study of] the Three Vedas,
Rough hides, matted locks and dirt;
Hymns, rules and vows, austerities,
Hypocrisy, bent staffs, ablutions:
These emblems of the brahmins
Are used to increase their worldly gains.*

12. Page 36 — **"Don't you remember what happened to Suciloma?"...** Suciloma ('Needle-hair') is a yakkha who, wishing to test the Buddha to see if he was a genuine monk or not, came close and loomed over him, opening his mouth wide and raising the needle-like hairs all over his body. The Buddha drew back and the yakkha asked, "Are you afraid of me, monk?" He replied, "I'm not afraid of you, friend, it's just that your touch is evil."

This comment angered the yakkha and he said, "I'll ask you a question and, if you won't answer me, I'll drive you insane, or I'll split your heart, or I'll grab you by the feet and hurl you across the Ganges River."

The Buddha was easily able to answer the question and thus prevented the yakkha from making any attempt to harm him; this story appears at S 10.3.

13. Page 37 — **“It was a bright, full moon night,”...** The yakkhas mentioned in the original story are not named; the incident is recounted at Ud. 4.4.

14. Page 38 — **The seven rough tufts...** This is a physical characteristic of some yakkhas, as in Jāt §519.

15. Page 38 — **one of the campaigns of King Indra against the asuras...** ‘Indra’ is the Sanskrit form of the name of the king of the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods; ‘Inda’ is the Pali form. He is also known as ‘Sakka’ in the Pali texts which translates as ‘Shakra’ in Sanskrit.

There are many accounts in the scriptures of frequent wars between the devas and the asuras – the Jealous Gods, or Titans.

16. Page 38 — **what about the warding charm that your own king... Vessavana, composed to protect the Buddha’s disciples...** The account of King Vessavana suggesting such a protective chant and its approval by the Buddha are to be found in the Ātānātiya Sutta, D 32. A somewhat amended text of the original verse, in the form in which it is recited in Thailand, is to be found on pp 62-67 in the Abhayagiri chanting book:
<http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/book/288/>

17. Page 39 — **dun-die-finish-mata-mata...** This is a pidgin English phrase that was a favourite expression of the author’s father, picked up on his travels in Africa and India with his pack-horse brigade during the Second World War.

18. Page 40 — **the Elder nun Uppalavanna...** She was the nun most gifted with psychic powers and thus able to see into other realms of existence.

Chapter 5:

1. Page 42 — **King Udena...** This monarch was the ruler of Vamsa, the land between the River Ganga and the River Yamuna, in northern India (see map on p 6, above). He appears in several Suttas and Jātakas. He is usually presented as having a somewhat ambivalent relationship to the Buddha and his teaching. In Jāt §497 he is a proud and angry son of the Bodhisattva, the Buddha in one of his previous lives; during the era of the current Buddha he gets angry at both Pindola and Ānanda for being with the women of the royal harem and teaching them in the park.

In the Mahāyana, or Northern Buddhist tradition he is represented as being much more devoted to the Buddha – when the Buddha went to the Tavatimsa Heaven for three months, to teach the devata who had been his mother, King Udena is said to have had the first Buddha-image ever made, to be an object of devotion and to serve him as a reminder while the Buddha was away (see S.H. Wriggins, ‘Xuanzang – A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road,’ pp 87 & 188).

A lot of his story, and the source for much of this tale, is to be found in 'The Story Cycle of King Udena' in the Dhammapada Commentary to verses 21-3 (see 'Buddhist Legends Vol I,' translated by E.W. Burlingame, pp 247-293).

2. Page 42 — **his elephant Bhaddavatika...** She is mentioned in Jāt §409 and other places in the Suttas.

3. Page 42 — **a golden wheel... was slowly turning...** The wheel is a symbol of the Dhamma, the teaching of the Buddha. The first teaching that he gave, in the deer park near Varanasi, is known as the 'Dhamma-cakkappavattana Sutta' – 'The Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma.'

4. Page 44 — **the Minister, Lord Ghosaka...** Like King Udena, Ghosaka appears in many places in the Buddhist scriptures. He later became a major supporter of the Buddha and his monastic community.

5. Page 44 — **several handfuls of pollen...** As is mentioned in Jāt §485, where it says that the Bodhisattva: "wandered about, anointing himself with perfumes, eating the pollen of flowers, clothing himself in flower-gauze... swinging in the creepers to amuse himself, singing songs in a honey voice." (See also Jāt §540).

6. Page 44 — **the greatest cooks of all Avanti...** Avanti was the country of which Ujjeni was the capital, see map on p 6, above.

7. Page 45 — **to devas most humans stink...** This fact is mentioned in Ven. Ajahn Mun's biography: "In the scriptures it says that *devas* do not like to be near humans because of their repugnant smell. What is this repugnant odor? If there is such an odor, why do you all come to visit me so often?"

"Human beings who have a high standard of morality are not repugnant to us. Such people have a fragrance which inspires us to venerate them; so we never tire of coming to hear you discourse on Dhamma. Those, exuding a repulsive odor, are people whose morality stinks, for they have developed an aversion to moral virtue even though it is considered to be something exceptionally good throughout the three worlds. Instead, they prefer things that are repugnant to everyone with high moral standards. We have no desire to approach such people. They are really offensive and their stench spreads far and wide. It's not that *devas* dislike humans; but this is what *devas* encounter and have always experienced with humans."

'Venerable Ācariya Mun Bhūridatta Thera – A Spiritual Biography,' pp 132-3, by Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñānasampanno, translated from the Thai by Bhikkhu Dick Sīlaratano.

8. Page 45 — **did you see any all-heal around here?...** 'All-heal' here is referring to *Prunella vulgaris*, also known as Common Self-heal, a type of mint. It is one of seven species of plants of the family *Lamiaceae*, most of which are known as 'self-heal' or 'all-heal,' for their use in herbal medicine. Most are native to Europe, Asia, and North Africa.

The name 'self-heal' derives from their use to treat a range of minor disorders, as they have an antiseptic and antibacterial effect. The the whole plant is used to treat cuts and inflammations.

9. Page 46 — **the spout began to send forth some fumes...** The ability to produce heat in this way, through psychic power, is something that can also be developed through meditation. A contemporary Buddhist meditation master, Dipama – an Indian lay-woman who lived in Calcutta – was known not only to be able to bake a potato in her hand in this way but (if you wanted her to) she could also make it taste like chocolate!

10. Page 46 — **our usual life-span is about 1000 sun-turnings...** In Jāt §504 it specifies this as an average life-span for kinnaris: “A thousand summers, strong and hale...”

11. Page 47 — **his own man-servant Mitta...** Like King Udena and Lord Ghosaka, Mittā is also from the story cycle in the Dhammapada Commentary to verses 21-3. In the original story our young heroine comes to Kosambi with her parents, escaping an epidemic in Bhaddāvati. She meets Mittā at the food distributions held at Lord Ghosaka’s mansion.

12. Page 47 — **a proud kshatriya...** The kshatriya caste, the warrior-nobles, were one of the two highest castes in India, along with the brahmins. Their code included an injunction to kill even their own parents, if it was to their advantage to do so.

The other two castes are the vaishas, the merchants – this is the caste of Kāmanīta’s whole family – and the shudras, the workers, or labouring caste. Below all of these, on the social scale of the time and still to this day despite many social reforms, are the candālas or ‘untouchables,’ more properly known these days as the dalit or ‘scheduled caste’ people.

13. Page 47 — **Not... accustomed to looking behind him...** To do this was considered a sign of indignity and weakness, therefore not to be done by a royal. Such customs are still observed by some royal families to this day.

Chapter 6:

1. Page 51 — **“Get in, Khujjuttara...** ‘Khujja’ in Pali means ‘hunchbacked,’ ‘uttara’ means ‘upper’ or ‘top,’ ‘high,’ or ‘superior’ – thus Khujjuttarā’s name perhaps means ‘hunched upper body’ or, as some have suggested, ‘the best of hunchbacks.’

She became unique in the history of Buddhism as the only layperson to have recorded and compiled an entire section of the scriptures on her own, ‘The Itivuttaka.’ The name of this collection is derived from the opening of each discourse: “This was said (vuttam) by the Buddha... so (iti) I heard.” Thus, literally, it is ‘The So-it-was-said Collection.’

2. Page 52 — **their hands pressed together in añjali...** ‘Añjali’ is the universal gesture of respect in Asia; the hands are held together at the heart, with the palms touching.

3. Page 54 — **Maha-Baka...** This name means ‘Great Heron’ – a proud and haughty bird in Indian myth. ‘Baka’ was the name of a conceited brahmā god who was formerly a teacher of the Bodhisattva; the story of his encounter with the Buddha is found in ‘The Discourse on the Invitation to a Brahmā,’ M 49.

4. Page 55 — **who knew what spiteful spirits and ghosts would come along with the timber?...**

Fear of haunting by spirits attached to the possessions of the dead is very common in Asia. In the countryside cremations are held in forests, and the forests are preserved in the belief that the spirits of the newly dead will be able to have somewhere to stay – i.e., in among the trees and NOT in the village.

Furthermore, it is often believed that, if you are foolish enough to cut down a tree that’s ‘occupied,’ the tenant might come along with the lumber and cause trouble in your home.

5. Page 56 — **“Deardeparted!...** These verses do indeed come from the traditional Vedic ceremonies for the dead, the Atyesti, or Antyeshti. They are recited after making five oblations, to: Agni, Soma, Loka, Earth & the Other World. See ‘The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions,’ p 77

6. Page 56 — **the mala of blossoms...** A ‘māla’ is a garland or rosary.

7. Page 56 — **walking round it anti-sunwise...** Circumambulation for the dead is done anti-clockwise; for general devotional ceremonies, always clockwise.

8. Page 57 — **“Om Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!...** This is a common closing phrase for Vedic scriptures; it means ‘Peace! Peace! Peace!’

9. Page 58 — **Man quits his mortal frame...** These verses all come from Jāt §354; Khujjuttarā is the reciter of the last ones, in a previous life with the Bodhisattva.

10. Page 59 — **let’s put that cloth up in the branches of a tree...** This custom is the source of the ‘pah bah’ or ‘forest cloth’ ceremony in Thailand. The presence of such funeral shrouds in the low branches of a tree in the charnel grounds is mentioned in the Vinaya and the Suttas as a regular source of robe material for the monastics.

11. Page 61 — **Through the doorway also appeared Sundari...** Sundarī means ‘beautiful.’

Chapter 7:

1. Page 62 — **He had now reached seven Rains...** In Asia, age is traditionally measured by the number of rainy seasons one has lived through; this is comparable to ‘summers’ or ‘winters’ in European usage (for example in Ch 5, note 10).

2. Page 62 — **just like the god Krishna's own mother...** Lord Krishna's mother was named Devakā, his father was Vasudeva.

3. Page 63 — **Lord Krishna and the buttermilk...** This story of the young Lord Krishna's mischief is to be found in the Bhagavata Purana, Skanda 10.

4. Page 64 — **the travelers from Kalinga...** Kalinga was an ancient kingdom on the eastern shores of India. It was located where the states of Orissa and Andhra Pradesh are to be found today.

Chapter 8:

1. Page 67 — **Kuvera... the Heavenly King who was the Guardian of the North and ruler of the yakkhas...** Each of the four directions has its celestial guardian or 'Lokapāla,' and each one is the ruler of a certain class of beings: East is Dhatarattha, king of the gandhabbas (gandharvas in Skt), the heavenly musicians; South is Virūlhaka, king of the kumbhandas, pot-bellied gnomes and petas (hungry ghosts); West is Virūpakkha, king of the nāgas, the divine dragons; North is Kuvera, also known as Vessavana, who is king of the yakkhas, the celestial demons.

These are all listed in the Ātānātiya Paritta, employed so effectively by the kinnari in Ch 4. The original source for this is in the Ātānātiya Sutta, D 32.

2. Page 67 — **a monk had come to their gate seeking for alms...** A daily alms round by Buddhist monastics still happens every day in Thailand and Burma.

The 'house-to-house' style of gathering alms – where the monk or nun stands by the door of each house for a while – is still found in India among certain groups of yogis and sannyasins.

3. Page 68 — **monks could be very picky about needing to sit higher up...** The Buddhist monastic training rules, Sekhiyas #68 & #69, refer to this. A nun or monk should always sit higher if they are giving teachings; if it's an ordinary encounter however, then the relative heights don't matter.

4. Pages 69 — **Mysterioso, Impervioso,... Greensickness Peak, ... in the Great Fable Mountains...** These are all references to characters and locations in 'The Story of the Stone,' also known as 'The Dream of the Red Chamber' by Cao Xueqin (Tsao Shue-Chin). The definitive translation of this great Chinese tale was made by David Hawkes, published by Penguin Classics.

5. Page 71 — **It is difficult to evade the King of Death...** There are many teachings in the scriptures that refer to this, e.g. at S 35.248. Here the Buddha describes the captured asura king Vepacitti, after losing a battle with the devas, being bound 'by his four limbs and neck'; he then

goes on to say, “So subtle, monks, was the bondage of Vepacitti, but even subtler than that is the bondage of Māra.”

6. Page 71 — **he mixes the nectar of the kola fruit...** This fruit has indeed been used for varieties of food and drink since the time of the Buddha, for example, at M12.52: “Sāriputta, there are certain recluses and brahmins whose doctrine and view is this: ‘Purification comes about through food.’ They say: ‘Let us live on kola-fruits,’ and they eat kola-fruits, they eat kola-fruit powder, they drink kola-fruit water, and they make many kinds of kola-fruit concoctions.”

Chapter 9:

1. Page 74 — **‘Mango’ isn’t really a very suitable name, is it?...** ‘Mango,’ as mentioned above, is the English translation of ‘Amba.’ The most famous character in Buddhist myth and scripture with a ‘mango’ name was Ambapālī, the great courtesan of Vesālī.

Once, when she had invited the Buddha and his monks to a meal at her house and he had accepted, she refused 100,000 gold pieces that she was subsequently offered to give up the invitation to the Licchavi princes: “They snapped their fingers saying, ‘We’ve been beaten by the mango-girl, we’ve been outwitted by the mango-girl.’” This story is recounted in ‘The Discourse on The Buddha’s Last Days,’ D 16.2.16. Later she became a nun and a famous Arahant; her verses of enlightenment are recorded at Thig. 13.1.

2. Page 76 — **a large group of ascetic wanderers,... came and stayed...** This part of the tale also comes directly from ‘The Story Cycle of King Udena,’ in the Dhammapada Commentary to verses 21-3; see ‘Buddhist Legends Vol I,’ pp 277-80.

3. Page 80 — **acts of faith ... bring ... welfare and happiness for a long time...** This principle is described by the Buddha in many places in the scriptures. For example, in ‘The Discourse on the Exposition of Offerings’ at M 142, and at D 16.5.11: “A stupa should be erected for the Tathāgata. And whoever lays wreaths or puts sweet perfumes and colours there with a devout heart, will reap benefit and happiness for a long time.”

4. Page 81 — **He was going to donate the park where the wanderers had been staying...** As it turned out, the Ghositārāma was the only monastery ever established within the walls of a city during the Buddha’s lifetime. The foundations of the old monastery compound and the pillar planted there by the Emperor Ashoka can still be seen at the site of ancient Kosambi to this day.

5. Page 83 — **the Buddha stood still and straight and recited a blessing...** Even in the Buddha’s time this kind of ‘anumodanā’ (literally, ‘rejoicing in the good that has been done’) was given, e.g. at M 91.17.

6. Page 83 — **the paths and forests of Jambudipa...** ‘Jambudīpa’ is an ancient name for India. It literally means ‘The Island of Rose Apples.’

7. Page 84 — **the stuff they melt out of trees and make waterproof things with ...** In Thailand, in former times, the sap of the ‘my yahng’ tree was used in this way to make waterproof vessels from basketwork, and to affix axe-handles, knife-blades etc.

Chapter 10:

1. Page 90 — **there was a man called Kotuhalaka...** This part of the story, Gosaka’s karmic history, also comes directly from The Story Cycle of King Udena, in the Dhammapada Commentary to verses 21-3; see ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, pp 252-66.

‘Kotūhalaka’ means ‘Excited’ or ‘Earnest,’ ‘Kālī’ means ‘Black’ or ‘The Dark One,’ and ‘Kapi’ means ‘Monkey.’

2. Page 94 — **no teacher’s closed fist for the initiated...** This principle is described in several places in the scriptures, for example: “I have taught the Dhamma, Ānanda, making no ‘inner’ and ‘outer’; the Tathāgata has no ‘teacher’s closed fist’ in respect to doctrines,” at D16.2.25; and “Bhikkhus... I am ever accessible to entreaties, open-handed (payatapāni)...” at Iti. 100.

3. Page 94 — **trying to persuade folk to visit their temples or to follow their beliefs...** There is indeed a long-standing tradition of non-proselytization in Buddhist practice, however, there is no explicit rule prohibiting it. This tradition most obviously manifests itself in the custom of formally inviting the teachings to be given, even at standard weekly events in a monastery; also in the style of the almsround, wherein the monastics can make themselves available for offerings but cannot ask or even hint that they would like something.

4. Page 94 — **made one want to ‘come and see.’ ...** ‘Ehipassiko’ means ‘encouraging investigation,’ ‘inviting one to come and see.’ It is one of the classical attributes of the Dhamma.

5. Page 94 — **they would present them to one of the attendant bhikkhus...** This monk would then have the responsibility of informing the ‘stores monk’ who would then see that all offerings were properly taken care of and put away. They would be shared out as needed, in due course, to all community members.

6. Page 95 — **to sit on a raised bench...** A Dhammāsana or Dhamma-seat. So positioned that the speaker of Dhamma can be seen and heard easily and so they are sitting higher than the rest of the assembly.

7. Page 95 — **facing the east...** The direction of dawn; still today Dhamma Halls are usually arranged so the Buddha-rupa is facing east.

8. Page 95 — **similes from kitchen and cattle-pen, from battleground and bath-time...**

For example:

kitchen — water drops on a hot plate — M 66.16

cattle-pen — care for the cows — M 33.2-14

battle-ground — M 63.5

bath-time — kneading bath powder — M 39.15

9. Page 95 — **everything in life, it seemed, could be used to learn from...** This was a favourite dictum of Ven. Ajahn Chah. See, for example 'Everything is Teaching Us,' trans. by Paul Breiter.

10. Page 95 — **Just as when rain pours down in thick droplets...** This teaching is from S 55.38, the translation here is based on that of Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi; the same simile is used in S 12.23, the Upanisa Sutta.

11. Page 96 — **it is in accordance with nature...** This is an edited version of A 10.2

12. Page 96 — **her confidence in his wisdom and purity of heart became unshakeable...** In Buddhist tradition this quality of spiritual certainty is known as Entering the Stream. It is characterized by the arising of perfect faith in a) the Buddha (= the quality of wisdom & awareness), b) the Dharma (= the Buddha's teaching and the Truth of the way nature is) and c) the Sangha (= the community of those who have awakened to the Truth & the quality of unselfishness that they embody); as well as d) a natural and complete honesty.

One who has Entered the Stream in this way is said to be guaranteed to reach full enlightenment (arahantship) in no more than seven lifetimes; furthermore, it is said that during that time it is impossible for them to be born in the lower realms – that of the animals, the hungry ghosts or in the hells (see Ch 4, note 1).

13. Page 96 — **totally present...totally transparent...** This mysterious blend of qualities is represented in the word that the Buddha coined to refer to himself: 'Tathāgatha' – it means both 'Thus come' & 'Thus gone' or 'Gone to suchness' & 'Come to suchness.'

Chapter 11:

1. Page 99 — **us earth-spirits are somewhat nudged into the background...** This situation is described by a young female devatā when telling the bhikkhu Samiddhi how hard it is for junior characters like her to see the Buddha: "It isn't easy for us to approach that Blessed One, bhikkhu, as he is surrounded by other devatās of great influence."

The monk, however, kindly arranges a chance for her to meet the Buddha face to face. The encounter is described at S 1.20.

2. Page 99 — **time is different... so too is space...** At the time of his final passing away, the Buddha asked the monk who was fanning him, Upavāna, to stand aside since: “The devas from ten world-spheres have gathered to see the Tathāgatha... For a distance of 12 yojanas [≈ 108 miles] ...there is not a space you could touch with the point of a hair that is not filled with mighty devas.” D16.5.4-6

3. Page 99 — **the Udambara flower...** This rarest of blossoms is mentioned in the Lotus Sutra, it flowers only once every 3000 years. There is also a legend in Vietnam that the fragrance remains after the flowers have fallen:

*And those people who hear this Dharma –
Such people too, are rare,
Like the Udambara flower,
In which all take delight,
Which the gods and humans prize,
For it blooms but once in a long long time.*

Lotus Sutra, Ch 2, ‘Expedient Devices.’

4. Page 101 — **park-devas, grove-devas, medicinal herb-pixies, the dwellers in forest giants...** In Pali these are: āramadevatā, vanadevatā, osadhitina-vanaspatīsu adhivatthā devatā. Such beings are mentioned, for example, at S 41.10.

5. Page 101 — **the Buddha would be departing on his annual wanderings...** It was customary for the Buddha (and is still the same for ‘dhutanga’ monks in Thailand) to reside for the Rains at one place and then to travel through the countryside seeking remote locations for meditation, during the remaining eight months of the year.

6. Page 102 — **the full moon observance...** The Uposatha day; each full and new moon Buddhist monastics gathered to recite the Rule, to listen to Dharma teachings and to meditate through the night. On the half moons it is the same but without the recitation. These customs are still carried on today.

7. Page 102 — **the chance to hear the words of an enlightened master...** The preciousness of such opportunities is described in the scriptures many times, for example at CV 6.4, M 130.28, A 1.19 & A 6.96.

8. Page 102 — **the Buddha gave progressive instruction...** As, for example, at M 56.18 & D 3.2.21-2

9. Page 103 — **“It may be that some amongst you have doubts about the spiritual path...** This statement comes from D16.6.5.

10. Page 103-4 — **what is the best way to... not be seen by the King of Death?...** This passage comes from The Questions of Mogharāja, at SN 1118-9.

11. Page 104 — **Knowing the body as false as foam ...** These two verses come from the Dhammapada, Dhṛp 46 & 170.

12. Page 104 — **her body and her thoughts seemed not really to belong to her at all...** The deepening of Sāmāvātī's realization here is described in terms of her breaking through the first three of what are called the 'Ten Fetters' or 'samyojana' in Pali. These first three are 1) personality-view (ie the belief 'I am this body and this personality'); 2) attachment to conventions and social agreements (e.g. the belief a one dollar bill has an absolute and intrinsic worth, or that such-and-such a ceremony will purify me); and 3) doubt about what is and what is not the spiritual path to liberation.

Sāmāvātī broke through these three fetters when she Entered the Stream (on p 96) and here her understanding has deepened to the point where she is on the path to the next level, that of Once-Returner – that is to say, she is close to reaching a spiritual maturity such that she will be born as a human being for just one more lifetime. After that, she will only be born in the heavenly realms and will, with absolute certainty, reach full enlightenment from there.

The reaching of the second level of enlightenment ('sakadāgāmi' in Pali) is characterized by a distinct diminishing of sensual desire and of aversion – kāma-rāga & vyāpāda in Pali.

13. Page 105 — **the River Yamuna, that ran north-south below the ramparts...** The old walls of King Udena's place are still to be found today towering above the River Yamuna, or Jumna as it is known in modern times.

14. Page 105 — **this was the day when the daughters of... Kosambi...** This account of the annual festival is based on 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in the Dhammapada Commentary to Dhṛp verses 21-3; see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 269.

15. Page 105 — **the annual display of ball games...** As in 'The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,' Chapter 4.

16. Page 107 — **this is a day dedicated to the Goddess Sarasvatī...** The sun is in her constellation in mid-April. This is when all of South Asia celebrates its New Year and enjoys the water/fertility festivals that go with it. In Thailand this water festival – which often involves a ritual bathing of Buddha images, and sometimes monastics, as well as the widespread hurling of water over all and sundry – is called 'songkran.'

17. Page 107 — **Lady, your father Timbaru great...** This song, performed for the Buddha by the celestial musician (gandharva) Pañcasikha in the original, is found at D 21.1.5, 'The Questions of Sakka, King of the Gods.' This translation of it is the work of Maurice Walshe; it is reprinted here by kind permission of Wisdom Publications.

The vīnā is the 'Indian lute,' a stringed instrument often mentioned in the scriptures.

18. Page 110 — **Father...you have made a grave mistake...** This exchange is from 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in the Dhammapada Commentary to DhP verses 21-3; see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 269.

19. Page 110 — **It's a serious thing to come and live in a king's household...** This exchange also comes from 'The Story Cycle of King Udena'; see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 282.

Chapter 12:

1. Page 112 — **Queen Kinnara of Varanasi...** She is mentioned in Jāt §536. She is described as sneaking out at night for assignations with 'a loathsome misshapen cripple' under a rose-apple tree; (see 'The Jātaka,' Vol V, pp 234-5).

2. Page 112 — **Queen Kanha...** She is also found in Jāt §536, (ibid. Vol V, p 225). This royal lady seems to be directly comparable to Queen Draupadi of the Mahābhārata; even though she's married to Princes Ajjuna, Nakula, Bhimasena, Yudhitthila and Sahadeva, in this story from the Pali scriptures, Queen Kanhā has her affections set on 'a headless crippled dwarf.'

3. Page 113 — **Where have all the flowers come from, Kujj?...** This dialogue comes from 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in the Dhammapada Commentary to verses 21-3; see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 281-2.

4. Page 113 — **No feeling of anger or resentment rose in Samavati's heart...** Now that Sāmāvātī is on the path to the second level of enlightenment, a Once-Returner, such afflictive emotions have very little strength.

5. Page 113-4 — **Me, Miss, a hunch backed slave and a thief...** In a similar vein the Buddha made a special point of teaching for the sake of Suppabuddha the leper, at Ud. 5.3.

Similar instances are recounted at S 11.14, and also in the Dhammapada Commentary to verse 203 (see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol III, pp 74-6), where there is a story of the Buddha keeping a large assembly waiting so that a poor farmer could arrive and get fed before he gave the teaching.

6. Page 114 — **or he got me to reshape the way I asked it...** The Buddha said there are four appropriate ways to deal with questions: 1) a straight answer, 2) a counter question, 3) to rephrase the question and, 4) to lay the question aside. This teaching is found at A 4.43.

7. Page 114 — **as if someone had set upright something that had been knocked down...** This is a stock description of the arising of faith in the Buddha's teachings. It can be found in numerous places in the scriptures, for example at D 3.2.22.

8. Page 115 — **This was said by the Blessed One...** As above, Ch 6, note 1

9. Page 116 — **little or no clothing on the upper part of their bodies...** This style of dress from that period can be seen in hundreds of reliefs carved into the stupas built by King Asoka and others of the early Buddhist era.
10. Page 117 — **Even though a bhikkhu might hold on to the hem of my robe...** This teaching is found at Iti. 92.
11. Page 117 — **brought their palms together and, intoned "Sadhu!" Three times...** As is still done today, to express gratitude and approval for a teaching.
12. Page 118 — **Angulimala giving up his life as a bandit and then becoming a monk...** As is described at M 86, The Discourse on Angulimāla, and in 'The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,' Chs 33 & 34. According to the timeline of the present story, these events had occurred approximately fifteen years before.
13. Page 118 — **Angulimala lives up in Kosala ... at the Jetavana...** The Jetavana was the Buddha's main monastery in Kosala. The foundations of Angulimāla's kutī and a stūpa for his relics are still to be found there. See map on p 6, above.
14. Page 119 — **He's a proud man, Miss...** In Jāt §497 Udena, in a previous life, is the proud and angry son of the Bodhisattva.
15. Page 119 — **the full moon day that marked the end of the Rains...** This is the full moon of November, in the Western calendar.
16. Page 119 — **she's a veritable Sita...** Sītā was the perfectly virtuous and beautiful wife of Lord Rāma in the Rāmāyana, the ancient Indian epic. A modern-day exploration of her story is to be found in the animated film 'Sita Sings the Blues,' by Nina Paley – it can be found at www.sitasingstheblues.com.
17. Page 121 — **the brahmin village of Harittananda; this is my daughter, Magandiyā...**
Harittānanda is an invented name, meaning 'The joy of gold.' In 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' Māgandiyā is simply said to have come from 'the Kuru country,' north of Vamsa, and from 'a certain market town' – see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 274-5.
18. Page 122 — **an ill-will of vitriolic strength...** It is a curious fact that the word 'fascination' is closely related to this same kind of action; its etymology can be traced to 'phæsi kaino' in Greek, meaning 'to kill with the eyes.'

Chapter 13:

1. Page 123 — **what's a 'mangala' Mum?... It's just a lucky charm, an amulet of some sort ...**

This is indeed one meaning of the word 'mangala.' Such amulets are very popular still throughout the Buddhist world and elsewhere.

It can also mean 'a blessing' (either mundane or spiritual), a magical charm of some kind, or a protective spell. Various other aspects of its meaning will become apparent as our tale unfolds.

2. Page 124 — **three-quarters of your father's fortune...** This is not a huge exaggeration; in Thailand a 'Somdet Dtoh' amulet was sold in 2008 for about \$3 million, US.

3. Page 124 — **a red fish... the words 'full grown'... touching fresh cow-dung...** These three are all mentioned as mangalas in the introduction to Jāt §453, the PTS version of which translates the term as 'omen'; the lucky rabbit's foot is a European superstition.

4. Page 124 — **Ujjeni straddled the River Carmanvati...** Today the River Carmanvatī is called the River Chambal.

5. Page 126 — **this old soldier, Ajjuna...** His name has come from one of the husbands of Queen Kālī in Jāt §536. As mentioned at Ch 12, note 2, there is an obvious parallel here to the great warrior Arjuna of the Pandava brothers in the Mahābharata.

In the great battle of that epic story, the god Krishna famously takes on the role of charioteer for Arjuna. The Bhagavad Gīta recounts the dialogue between the two of them just before the fighting commences.

6. Page 126 — **I don't say a mangala is a lucky charm...** This evasive and non-committal form of response is called 'amarā-vikheppikā' in Pali, 'eel-wriggling.' A good example of it is found in D 1.2.23-28; note 58 in the Wisdom Publications edition of 'The Long Discourses of the Buddha,' p 541, explains more about the name.

7. Page 127 — **Vishva who looked after the maintenance of the buildings...** 'Vishva' is short for Vishvakarman, the architect of the Vedic gods.

8. Page 128 — **He has the eyes of the kunala bird...** This kind of bird, with its eyes of legendary beauty, is mentioned in Jāt §536.

9. Page 128 — **She had been concerned that... he would get the spiritual bug...** These are the same concerns that the Buddha's father, King Suddhodana, had when his son was the young Prince Siddhartha.

10. Page 129 — **go and sneak a look at them all bathing ...** This is indeed another famous incident in the life of Lord Krishna. The 'gopis' were milk-maids or female cow-herds; they

feature very prominently in the Krishna stories of Hindu legend. This tale can be found in the Bhagavata Purana, Skanda 10, Ch 22.

11. Page 132 — **'spontaneous verse exercises'...** This was a skill much practised and admired in ancient times. The Buddha was highly gifted at this art; for example, the Dhammapada and the Sutta Nipāta are two long poetic collections of teachings which were all spontaneously composed by him.

12. Page 133 — **happiness and joy are born from those who are dear to us...** This statement of Krishna's is a quotation from a character in the "Born From Those Who Are Dear" Discourse,' who sets in motion a string of dialogues and offers the occasion for the Buddha to give a number of useful teachings. It is found at M 87.3.

13. Page 133 — *Great is the joy of sweet desire...* These verses were originally uttered by Princess Yashodhara, (the Buddha's former wife and later a nun and an Arahant) in a former existence, when she was with the Bodhisattva. The verse appears in Jāt §459, in 'The Jātaka,' Vol IV p 74.

14. Page 135 — **the strength of their love only made the tearing apart more agonizing...** The Buddha outlined this equation in a few places, for example at M 87.3, at Ud 8.8 & Dh 212-3.

This principle is also a major theme of 'The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,' indeed the simple contemplation that the Buddha gives to the heroine, Vāsithī, once she has become a nun – "Where there is love, there is also suffering" – is a lynchpin of the story. See 'The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,' Ch 41.

15. Page 135 — **he too had had his true love wrenched rudely from him ...** As in the Mahābharata; after Draupadi, the wife of Arjuna and the other four Pandava brothers, has been lost in the dice game, the disreputable Dushassana drags off by her hair and the anguished husbands can only sit and watch.

16. Page 135 — **When two great forces oppose each other...** This is a quotation from the 'Tao Te Ching,' Ch 69, Stephen Mitchell trans.

Chapter 14:

1. Page 137 — **duties that bring them into his chambers...** Another instance of this type of method is recounted in the novel 'Raj,' by Gita Mehta. For example, on p 188: "But each time the boys returned to Sirpur, I told the younger concubines to remind them of their own customs...' The Dowager Maharani's voice described how she had sent girl after girl from the harem to seduce the awkward schoolboys during their holidays, hoping to recapture her grandson's souls from Britain through their loins."

2. Page 137 — **Nanda, Kokila, and Ummadanti...** Ummadantī is a character in Jāt §527. In that story the Bodhisattva becomes infatuated by her; in a later life, in the time of the Buddha, she became the great Arahant Uppalavannā and the man who is her husband, Ahipāraka, in Jāt §527 is born as Sāriputta, the Buddha's chief disciple. Kokilā and Nandā are princesses mentioned in Jāt § 542.

3. Page 139 — **The disreputable monk... bears absolutely no resemblance to... your new gardener...** This is an extrapolation of an ability the Buddha possessed and used on rare occasions, e.g. when Queen Mallikā had died, King Pasenadi went to ask the Buddha where she had been reborn but: "The Teacher so contrived that he should not remember the reason why he had come to him." 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol II, p 341.

Obi Wan Kenobi, in the film 'Star Wars,' also employs a similar ability when his group is challenged by some guards. He utters the famous line: "These aren't the droids you're looking for," and they are all allowed to pass.

4. Page 140 — **otherwise known as loving-kindness...** This quality, and the cultivation of it through meditation ('mettā-bhavānā' in Pali), are considered to be of great importance in Buddhist practice.

5. Page 140 — **you can make yourself invisible...** As the Buddha did with Yasa, the merchant's son: "Suppose I use my supernormal power so that while the merchant is sitting here he will not see Yasa." MV 1.7, as recounted in 'The Life of the Buddha' by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, p 49.

6. Page 141 — **I will never lie to you...** This is also a very significant element in Buddhist practice. Throughout his incalculable number of lives as a Bodhisattva, even though he killed and stole, seduced other's wives etc., the one moral precept the Bodhisattva never transgressed was that against telling a deliberate lie. As it says in Jāt §431 "In certain cases a Bodhisatta may destroy life, take what is not given, commit adultery, drink strong drink but he may not tell a lie; attended by deception, that violates the reality of things." Also in Jāt §422, when, in the First Age of the universe, the being who later became Devadatta, lies for the first time; no being there understands what 'lie' means; they ask: "Is it blue or yellow or some other colour?"

The Buddha also emphasises this principle in some early advice he gave to his seven-year-old son, the novice Rahula: "Therefore Rahula you should train thus: 'I will not utter a falsehood, even as a joke,'" (M 61.1-7).

7. Page 141 — **these could bring you confusing or misleading answers ...** As occurs most significantly in 'The Pilgrim Kāmanā,' on p 167; see also notes for this passage on p 418 of that book.

8. Page 142 — **Suppose there were a mountain three leagues long...** This famous simile comes from S 15.5. Three leagues ≈ one yojana ≈ nine miles.

9. Page 142 — **before an æon had passed...** The word 'æon' here means 'a Mahākalpa,' the time needed for a world system to arise, develop and perish; in traditional Buddhist cosmology this lasts for four 'incalculable periods' or 'asankheyya kappas'. See also A 3.114.

The OED describes a kalpa as 'the period between the beginning and the end of the world considered as the day of Brahma (4,320 million human years)' – coincidentally, this is roughly the age of Planet Earth.

10. Page 142 — **If there were four accomplished meditators...** This comes from S15.7, based on Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation.

11. Page 142 — **The heap of bones one person leaves behind ...** This comes from S 15.10, again, based on Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation.

12. Page 142 — **Truth becomes fiction when the fiction's true...** From 'The Story of the Stone,' Vol I, p 44. The Chinese of this cryptic statement, when transliterated, is:

*Jia zuo zhen shi zhen yi jia
Wu wei you chu you huan wu.*

This puns and produces the names of the two principal families of 'The Story of the Stone': the Jia (imaginary) family & the Zhen (real) family.

13. Page 143 — **To try to conceive...the Ultimate Beginning...** As the Buddha says at S 15.1-4, "no first beginning is describable." This issue is one of The Four Imponderables ('acinteyya' in Pali), the other three are: a) The complete workings of karma; b) All aspects of meditative absorption, or jhāna; and c) The range of the mind of a fully enlightened Buddha. These are described at A 4.77. The dangers of too much 'loka-cinta' or pondering about the origins of the world and 'Who created the sun and moon? The great earth? The ocean? Who begot beings? The mountains? Mangoes, palms and coconuts' are also described at S 56.41

How it might be that the head would be split into seven pieces on such an occasion is recounted, for example, at M 35.14.

A parallel dialogue on this, from Milton's unique perspective, is to be found in 'Paradise Lost,' in Bk VII; the passage runs from ll 86-97, where Adam asks: "How first began this Heav'n..." to ll 635-6: "... thy request think now fulfill'd, that ask'd how first this World and face of things began."

14. Page 143-9 — **Generations four score hundred...** The genealogical structure alluded to in these verses is based on such studies as 'Out of Eden,' by Stephen Oppenheimer, the documentary 'The Real Eve,' and 'The Journey of Man' by Spencer Wells; the basic thesis of these is: '[T]here was a single common ancestor or 'Mitochondrial Eve' for all African female lines and then, much later, came a subsidiary 'Out-of-Africa Eve' line whose genetic daughters peopled the rest of the world.' ('Out of Eden,' p 46).

This story of the origins of *Homo sapiens* begins roughly 190,000 years ago, with Mitochondrial Eve who was by then one of a very small pocket of human survivors: 'The genetic heritage of modern humans may be derived from a core of 2,000-10,000 Africans who lived around 190,000 years ago.' ('Out of Eden,' p 46).

The African exodus across The Gate of Grief is reckoned at approximately 81,000 BCE — it involved only one of the thirteen genetic lines extant in East Africa at that time ('Out of Eden,' p 62); the fateful 'Out-of-Africa Eve' was part of this exodus.

'In fact all the world's non-Africans could have descended from a founding population of only 50 people.' ('Human,' p 31, Ronald Winston & Don E Wilson eds., Smithsonian Institution/DK Publishing.)

15. Page 143 — *In dust they drew their marks ...* As in 'The Journey of Man,' p 84.

16. Page 144 — *all who crossed there died...* The first attempts to leave Africa by modern humans, 90-120,000 ago, ended with all dying — they exited by the northern corridor of Egypt/Syria. See 'Out of Eden,' p 54.

17. Page 144 — *The Gate of Grief...* Also known as 'Bab al Mandab,' this strait is now fifteen miles wide and 450 feet deep. During the periods of glaciation, such as existed 83,000 years ago, it was only seven miles wide. See 'Out of Eden,' p 67, and also see map on p 268, above.

18. Page 144 — *The land had dried, there was no green...* "Increasing aridity of the Eastern African coast... wetter monsoon conditions on the southern Yemen coast." See 'Out of Eden,' p 78.

19. Page 145 — *But now the salt-thick waters brewed...* The salinity increased as the sea levels lowered. See 'Out of Eden,' p 9.

20. Page 145 — *surged round sharpened reefs...* The name 'The Gate of Grief' comes from its numerous reefs. See 'Out of Eden,' p 67.

21. Page 145 — *an ancestral drift...* This principle is explained in 'Out of Eden,' pp 64-66.

22. Page 145 — *Eleven times ten thousand laps...* Dūsaka is placing these events at around 81,000 years before his retelling, i.e. roughly 110,000 years after Mitochondrial Eve.

23. Page 146 — *The cold is at its worst...* Owing to these conditions there was a dramatic lowering of the sea levels at 83-81,000 BCE. The waters fell to something like 250 feet below current levels and this 'sea lowstand' was never repeated. See 'Out of Eden,' p 80.

24. Page 147 — *Their last dried strips of buck...* This kind of dried meat, known as 'biltong,' is still very popular in Africa.

25. Page 148 — *Combing the fertile shores...* As Stephen Oppenheimer puts it, the survivors of the exodus succeeded in 'eating their way down to Indonesia in 10,000 years.' See 'Out of Eden,' p 77.

26. Page 149 — *A mount of fire in the south-east...* The eruption of Mount Toba in Sumatra took place 72,000 years before Dusaka's account. It had a dramatic effect on most forms of life, especially those in the direct path of its ash-cloud, which covered the whole of India.

27. Page 149 — *A burst of growth before unseen...* '[I]n India, 'Rohani' [the origin of the burst of new ancestral lines] makes even that fecundity [of the earlier Nasreen line] look like family planning.'" See 'Out of Eden,' p 183.

28. Page 149 — *The seed spread north and west and south...* "'Rohani' being mother to most Westerners including Europe, not to mention two far-eastern daughters with very large families... the expansion can be dated to 73,000 years ago." See 'Out of Eden,' pp 182-3.

29. Page 149 — *The Mother of all Birth...* "Thence be call'd the Mother of the human Race." Milton, Paradise Lost, Bk IV, l 475.

Chapter 15:

1. Page 150 — **War in Heaven ...** The title of this chapter comes from 'Paradise Lost,' Book I, l 43.

2. Page 150 — **an asura who'd been trussed up after losing a fight...** As is described at S 11.4 and at S 35.248.

3. Page 150 — **the story-tellers who come from the far west...** In this instance, Persia/Iran.

4. Page 151 — **these so-called 'deities' are just random inventions, yagu-brain...** 'Yāgu' is a form of rice-gruel or porridge.

5. Page 151 — **the Kirthar mountain range...** These are the mountains between India and Iran. These reflections come courtesy of Carl Sagan, from his novel, 'Contact,' p 199. See map on p 6, above.

6. Page 151 — **Vajrapani with a thunderbolt...** As is described at M35.14: "Now on that occasion a thunderbolt-wielding spirit holding an iron thunderbolt that burned, blazed and glowed, appeared in the air above Saccaka the Nigantha's son, thinking: 'If this Saccaka the Nigantha's son, when asked a reasonable question up to the third time by the Blessed One, still does not answer, I shall split his head into seven pieces here and now.'"

'Vajrapani' literally means 'lightning-' or 'diamond-fist' See also Ch 14, note 13.

7. Page 151 — **no gods and spirits, no other worlds...** The faith in the existence of other realms, past or future lives etc. is part of ‘mundane Right View,’ in the Buddha’s teaching. This is outlined, for example, at M 117.7: “...there is this world and the other world.”

8. Page 151 — **He’s just doubting that which should be doubted...** This is an important feature of the Buddhist approach to understanding how things work. It is well described in the Kālāma Sutta, A 3.65.

9. Page 153 — **made his mind too sharp... felt his mood go flat...** At S1.1 the Buddha describes his own efforts at trying to find the right balance: “When I struggled I got swept away when I halted, I sank...by not halting and not straining, I crossed the flood.”

The Buddha also encouraged the former vina-player Sona Kolivisa by reminding him of how he used to tune his stringed instrument – this story is to be found at A 6.55 & Vin. MV 5.1.

10. Page 153 — **at the very moment he gave up...** It was also at the moment of giving up that Ven. Ānanda’s full enlightenment occurred, just before the First Council; see CV 11.1.

11. Page 154 — **at first the three rosy-coloured devas were all he saw...** The succession of beings described here (roughly) matches traditional Buddhist cosmology from the earth spirits up to the formless deities.

the very stuff of green- and tree-life...	Bhumma-deva, the earth spirits
then stately folk of brawny arms and steady eye...	Retinue of the Four Great Kings
multi-coloured grand array...	Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods
as once again the host increased...	Yāma-deva, the ‘Devas of the Hours’
radiant lights and fragrances...	Tusita-deva, the ‘Contented’
tiers of light...	‘The Heaven of Those who Delight in Creating’
and grew again...	‘The Heaven of Those Who Delight in Other’s Creations’
radiance that would have burned...	Brahmā-realms of Form
all form was lost...	Formless brahmā-realms
beyond the realm of space...	The highest of the formless brahmā-realms.

At D 20.6 it also highlights how different beings experience things in different ways:

*With superhuman vision thus arising
some saw a hundred gods, a thousand some.
While some saw 70,000, others saw
Gods innumerable, all around
And He-Who-Knows-With-Insight was aware
Of all that they could see and understand.*

12. Page 154 — **he was the universe itself...** This is a delusion, albeit an understandable one, of Krishna’s. The Buddha describes this kind of error at M 1.25: “He conceives himself as All, why? Because he has not understood it, I say.”

13. Page 155 — **On a bad day we can be shot with an arrow...** For example, in Jāt §485, when the Bodhisattva was just such a kinnari, it is recounted that a king out hunting, "...shot the fairy Canda... 'my blood is flowing, flowing'..." ('The Jātaka,' Vol IV, p 180). Other kinnaris are kidnapped and imprisoned in Jāt §481, with the king who captures them ordering: "Kill these creatures and cook them, and serve them up to me."
14. Page 156— **the royal naga who lives here in the palace lake... Samuddaja...** This dragon-princess appears in Jāt §543; her father was a human prince, her mother a nāgi.
15. Page 156— **Princess Irandati is the beloved of General Punnaka...** The story of Princess Irandatī and General Punnaka is found in Jāt §545.
16. Page 157— **the capital of that beautiful land is named Masakkasara...** The description of Masakkasāra and its parks can be found in Jāt §545, and in 'Three Worlds According to King Ruang,' pp 224-5.
17. Page 157— **the Prince Suvira... was busy at his pleasure...** He was well-known as a distractible and pleasure-seeking character – see, for example S 11.1.
18. Page 157— **Vepacitti and his band...** Vepacitti is an asura who appears a number of times in the scriptures, for example in the Sakkasamyutta, at S 11.4, .5, .7, & .23.
19. Page 157— **The dryad Alambusa...** Her name comes from that of an aspara of great beauty, mentioned in Jāt §523.
20. Page 157— **King Rahu... Yugandhara Mountain...** The asura king and the great mountain are described in 'Three Worlds According to King Ruang,' pp 109-10
21. Page 157— **an evil bourn awaits all those who lie...** On one occasion (quoted at S 11.7) Vepacitti also makes this observation to Indra:
- Whatever evil comes to a liar
...that same evil touches the one
who transgress against you, Sujā's husband.*
22. Page 158 — **I do not dispute with the world...** This famous statement was made by the Buddha at S 22.94.
23. Page 158 — **One year there was a drought...** This account comes from the Dhammapada Commentary to Dhṛ verses 197-9, see 'Buddhist Legends, Vol III,' pp 70-2; also see the introduction to Jāt §536.
24. Page 159 — **While in the midst of hate...** This is Dhṛ 197.

25. Page 160 — **He helps turn... their tortures into violent reaction against the torturers...**
“...turning our Tortures into horrid arms against the Torturer.” ‘Paradise Lost,’ Bk. II, ll. 63-4.

26. Page 160 — **delighted to help the devas...** As King Mārādhirāja, Māra is the ruler of The Heaven of Those Who Delight in Other’s Creations; that is to say, he’s the brightest deva of the Sensual Realms (kāma-loka). In this role he is thus a figure highly comparable to the biblical Lucifer, ‘The Light-bringer,’ formerly the brightest of all archangels.

27. Page 162 — **a murderous glee took him over...** As in M 50.21 – “Then the Māra Dūsi took possession of a certain boy and, picking up a stone, he struck the Venerable Vidhura on the head...” Vidhura was the chief disciple of the Buddha Kakusandha.

Chapter 16:

1. Page 165 — **she dreaded a similar urge being awakened...** As it was in the life of the Buddha; this is described, for example, at A 3.38.

2. Page 165 — **You are a vaisha,... that’s your dharma...** This fixity of roles was, apparently, a little less formalized in the Buddha’s time but was made more concrete with the Laws of Manu, a set of social codes that were compiled by the Manavans, about 500 years later. The Sanskrit name for these laws is ‘Mānava-Dharmaśāstra’ or ‘Manu-smṛiti.’

3. Page 167 — **“A woman has a dream...** This is an accurate rendering of a dream recounted by a young mother in England, in the early ‘80s. It occurred shortly after the two-year-old child of a close friend died when the car she was in exploded.

4. Page 168 — **for Mara, evil is his good...** In ‘Paradise Lost’ the recently fallen Lucifer reflects: “So farewell Hope, and with Hope farewell Fear, farewell Remorse; all Good to me is lost; Evil be thou my Good...” (Bk IV, ll 108-110)

5. Page 168 — **by your very effort to destroy something, you ended up making it stronger...**
At S 11.22 the Buddha tells a story of just how such a thing happens when an ‘anger-eating demon’ comes to visit Lord Indra’s palace:

The celestial monarch happens to be away when an ugly little sprite wanders in and sits itself down on the throne. All the attempts of the courtiers to get rid of it only cause it to swell in size and increase in power and beauty.

When Indra returns from his travels and discerns what’s going on, he greets the occupant of his throne politely and engages in friendly conversation. As he does so the demon shrinks and soon spontaneously disappears.

6. Page 170 — **the place was strangely tidy...** Buddhist monastics are obligated to tidy their dwelling places before leaving; indeed, you are supposed to leave the living-space in better shape than you found it.

7. Page 170 — **the royal nagas in the lake, Virupakkha and Samuddaja...** In traditional Buddhist cosmology Virūpakkha is one of the four Guardians of the World (Lokapālas) and he rules the Western Quarter, the realm of nāgas – see above, Ch 8, note 1.

Not wishing to confuse matters, it might also be mentioned that one Dhatarattha is named as a king of nāgas, and he and Samuddajā are mentioned as a couple, in Jāt §543 ('The Jātaka, Vol VI,' pp 84 ff.).

8. Page 171 — *When one sees with perfect wisdom...* These verses come from S 15.10; it is the second part of the verses about Vepulla Mountain that were quoted above, Ch 14, p 142.

9. Page 176 — **the Kattika month...** This is the roughly equivalent to the month of November in the Western calendar.

10. Page 175 — **the face of the Hunter...** As in M 25.7, 'The Discourse on The Bait': "'Deer-trapper' is a term for Māra, the Evil One." Interestingly, the verb 'to kill' or 'to strike' in Pali is 'hanati' and 'hantar' in Pali means 'The Killer.' Another term for this is 'māretā' or 'māretar' from the verb 'māreti,' 'to kill,' as used at S 23.1: "Rādha, see form as Māra, see it as the killer..."

11. Page 175 — **during the Eight Days of Frost...** The coldest part of the Indian mid-winter was known by this name in the Buddha's time.

12. Page 175 — **"Living beings," he mused, "are so gullible."** Apparently this English word comes from the Latin 'gula,' derived originally from the Pali/Sanskrit 'gala' = swallow + 'bāla' = fool; the compound 'galabāliṣo' thus means 'foolish swallowing' or 'taking the bait.'

Chapter 17:

1. Page 179 — **They say you have a charm...** As in 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 271.

2. Page 179 — **to go dressed in plain white clothing...** It is customary for devout followers of the Buddhist religion, particularly in the Southern Buddhist countries, to wear plain white, or black and white clothing when visiting the temple, and to forgo the use of jewellery and perfumes. This practice is especially followed on the lunar observance days (the full, new and half-moons), or for a special event or festival. In the Pali scriptures there is often reference to 'the white-clad laity' e.g. at A 5.195.

3. Page 180 — **A good king should display:...** These are the Ten Rāja-dhammas, or Royal Virtues. They are mentioned in several places in the Jātakas, e.g., Jāts §§151 & 282.
4. Page 180 — **one worthy of ruling the world...** These qualities of a Universal Emperor are listed at D 25.6.
5. Page 182 — **that the Queen had those windows put in...** As in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, p 282. In the original story it was Khujjuttarā who had the idea to put viewing-holes in the wall.
6. Page 182 — **The concealment of another’s fault...** In many of the more serious monastic rules it is also regarded as a wrongdoing, sometimes even of an equal weight, for a monk or nun to hide the transgression of another.
7. Page 185 — **if a queen has five husbands...** As quoted above, Ch 12, note 2.
8. Page 185 — **less than 16,000 concubines...** This refers to Jāt §489: “Such a King should have 16,000 women at the least.” Also, comparable comments are made at Jāts §§461, 472, 538 & 460, where the Bodhisatta is one of 1,000 sons of King Sabbadatta.
9. Page 185 — **like the avenging Goddess Durga...** She is an aspect of Mother Kālī and is usually depicted with many weapon-weilding arms. Her name means “one who can redeem in situations of utmost distress.”
10. Page 186 — **a strong emphasis on love for all beings...** As in the Karanīyamettā Sutta: “Even as a mother protects with her life, her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.” SN 143-152.
11. Page 186 — **not trying to suggest we like the unlikeable...** As described in ‘Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless,’ by Ajahn Sumedho, pp 35-38.
12. Page 186 — **celestial palace of Vejayanta...** As mentioned, for example, at M 37.8: “It once happened that war broke out between the devas and the asuras. In that war the devas won and the asuras were defeated. When I had won that war and returned from it as a conqueror, I had the Vejayanta Palace built.”
13. Page 186 — **the nine gems of the Bejaratana...** The legend of Bejaratana – the Nine Auspicious Gems – associates these stones with different parts of the body:
- heart – diamond & ruby
 - right eye – cat’s eye
 - left eye – garnet
 - tongue – coral
 - lymph – moonstone
 - blood (as spewed by the nāga Pasukin) – yellow sapphire, blue sapphire & emerald.

14. Page 186-7 — **Lord Vepacitti is the father of my beloved Queen, Suja...** This curious fact is mentioned at Jāts § 386, 429 and 430; also at S 11.12: “Sakka’s wife is the asura maiden named Sujā.” The story of how this odd couple came to be married is found in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, pp 313-324.
15. Page 187 — **Varuna and Isana...** The former is named as a deva-king in Jāts §§513 & 543; an eminent nāga of the same name appears in Jāt §545. The latter is another name for Lord Shiva; he is mentioned along with Varuna as a deva-king at D 13.25 & S 11.3.
16. Page 187 — **Rhamba, the leader of the dance...** She was indeed one of the most famous asparas, along with Urvasī, Menakā and Tilottamā. Generally the female asparas have the male gandharvas as their husbands. The women dance and the men make the music in the classic tales.
17. Page 187 — **these cloud-devas...** The valāhaka have a whole section of the Samyutta Nikāya dedicated to them – S 32. All these various forms of cloud-deva are mentioned there.
18. Page 188 — **his Sindh horse with its golden ears...** As described at Jāt §545, ‘The Jātaka,’ Vol VI, p 131.
19. Page 188 — **Princess Irandati...took the mailed hand...** As at Jāt §545, ‘The Jātaka,’ Vol VI, p 131.
20. Page 188 — **the great Bodhisattva Utpalabhuti...** As mentioned in the Avatamsaka Sūtra, in the chapter entitled ‘Entry into the Realm of Reality.’ This spiritually advanced parfumer, whose name means ‘born of the blue lotus,’ is the 21st Bodhisattva encountered by the youth Sudhana on his quest for enlightenment. See ‘Entry into the Realm of Reality – The Text,’ trans. Thomas Cleary, pp 134-5, Shambhala Publications.
21. Page 189 — **the Bodhisattva ‘Adorned with Fragrance’...** This great spiritual being – who also used the realm of scent as a spiritual method – is mentioned in the Shurangama Sutra, 5.30. This method of realization is one of 25 presented to the Buddha as possible approaches to enlightenment. See ‘The Shurangama Sutra’ p 125, DRBA.
22. Page 189 — **its glorious top and middle tones... base note...** These terms are used as part of the description of similarly mysterious and exotic scent in ‘Jitterbug Perfume,’ by Tom Robbins; e.g. on p 218.
23. Page 190 — **Watch out! Watch Out! It’s a snake!...** This latter part of the chapter is mostly derived from ‘The Story Cycle of King Udena’ in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, pp 285-6.
24. Page 191 — **gently remove a posy of flowers...** In the original tale it is Māgandiyā herself, who had contrived to be present, who removes the flowers.

25. Page 191 — **He pulled the string of the great bow and aimed the arrow at Samavati...**

A similar incident is recounted in the Ambattha Sutta, D 3.1.23 where the Buddha speaks of Ambattha's ancestor Kanha (Skt = Krishna), who was the black-skinned son of the slave-girl Disā. He says:

“Don't disparage Ambattha too much for being the son of a slave-girl! That Kanha was a mighty sage. He went to the south country [the Deccan], learnt the mantras of the brahmins there, and then went to King Okkāka and asked for his daughter Maddarūpī. And King Okkāka, furiously angry, exclaimed: 'So this fellow, the son of a slave-girl, wants my daughter!' and put an arrow to his bow. But he was unable to either shoot the arrow or to withdraw it. Then the ministers and counsellors came to the sage Kanha and said: 'Spare the king, Reverend Sir, spare the king!'”

The king was then told by Kanha that the only way out of this dilemma was to fire the arrow at the crown prince. Kanha assured him if he did so the prince would be unharmed. The king obeyed under this duress and the prince was indeed happily unscathed. He then offered his daughter Maddarūpī to Kanha in marriage.

In the original tale King Udena only fires one arrow and no yakkha is mentioned as providing protection.

Chapter 18:

1. Page 194 — **his vast yellow-stone throne...** Reference is often made to Indra's throne; it grows hot for the kind of reasons mentioned in the story, also when Lord Indra (Sakka) has exhausted his merit or when his life is drawing to an end. See, for example Jāts §§440, 472, 480 etc. It is also said to tremble when a deed of great virtue is being performed, e.g., at Jāt §488.

2. Page 195 — **like a strangling fig, or maybe a maluva creeper...** Two Jātaka stories use the nature of such parasitic figs as a way of illustrating the dangers of tolerating even the slightest amount of unwholesomeness – these are Jāts §§370 and 412. (See also Bhikkhu Bodhi's note on S 46.39 re these plants, in 'Connected Discourses V' note 81). On the perilous properties of the 'tender, soft, downy tendril of the māluva-creeper,' see M 45.4: “The creeper enfolded the sāla tree, made a canopy over it, draped a curtain all around it, and split the main branches of the tree.”

3. Page 196 — **he went through Kosambi on his alms-round...** This account of the quarrel and the Buddha's departure is largely as found in M 48, M 128, MV 10.1-3 & S 22.81. An excellent telling of the whole sorry tale is found in 'The Life of the Buddha,' by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, pp 109-119, BPS.

4. Page 197 — **teachings over... weeks on how to establish concord...** These are the 'Six Memorable Qualities' — the sārānīya-dhammas, as at M 48.6.

5. Page 197 — **many tales of his former lives...** Such as Jāts §§357 and 33, as mentioned in 'Buddhist Legends, Vol I,' p 177.
6. Page 197 — **"Enough, bhikkhus, stop all this quarrelling..."** This passage comes from M 128.4-6.
7. Page 199 — **Ananda would be invited to the palace...** This turn of events comes from 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' once again; see 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 287.
8. Page 200 — **using a Gandhara charm...** This 'vijjā' is mentioned at D 11.5; it was used to render oneself invisible.
9. Page 201 — **his women, all gazing adoringly at this... monk...** This description of Udena taking offence at his court women's feelings of devotion to Venerable Ānanda is recounted in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 287: "One day, after they had listened to the Elder's discourse on the Dhamma, their hearts were filled with joy and they rendered honour to the Elder by presenting him with 500 yellow robes." A similar but more canonical account is found in the books of the Monastic Rule, at CV 11.13-14. It is also cited by the author in 'Three Robes is Enough,' in the anthology **'Hooked! ~ Buddhist writings on greed, desire and the urge to consume,'** ed. by Stephanie Kaza, Shambhala Publications.
10. Page 201 — **flower-liquor, puppha-rasa...** This kind of alcoholic drink is mentioned at Vin I 246.
11. Page 202 — **they stopped donating food in the morning....** As recounted in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 178: "The monks got so little food they were nearly famished and it required only a few days to bring them to a better state of mind."
12. Page 204 — **Sharing the goodness...** The principle of sharing blessings, (merit, or puñña in Pali) is a central practice in Buddhist tradition. See 'The Sharing of Blessings' on pp 26-7 in the Abhayagiri chanting book – <http://www.abhayagiri.org/main/book/288/>
13. Page 205 — **I was the daughter of King Canda Pajjota...** This account is largely as found in 'The Story of Cycle of King Udena,' 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 270-272.

Chapter 19:

1. Page 209 — **Brekkek, kekkek, kekkek, kekkek!...** This small collection of odd words comes from *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce, p 4. On this passage Joseph Campbell writes: 'The guttural sound "brékkek kóax," borrowed from Aristophanes' comedy 'The Frogs,' suggests a swampy damp terrain..."Ualu" and "Quáouauh": Welsh cries of lament.' ('A Skeleton Key to *Finnegans Wake*,' p 31).

2. Page 209 — **surrounded by bonfires....** This is the ascetic yogic discipline called 'The Five Fires' – it is still practiced today, as are all of the austerities described here, by Hindu yogis.

3. Page 209 — *Mingin foref, klege shanesto...* These words are an adaptation of Heather Moore's inspired CAPTCHA security code poems, as described on her 'Skinny laMinx' weblog – <http://www.skinnylaminx.com/2008/11/security-poetry.html>.

4. Page 210 — **a good samana...** The samanas, or wanderers, are part of the highly varied clan of spiritual seekers in India. They are meditators and ascetics who live a homeless and harmless life. They are often contrasted with the brahmins; these are householders having families and playing the role of ritual priests. 'Samana' literally means 'a calm one' – it is also the origin of the word 'shaman' in European lore.

5. Page 211 — **following the breath to calm his thoughts...** This is the meditation called 'mindfulness of breathing.' It is a method greatly praised by the Buddha and practiced by him throughout his long life as a monk. See, for example, M 118 & S 54.11 "If anyone, bhikkhus, speaking rightly could say of anything: 'It is a noble dwelling, a divine dwelling, the Tathāgata's dwelling,' it is of concentration by mindfulness of breathing that one could rightly say this."

6. Page 211 — **repeating a mantra...** This is another classical form of meditation; a single word or a phrase is repeated over and over internally in order to calm and focus the mind. A very common mantra used in Thai Buddhist practice is the word 'Buddho' – the name of the Buddha – repeating 'Bud-' on the inbreath and '-dho' on the outbreath.

7. Page 212 — **true wanderers,... never used money...** This is a rule still followed by the stricter lineages of Buddhist monastic training and some of the groups of wanderers in India today.

8. Page 217 — **the candalas and matangas...** These are two of the lowest rungs in the caste system; the candālas being the 'untouchables' (see Ch 5, note 12) and the matangas also being below the workers caste (the sudras). In the famous incident of Ānanda asking for water at the well from the matanga girl Pakati, she says: "Oh brahmin, I am too lowly and inferior to give you water. Do not ask any service of me for, by that, your purity will be contaminated as I am of low caste." The Venerable Ānanda memorably replied: "I did not ask for caste but for water." The woman thus became very impressed and inspired by him – later even becoming an Arahant nun. (See Divyananda, as in 'The Gospel of Buddha,' by Paul Carus, 1894).

9. Page 220 — **'keeping the postures even'...** Ajahn Chah made the same error of interpretation, in respect to this way of establishing mindfulness of the body; he describes his mistake: "At first I took the word 'consistent' (even) at face value, and thought that you should

stand for as long as you walk... sit... lie down. I tried this but I couldn't do it..." From 'Food for the Heart,' p 243, Wisdom Publications.

10. Page 220 — **'the cessation of perception and feeling'...** Rather than this being a rock-like state of insensitivity this term actually refers to the most refined of all levels of meditative concentration.

11. Page 220 — **the more pain he felt the more bad karma he had burned off...** As the Buddha recounts in his description of a dialogue with some disciples of Nigantha Nataputta – he asked: "But friends, do you know that so much suffering has been exhausted, or that so much suffering has still to be exhausted?" They were under the impression that suffering was being burned off by 'the performance of piercing austerities,' (M14.17-18). They did not know the answer to the Buddha's question, yet still they asserted, "Pleasure is not to be gained through pleasure, pleasure is to be gained through pain." To which the Buddha replied, "But friends, I can abide without moving my body or uttering a word, experiencing the peak of pleasure for... seven days and nights," indicating that liberating spiritual practice can also be highly enjoyable (M14.20-22).

12. Page 221 — **this misery really isn't of much use to any of us here...** This reflects the Buddha's own intuition that such painful austerities were fruitless, as described at M 36.30 "...by this racking practice of austerities I have not attained any super-human states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. Could there be another path to enlightenment?"

13. Page 222 — **I am... the lord and protector of water- and tree-spirits...** Vessavana is named as such at Jāt §398

14. Page 222 — **avowed to guard the safety of the world...** He is one of the four Great Kings who are also known as the 'Lokapala' – the guardians of the world (see, e.g. D 18.12, & also above Ch 4, note 5).

15. Page 222 — **cintamani-vijja...** This 'wish-fulfilling gem charm' is mentioned at D 11.7; there it is called the 'manika charm.'

16. Page 223 — **We nagas are the favourite food of the garudas ...** In many classical Buddhist legends it is described how the nāgas and the garudās (also known as supannās) are ancient foes of each other, hardly surprising since nāgas are the favourite food of those giant eagles. For example, at D 20.11, the verses recounting a unique mahā-samaya, 'a mighty gathering,' describe how:

*And the twice-born, winged and clear of sight,
Fierce garuda birds (the nāgas' foes) have come
Flying here – Citrā and Supannā.*

*But here the nāga kings are safe: the Lord
Has imposed a truce. With gentle speech
They and the nāgas share the Buddha's peace.*

17. Page 224 — **There are forms, monks...** This teaching of the Buddha is found at S 35.115

18. Page 225 — **five different shades of red...** To possess 'hair of five colours' was an attribute of rare auspiciousness in ancient folklore. See, for example, 'The King of Ireland's Son,' by Padraic Colum, p 288, (Henry Holt and Co. 1916, Dover Publications, 1997):

"A girl she was and wherever the sun was it shone on her, and wherever the breeze was it rippled over her. White as the snow upon a lake frozen over was the girl, and as beautiful as flowers and as alive as birds were her eyes, while her cheeks had the red of fox-gloves and her hair was the blending of five bright soft colors. She looked at Flann happily and her eyes had the kind look that was always in Morag's eyes. And she came and knelt down, putting her hands on his knees.

'I am Morag, Flann,' she said.

'Morag indeed,' said he, 'but how have you become so fair?'

'I have eaten the berry from the Fairy Rowan Tree,' said she..."

Chapter 20:

1. Page 227 — **the Vipasa River that flowed below Kulluta...** This village is nowadays known as Kullu and is on the Beas River, this being a contraction of 'Vipāsa' the ancient Indian name. This was the furthest point east that the armies of Alexander reached as they made their invasion of India. To them it was known as the River Hyphasis. It is a tributary of the Sutlej River and subsequently the Indus. Kullu is about fifteen miles from ancient Jālandhara.

2. Page 228 — **It was a stone and wood structure...** In the Kullu area houses are still built this way, with stone walls layered at about four foot intervals with lengths of thick cedar timber. This is so that, during the many earthquakes that occur in the region, the stones and the wood can slide across each other and the building will remain standing.

3. Page 230 — **he had indeed grown to enjoy it ...** This kind of enjoyment, as one might suspect, is completely contrary to the life of a true samana. As it says in Ashvaghosha's 'Life of the Buddha' 11.67:

*The pleasure that a man living here
derives from his harming another being,
is unwelcome to a wise and compassionate man.*

4. Page 231 — **Karuna, Sugandha's mother...** This name means 'compassion.'

5. Page 232 — **Yeshe Tsogyal, the consort of Padma Sambhava...** In the Eighth Century CE the Tibetan King Trisong Detsen, having faith in Buddhism, invited the great sage Padma Sambhava, of Uddiyana (the country to the immediate north-west of Gandhara, in modern Afghanistan), and the esteemed Indian monk Sangharakshita to Tibet. Yeshe Tsogyal was a Tibetan princess; she became the student and consort of Padma Sambhava and was the first Tibetan ever to attain complete enlightenment, by some accounts. She became a guru of great power and wisdom, (see 'Lady of the Lotus-Born,' by Gyalwa Changchub and Namkhai Nyingpo, Shambhala Publications).

6. Page 232 — **She could turn herself into a flying tigress...** The place where they landed and then lived in a cave, on one such excursion, is now the location of the monastery called 'The Tiger's Nest,' it is near Paro, in Bhutan.

7. Page 232 — **Tilopa had his student Naropa go thieving...** This was just one of many painful trials the mahā-siddha (master of enlightenment) Tilopa put Naropa through. They lived in India, around the Tenth Century CE; Tilopa 988-1069 CE, Naropa 956-1041 CE; Naropa subsequently also became an accomplished sage. A comprehensive and beautifully illustrated compendium of the biographies of these 84 great beings is found in 'Masters of Enchantment – the lives and legends of the Mahasiddhas' translated by Keith Dowman and illustrated by Robert Beer, published by Inner Traditions.

8. Page 232 — **Marpa – he had Milarepa build and take down a stone tower seven times...**

Also in the lineage of mahā-siddhas, Marpa was a student of Naropa and brought this particular brand of accomplishment to Tibet, in the Eleventh Century CE; Marpa 1012-1097 CE.

9. Page 233 — **shoveling dung and rotting giblets – this is the nectar of training!...** Another of the classical mahā-siddhas, Luipa, lived for twelve years by eating the rotting fish-guts thrown away at the market. Again, his story is found in 'Masters of Enchantment,' pp 33-4.

10. Page 234— **the murderer who built towers, dwelt in a cave and turned green from living on nettles...** These are some more incidents from the highly colourful life of the great yogi, Milarepa; Milarepa: 1052-1135 CE. His story can be found in detail in 'The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa,' Shambhala Publications.

11. Page 237 — **you are the victor...** 'Jaya' is the Pali for 'victory'; 'Jayanta' therefore means 'victorious one.'

Chapter 21:

1. Page 242 — **ever loved and lauded Ananda...** The great Elder Ānanda was indeed popular and highly appreciated. The Buddha once said to him: "Ānanda has four remarkable and wonderful qualities. What are they? If a company of monks comes to see Ānanda, they are

pleased at the sight of him, and when Ānanda talks Dhamma to them they are pleased, and when he is silent they are disappointed. And so it is too with nuns and with women and men among the lay followers.” D16.5.16.

2. Page 242 — **if you knew, as I know...** This teaching is found at Iti 26. It was also quoted in ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,’ on p 280.

3. Page 243 — **Samavati was moved to think of something to offer him...** This incident is recounted, in various forms, at CV11.13-14 and in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, p 287, (see above, Ch 18, note 9).

4. Page 246 — **Suguda – far to the north-west of here...** This area is referred to by historians as Sogdiana, it was just to the north of Bactria; its capital was Maracanda, known today as Samarkand. The region is now called Uzbekistan and includes some of the modern state of Tajikistan. See map on p 268.

5. Page 246 — **he could recite the entire Triple Veda...** These are the scriptures of the Hindu religion, as they existed during the time of the Buddha. Such an ability, to recite the Vedic Canon by heart, was considered a sign of a significantly accomplished spiritual practitioner. For example at D 3.1.3, “Now at that time Pokkharasāti had a pupil, the youth Ambattha, who was a student of the Vedas, who knew the mantras, was perfected in the Three Vedas, a skilled expounder of the rules and rituals.”

6. Page 247 — **born of the mouth of Lord Brahma Himself...** As it says in the Pali texts: “...the brahmins say this: ‘brahmins are the highest caste, those of any other caste are inferior; brahmins are the fairest caste, those of any other castes are dark; only brahmins are purified, not non-brahmins; brahmins alone are the children of Brahmā, born of his mouth, born of Brahmā, created by Brahmā, heirs of Brahmā.” (M 84.4)

7. Page 247 — **our children will be velamikas...** A ‘velamika’ was a person born half kshatriya, half brahmin. According to the laws and customs of India at that time a velamika would be accepted as a brahmin and allowed to take part in all the brahmin rituals, although they would not necessarily be accepted as a kshatriya. This disparity of roles is described at D 3.1.24-25, and would be sure to have rankled someone like Māgandiyā.

8. Page 247 — **He preaches against brahmins...** As with Māgandiyā’s other assertions, this is something of a misrepresentation. The Buddha did speak out against the caste system in his teaching, it is true. For example, many aspects of his outlook on this issue are represented by his enlightened disciple Mahā-Kaccāna in M 84, where, over and over again, the monk states: “These four castes are all the same; there is no difference between them at all that I can see... that statement of the brahmins [on their superiority] is just a saying in the world.”

However, the Buddha also highlighted what he saw as the qualities of ‘a true brahmin,’ one who is pure-hearted and noble:

*Neither matted hair nor so-called high family,
Nor states of birth make one a true brahmin.
By one's own actions in the practice of truth
Does one become a brahmin true.*

Dhp 393

*I do not call someone a true brahmin merely by reason of birth,
Just because they came from a noble mother,
Only if free from all attachments, from worldly grasping,
Then will I call that person a brahmin true.*

Dhp 396

9. Page 248 — **the first of the washerwomen crossed her shadow...** According to the ritual observances of the brahmins not only should they never touch a low-caste person, they should never let an 'untouchable,' a candāla, even so much as touch their shadow. Should this occur, the unfortunate candāla would be severely punished, often in extreme and painful ways. There are many horror stories about innocent people having their eyes put out or having molten lead poured into their ears, just because a brahmin wandered near them in this way or if they inadvertently heard a brahmin chanting some ritual verses.

10. Page 250 — **hunt-the-coral-flower in the Nandana Grove...** The Coral Tree, as mentioned in 'The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,' p 194 et seq., blossoms only rarely, taking one hundred years to flower, (see 'Three Worlds According to King Ruang,' p 234).

11. Page 251 — **the dovey-darlings of Nandana...** The Nandana Grove, 'Garden of Delight' is one of the parks in the capital of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods. The asparas referred to here as 'dovey-darlings' and 'feather-feet' are the 'nymphs with dove-like feet' which were one group of asparas of that heaven. See for example, Ud 3.2. In Pali they are called 'accharā kakutapādāni.'

12. Page 252 — **Their agreement was voiced by that roaring silence...** Consent by silence is the customary method employed the Buddha, and by those who follow Buddhist traditions. For example: "'Venerable Sir, let the Blessed One with three others consent to accept tomorrow's meal from me.' The Blessed One consented in silence." M 58.4

13. Page 254 — **My niece is an only child...** This account is derived from two places in the Dhammapada Commentary, to verses Dhp 179-80 and Dhp 21-23, 'The Story Cycle of King Udena.' These passages are to be found in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 274-77 & Vol III, pp 31-35.

Chapter 22:

1. Page 257 — **She reviewed the knotty points of the teaching...** This reflects an important aspect of Buddhist practice:

“Here one who has faith in a teacher visits them; when one visits them, one pays respects to them; when one pays respects to them one gives ear; one who give ear hears the Dhamma; having heard the Dhamma one memorises it; one examines the meaning of the teachings one has memorized; when one examines the meaning, one gains reflective acceptance of those teachings; when one has gained a reflective acceptance of those teachings, zeal springs up within one; when zeal has sprung up, one applies will; having applied one’s will, one scrutinizes; having scrutinized, one strives; resolutely striving, one realizes with the body the Ultimate Truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom.” M 70.23.

2. Page 257 — **A warm feeling of pure love... she nursed it...** One of the ways of developing loving-kindness meditation is to deliberately bring to mind a person (or even an animal) that one has a deep and unquestioning affection for, then taking that benevolent feeling, nurturing it and extending it to others.

3. Page 258 — **In the land of my fathers...** This is the name of a much-loved song of the Welsh, which is also now the national anthem of that country. Its title in Welsh is ‘Hen Wlad Fy Nhadau’; it was written by Evan James and his son James James.

4. Page 258 — **it is our custom to mark our limbs...** The Celts of ancient times were famous for being heavily tattooed. Julius Cæsar described these body-markings in Book V of his history, ‘The Gallic Wars,’ in 54 BCE.

5. Page 258 — **beside the inland sea in... Parthia...** This is the Caspian Sea of modern times and the lands to its east.

6. Page 258 — **an aged warlord in Maracanda...** This is the ancient name for Samarkand, as mentioned above, in Ch 21, note 4.

7. Page 258 — **the enfolding serpent – the Ouroboros...** It is an ancient European myth that the world is in fact flat and coiled around its rim lies a vast snake, the Ouroboros, or Jörmungandr, with its tail held in its own mouth.

8. Page 258 — **the Land of the Five Rivers...** This is the Punjab of modern times, comprised of parts of north-west India and eastern Pakistan. The number five, ‘pañca,’ gave the region its name; the five rivers are: the Sutlej, Beas, Ravi, Chenab and Jhelum.

9. Page 258 — **the heart of the Middle Country...** This is the ‘Majjhena Padesa’ in Pali, otherwise known as the central area of the River Ganges basin. It roughly comprises the modern

states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. In the Buddha's time it stretched from Rājagaha in the east to Madhurā in the west, and from Buddahgayā in the south to Sāvatti in the north.

10. Page 259 — **the land of Cymru...** This is the modern day spelling of 'Wales' in its own language. The word is pronounced 'Kumri.'

11. Page 259 — **she kept the flame of loving-kindness bright...** As mentioned at note 2 of this chapter. This describes the way in which that practice is classically carried out.

12. Page 260 — **all my efforts have borne no fruit...** This complaint of Māgandiyā to her uncle expresses her thoughts as found in 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 288.

13. Page 261 — **no villages in this valley until ... its eastern end...** These are the modern-day villages of Kalgar, Tulgar and Pulgar.

14. Page 267 — **The pillars... are thoroughly dried out...** This passage is as found in 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 288.

Chapter 23:

1. Page 269 — **yantras in some old language...** A yantra is a symbolic pattern or matrix of letters and numbers, used since ancient times in India and South-east Asia to act as a protective charm or to bestow particular powers or enchantments. They are also used as meditation objects or a symbol of spiritual truths – for example the 'Sri-yantra.'

2. Page 270 — **the celestial River Savasvati...** The Milky Way is also known by this name and is believed, in Hindu myths, to meet the other, earthly rivers at this point. The modern day city of Allahabad, also known as Prayag or Payaga, lies at this junction too.

3. Page 273 — **The vajrapani knocked me dizzy...** A yakkha of this name appears from time to time in the Buddhist scriptures, as mentioned above at Ch 15, note 6, re p 151.

It is interesting that, in the Northern Buddhist tradition, there is also a Bodhisattva of the same name. I.B. Horner has some interesting comments on this character in 'Middle Length Sayings,' Vol I, p 185, as does Maurice Walshe in note 151 in his 'Long Discourses of the Buddha,' p 549, and D.L. Snellgrove in 'Buddhist Himalaya,' p 62.

4. Page 278 — **sick-hearted pretas...** 'Preta' in Sanskrit or 'peta' in Pali, are the 'hungry ghosts,' members of the lowest-but-one realm in Buddhist cosmology. They are miserable beings in a perpetual state of craving as they have enormous ever-hungry bellies but tiny mouths, and can never eat enough to make them satisfied. The 'Petavatthu' collection in the Pali

Canon contains many stories about them. They symbolize the realm of the addict who is always hungry for the next fix.

5. Page 281 — **Just as the moon's radiance...** These passages are adapted from Iti 27.
6. Page 282 — **held by two kinds of views...** These passages are adapted from Iti 49.
7. Pages 284-5 — **hopping the weirs in serpenthyme...** Some of the words and phrases of this night-long riverrun have been borrowed from *Finnegans Wake*, by James Joyce, (pp 194-216), evoking the nature of the river spirit Anna Livia Plurabelle.
8. Page 285 — **dawn over Kurukshetra...** This is the field of battle in the classic Indian epic 'The Mahā-Bharata.' It is up-river from Kosambi on the River Yamuna.

Chapter 24:

1. Page 286 — **how can he be rewarding her...** The account of Udena's rewarding of Māgandiyā can be found in 'The Story Cycle of King Udena,' in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 289-90.
2. Page 288 — **in a roasting chamber like Avici Hell...** This is the lowest of the 'Eight Great Hells' of Buddhist cosmology; its name means 'The great hell of suffering without respite.' Each of the eight great hells are described as having floors and ceilings made of fiery red iron: "The fire in these hells never goes out," (see, for example, 'Three Worlds According to King Ruang,' pp 66-8).
3. Page 289 — **until this moment... I always felt apprehensive and suspicious of Samavati...** As in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 290.
4. Page 290 — **as friendly and undisputing as milk with water...** This beautiful phrase was originally used by the Buddha to address a group of three bhikkhus that he met just after he had left the squabbling monks at Ghositarama behind him. The story is found at M 128.11 and MV 10.4. The Venerable Anuruddha explains that one factor contributing to their harmonious state is that he considers: "Why should I not set aside what I wish to do and rather do what the other venerable ones wish to do." And so he does; thus concord is developed.
5. Page 292 — **the 'soma-charm' I put on the oil...** Where the 'Gandhara-charm' and the 'cintamani' both come from the Pali Canon; this charm is a fiction. That said, Soma was both the deity of the sacrifice in the ancient Vedas – there are 120 hymns to Soma in the Rig Veda – and it is also the liquor of the sacrifice that is poured into the mouth of Agni, the fire god. Soma was also a kind of universal panacea that caused the one who drank it to feel euphoria and a great sense of well-being:

*We have drunk Soma; we have become immortal.
We have gone to the light; we have found the gods.
What can hostility do to us now?*

Rig Veda VIII 48.3

in 'Oriental Mythology,' by Joseph Campbell, p 181

6. Page 295 — **Hiri and Siri, 'Honour' and 'Glory,' were of the Kalakañja-asura type...** This subgroup of asuras is mentioned at D 20.12: "The Kālakañjas, terrible to see..." and at D 24.1.7: "the Kālakañja asuras, who are the very lowest grade of asuras." The other aspects of their physical characteristics can mostly be found in 'Three Worlds According to King Ruang,' pp 107-08.

These daughters of Indra and Sujā along with Āsā and Saddhā are mentioned in Jāt §535 where they compete for a Coral Flower. It is a contest reminiscent of that occasioned by the 'apple of discord' which became the catalyst for the Trojan War. In this myth the shepherd Paris had to choose which of the goddesses Hera, Athene and Aphrodite should be given the golden apple, inscribed with the words 'for the most beautiful.'

Also, at Jāt §382, a beautiful aspara, called Sirī, is involved in a similar contest with Kālakannī, a female nāga, who is referred to as being 'ungracious and unlovely.'

N.B. in the Jātaka, the daughters of Indra and Sujā are referred to as: "Four maids with skins like gold... peerless midst all nymphs..." i.e. the description of Hirī and Sirī as being 'Kālakañja-like' in this way is not canonical.

7. Page 295 — **She was 'fair and golden-skinned...** Sujā is described thus in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, p 323.

8. Page 295 — **looking like Kalakanni, 'Misfortune' herself...** As above, Jāt §382.

9. Page 296 — **the force of life itself – the *jivita*...** In Buddhist philosophy this is the word for the 'life-' or 'vitality-faculty'; it can be physical (rūpa-jīvitindriya) or mental (nāma-jīvitindriya).

10. Page 298 — **The asura was still bound...** These properties of the bondage of Vepacitti are described at S 35.248, with the added reflection of the Buddha: "So subtle, bhikkhus, was the bondage of Vepacitti, but even subtler than that is the bondage of Māra."

11. Page 298 — **He cursed those who stood in judgement over him ...** This passage is derived from S 11.4, as are the verses that follow.

12. Page 299 — **"I know you Evil One, you have come here for your own ends"...** This phrase is borrowed from SN 430, the Padhāna Sutta.

13. Page 301 — **Full six hundred generations...** This poem is based on accounts of the extinction of over fifty species of mega-fauna in continental America, between around 12,000 to

11,000 BCE. After the arrival of the first small group of humans – who crossed the Canadian ice-sheet and emerged near modern-day Edmonton, also in about 12,000 BCE – within roughly 1,000 years, these dozens of species of large mammals had expired.

Their demise also appears to have coincided with a change of religious practices (as evidenced by ritual objects and the structure of burial sites) and with a new ‘earth-respecting’ ethic that appeared then for the first time.

Chapter 25:

1. Page 310 — **They revealed holes that had been neatly dug...** This whole scenario is largely as described in the Dhammapada Commentary, ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, p 290.

2. Page 310 — **Your karma... is ripening...** The Buddha uses this kind of phrase often, for example at M 86.17, in the Angulimāla Sutta: “You are experiencing here and now the result of deeds because of which you might have been tortured in hell for many years...” And, more generally: “Beings are the owners of their actions, heirs of their actions, they originate from their actions, are bound to their actions, abide supported by their actions.” (M 135.4)

3. Page 311 — **The state executioner... Tambadathika...** He was indeed a ruthless bandit, described as having ‘copper-coloured teeth and tawny skin, his body covered with scars.’ He was the executioner in Rājagaha for fifty-five years, but when he died – killed by the same cow as Pukkusāti, it seems – he was reborn in the Tusita Heaven as he had just heard a Dhamma talk given by Venerable Sāriputta. See also ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,’ Ch 21, note 2 (re p 173). His story can be found in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol II, pp 218-21, commentary to Dh 100.

4. Page 312 — **The executioner began to slice...** This gruesome passage is directly from the Dhammapada Commentary, ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, p 290. The Pali for this reads: “Māgandiyāya sarīratopi tikhinena satthena ghanaghanatthānesu mamsam uppātetvā telakapālam uddhanam āropetvā pūve pacāpetvā tameva khādāpesi.” This is translated as: “As for Māgandiyā, he had pieces of solid flesh ripped from various parts of her body with a sharp knife and, setting a vessel of oil on the brazier, he had them fried like cakes and made her eat them.” (E.W. Burlingame trans.)

5. Page 321 — **a full-scale glamour is far superior...** The original meaning of the word ‘glamour’ involved casting an enchantment in order to make someone look different. For example, the grey-eyed goddess Athene casts a glamour over Odysseus when he arrives in Ithaca to protect him from the aggression of his wife’s suitors: “Let me make you so that no mortal can recognize you.” (Odyssey, Bk XIII, l. 397)

6. Page 322 — **she performed the healing mudras...** A mudra is a gesture made with the hands that symbolizes or embodies various qualities. These include, for example, teaching,

blessing, peacefulness, fearlessness or, as in the famous ‘earth-witness’ mudra of the Buddha (where his right hand reaches down to touch the earth) the very moment of his enlightenment.

Chapter 26:

1. Page 323 — **the few who possessed the deva-eye...** This is the ‘dibba-cakkhu’ or ‘divine eye,’ it means the ability to see into other realms of existence. It is one of the six abhiññā or higher powers, psychic abilities that can come as the result of meditation practice and natural propensity for such skills. The other powers are: 1) magical abilities, like flying through the air; 2) the divine ear, i.e. being able to hear things a long distance away; 3) reading another person’s thoughts; 4) memory of past lives; and 5) full enlightenment. These are all mentioned in many places in the Pali Canon, for example at D 34.1.7 & M 77.31-38.

2. Page 325 — **I hope you have been keeping well, bhikkhus...** This is a very customary manner of greeting. For example, see M 128.7.

3. Page 325 — **came to the forest of Parileyyaka...** This account can be found, in various versions, at Ud 4.5, S 22.81, M 128, in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, p 179ff, & in Vol III, p 211.

4. Page 325 — **an ancient sala-tree...** The sāla tree is *shorea rubusta* (also *vatica robusta*) known for its beautiful fragrant white blossoms.

5. Page 326 — **they took the opportunity to ask forgiveness...** This ceremony is regularly practiced in southern Buddhist countries. It is carried out when one is about to depart from a monastery, at the end of a time when one has been living close to others for an extended period or at times such as described in this incident, when it will be useful to clean the slate and acknowledge any hurt that might have been caused.

6. Page 327 — **Those that are heedless...** These passages, and the accompanying verses, are derived from the Dhammapada Commentary to Dhp 21-23, in Buddhist Legends’ Vol I, p 293. The verses themselves are Dhp 21-23.

The Pali for “For, bhikkhus, the mindful never die,” is “Na hi, bhikkhave, appamattā na mīyanti.”

7. Page 328 — **It doesn’t seem right...** This account of the past life of Samavati is found in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, pp 290-1.

8. Page 329 — **Some of those good women were stream-enterers, some once-returners, some non-returners...** This passage is from Ud 7.10.

9. Page 329 — **a katthamukha, a ‘wooden-mouth’ viper...** This type of snake, with its paralyzing bite, is mentioned at note 173 to S 35.238, in ‘The Connected Discourses,’ p 1423.

10. Page 330 — **I'm sure I'm not supposed to be here...** In Buddhist monasteries a man would not be allowed to wander by himself around the nuns' area and, similarly, a woman should not be by herself in the men's area.

11. Page 332 — **the blessed Sanat Kumara himself...** This is a reference to the brahmā god known as 'The Eternal Youth' on account of his ever-young appearance. He is one of very few brahmā deities that follow the Buddha's teachings. He is mentioned, for example, at S 6.11, D 18.17-29 and M 53.25, and his words are often praised by the Buddha.

He is also seemingly related to the modern day avatar called Babaji or Haidakhan Baba of the Himalayan foothills in Kumaon. He manifested in a cave as a fifteen-year-old youth and lived from 1970-84; his ashram is still much-visited today.

12. Page 332 — **He wrote in runes of flame...** The Celts of Wales carved inscriptions in a runic alphabet.

13. Page 332 — **Merely turn your hearing round... to listen to your genuine true nature...** This is the method of meditation described by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guan Shi Yin) in the Śūrangama Sūtra, Ch 3, on p 256 of the BTTS ed., 2009. It is named by the Buddha as the 'easiest way to reach enlightenment,' among those described to him by the twenty-five Bodhisattvas who visit him in that particular teaching.

14. Page 336 — **a smoky, dolorous haze...** This description is derived from the Buddha's words, after the passing away of Vakkali, in S 22.87.

15. Page 336 — **I ate the bait and now depart...** These are the words of the enlightened monk Ratthapāla, uttered at M 82.25, after his family had tried to tempt him back to the household life.

16. Page 336 — **No bribe can move relentless Death...** This verse appears in Jat § 521.

17. Page 338 — **the elder Uppalavanna... Sister Khema...** These two were recognized by the Buddha as foremost in spiritual power and wisdom respectively. In one of his teachings (at S 17.24) the Buddha states: "A faithful female lay follower, rightly imploring her only daughter, dear and beloved, might implore her thus: 'Dear, you should become like Khujjuttarā the lay follower and Velukandakiyā, Nanda's mother... for they are the standard and criterion for my female lay disciples... But if, dear, you go forth from the household life into homelessness, you should become like the bhikkhunīs Khemā and Uppalavannā – for they are the standard and criterion for my female disciples who are bhikkhunīs.'"

Nanda's mother, also known as Uttarā, was the foremost of meditators, just as Khujjuttarā was the foremost in those who have learned much.

18. Page 339 — **in order to be back at our monastery before dusk...** The bhikkhunīs have a principle of not being away from their dwelling place after dark.
19. Page 339 — **bolts of cloth, flasks of medicine of various kinds, incense, candles and garlands of many sorts of flowers...** These are among the most common of traditional offerings: cloth to make robes, medicine for illness and the three types of shrine offering. These latter are often held to symbolize: 1) flowers = virtue, 2) incense = concentration, and 3) candles = wisdom.
20. Page 339 — **Queen Samavati, was foremost of those who live in kindness...** The Buddha bestowed the title, “aggam mettāvihārīnam,” on Samavati; as mentioned at A 1.14.7
21. Page 339 — **you surpassed all others... in learning and expounding...** This epithet bestowed by the Buddha is “aggam bahussutānam,” in Pali.
22. Page 340 — **one in the lineage of the Tathagatas...** Meaning, in this instance, that Dusaka is a Bodhisattva, one resolved on being a Buddha.
23. Page 340 — **she became one of the non-returners...** This is the third level of enlightenment, out of the four. The name ‘anāgāmi’ — literally ‘non-returner’ means that one who has reached such a level will never be reborn in the human realm but only in what are called The Pure Abodes (Suddhāvāsā). All the inhabitants of those realms are thus non-returners or Arahants. The Pure Abodes are considered to be the five highest of the brahmā heavens in what is termed the Realm of Form.
See also ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta,’ Ch 3, note 8 & Ch 8, note 5.
24. Page 340 — **just as did Ghatikara and Pukkusati...** Ghatikara was a potter in the lifetime of the Buddha Kassapa and was a friend of the Bodhisattva Gotama, known in that life as Jotipāla; his story is found at M 81 and S 1.50.
Pukkusāti was the original model for Karl Gjellerup’s chief protagonist, Kāmanīta, in ‘The Pilgrim Kāmanīta.’ His story is found at M 140, and he is also mentioned at S 1.50.
25. Page 340 — **there will be only one book...** This is the Itivuttaka, a section of the Khuddaka-nikāya, the fifth of the collections that make up the Buddha’s discourses.
26. Page 340 — **In the same royal household...** This account derives from the Dhammapada Commentary, in ‘Buddhist Legends,’ Vol I, p 292.
27. Page 341 — **Not in the sky...** This is Dhpa verse 127.
28. Page 342 — **Do you have your parents’ permission?...** The need for parental approval was established at the request of the Buddha’s father, after the Buddha gave his own son, Rahula, the novice ordination when he was seven years old. The aged king had become very

attached to his grandson and felt he should have been asked before Rahula was made into a sāmanera. The account of this is found at MV 1.54, and is quoted in 'The Life of the Buddha,' by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli, pp 77-9, BPS.

29. Page 343 — **the 'taking of dependence'...** This is the formal commitment of the student to follow the advice of a particular teacher, during the years of monastic apprenticeship. This commitment lasts throughout one's time as a novice and for at least the first five years as a monk.

30. Page 343 — **the memorious and eloquent ...** Not only were the Venerable Ānanda's teachings always well received (see Ch 21, note 1, re p 242) but he was blessed with total recall. At the First Council, after the Buddha's final passing away, he was the one who recited all of the Buddha's teachings from memory.

31. Page 343 — **Thus have I heard...** The 'Mangala Sutta,' or 'Discourse on the Highest Blessings,' is found at SN 258-69. It is one of the most frequently recited teachings of the Buddha, both because of the comprehensive collection of good advice that it contains as well as being part of the 'paritta' or protective verses recited for blessing and healing ceremonies.

32. Page 345 — **The Sudhamma Hall...** This was the main throne-room of the Vējayanta Palace, as mentioned at S 35.248, for example. It is described in detail at 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 319-20.

33. Page 346 — **the Thirty-three gods themselves...** The story of the provenance of the group that gave their name to the heavenly realm is found in 'Buddhist Legends,' Vol I, pp 315-20.

34. Page 346 — **a dumb animal like her...** In Jāt §481 a king, frustrated that a pair of captured kinnaris will not sing and dance for him, demands: "Kill these creatures, and cook them, and serve them up to me." From 'Jātaka Stories,' Vol IV, p 159.

35. Page 349 — **ceremonies of lamentation...** Kinnaris are capable of experiencing great sorrow. In Jat §504 there is the account of a pair of kinnaris who weep for 700 years after having been separated for one night. These two beings became King Pasenadi and Queen Mallikā in the Buddha's lifetime. Also, as mentioned above in Ch 15, note13, in Jāt §485 the kinnari Candā's cries of grief for her mortally wounded husband reach all the way to Indra's throne, making it hot and causing him to revive the Bodhisattva.

36. Page 351 — **doing some walking meditation...** In the usual standards of meditation monasteries, there is this encouragement to do some walking meditation – usually for at least an hour – after the daily meal. For example: "After the meal, air your robe on the line, and get straight out on to the walking meditation path." Ajahn Chah, 'Food for the Heart,' p 233, Wisdom Publications.

37. Page 352 — **the story about the disaster at Vesali...** This refers to the origin story for the third of the pārajika, or 'defeat rules' for Buddhist monks and nuns.

After this incident the Buddha established the training precept that: "Should any bhikkhu intentionally deprive a human being of life, or search for an assassin for him, or praise the advantages of death, or incite him to die (saying): 'My good man, what use is this evil, miserable life to you? Death would be better for you than life,' or with such an idea in mind, such a purpose in mind, should in various ways praise the advantages of death or incite him to die, he also is defeated and no longer in affiliation."

That is to say, if a monk or nun kills someone or causes another person to kill someone, their monastic life is automatically terminated – they have been 'defeated' by Māra – and they can never be fully ordained again in this lifetime.

38. Page 353 — **The Yonakas call it 'hamartia'...** 'Yonaka' is the Pali word for the Greeks; it is similar to the English word 'Ionia,' referring to western Asia Minor. The Greek word is 'Iōnios.'

As for 'hamartia' itself – it is well represented in the Buddhist scriptures by the jealousy of the Buddha's cousin, Devadatta and by the ambition of King Ajātasattu. As the Buddha expressed it, after having given the wonderfully comprehensive 'Discourse on the Fruits of the Homeless Life' to this latter: "The King is done for, his fate is sealed, bhikkhus. But if the King had not deprived his father, that good man and just king, of his life, then as he sat here the pure and spotless vision of the Dhamma would have arisen in him." Instead, he was bound for a stint in the lowest hells.

Hamartia has also been a frequent theme of tragic drama from 'Œdipus the King' by Sophocles, to 'Macbeth' by Shakespeare, 'A Streetcar Named Desire' by Tennessee Williams, and it resonates loudly in the character of Lord Voldemort, in the Harry Potter stories.



