

MARA AND THE MANGALA II

THE LIAR



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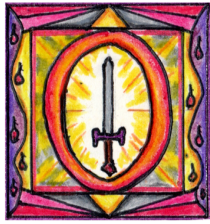
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BEFOREWORD



Once upon a time...

In the time before time – when before and after did not mean what they do now; when here and there were not as they are within this world; when self and other, alive and not alive, overlapped and blurred – there was no good or bad, no light nor dark, no one world or another.

Then as things happen, light came into being. The light was very bright to those who could see, but as soon as it appeared it cast shadows, and they were dark indeed.

The light knew itself at once and it was free and infinite, filled with delight; so the shadows began to enjoy the art of getting in the way. Thus it was that the dance began.

The pulses of the universe took shape as crystal germs of being. The light informed every such seed with the joy of its own reality, but the shadows ever played and took their pleasure in proving themselves stronger than the light – or ever vainly trying to do so.

The deepest of all shadows was the fact of ending, the death that comes to all that has begun. But was Death a single presence? Or did it change, divide? Sometimes it seemed quite solitary, total; at other times it had five faces, flowing, growing out and round each other – now ugly, dim and violent, now reasonable, now bright.

Mara was Death; was one yet also five:

‘I am the Ender, the Killer in the shadow’;

‘I am the Liar, who fulfils all desire’;

‘I am the House-builder, crafting mind and body’;

‘I’m the Thinker, who makes opinions true’;

‘And I am the Holy One, who shines brighter than the heavens.’

‘I am the creeping evil, a snake, a golden deer; I am a goddess; I am your friend, your palace of reason and your nemesis.

‘I am your birth and your certain death. Do you really think you can escape me?’

Chapter 1:

The Hell of Molten Copper



‘Thirsty?’ jested the hell warden, ‘ere, try some of this.’ He yanked viciously on the woman’s hair from the back, cricking her neck and forcing open her mouth. The stone scoop in his hand glowed with a sick green sheen as licklets of flame darted over the surface of the viscous liquid it contained.

‘Drink up! Hyeh heh heh,’ the demon’s throaty chortle kept going despite being drowned in volume by her screams. His bird-claw hand held the scoop with practised steadiness as he poured the molten metal down her gullet.

‘Wossamatter?! Lost yer taste fer drink?’

Within seconds she was silenced by the lethal heat of the draught burning out her throat and her voice. It was scarcely slowed as it hit her stomach and seared her innards to a stinking crisp. The waves of pain pounded through her being, mounting in a rapid crescendo as the flesh burned off her bones.

She felt the merciful blackness of unconsciousness rising in the wake of pain, but, as is the curse of all those condemned to such hells as these, no sooner had the bliss of oblivion been promised than she was wide awake and her body had been made quite whole again, ripe for torture once more.

* * *

The reek of singed flesh and smouldering hair was everywhere, blended with the fume of burning hoof. The stench bit the nostrils and so, even though every hot breath was gasped for, when it entered it chewed her nose and left her wincing.

Streams of molten copper swung lazily through the land around her; she had no memory of rural riverbanks and darting dragonflies amid the reeds but something in her knew that the gentle wending curves of blazing orange and green bore a resonance of another world. Here, now there was only heat, pain, clamour and stench.

There was no space or possibility for thought as the rhythms of pain and strain pounded on without relent.

The hell-dwellers were driven to hack ore-bearing rock from the cliffs around them. The wardens, beast-headed and rough-limbed, lashed any and all at every sign of laziness or pause. Weak or strong, young or old, female or male, all the Damned had to swing their picks and load the ore without respite.

‘Wanna rest, do yer?!’ She heard the roaring of the wolf-faced overseer behind her, to the left. She risked a glance and saw him twisting an old, straggle-headed

man by his ankle. 'Why not take a dip in the river while yer at it?' His scaley arm held the squealing man over the swirls of liquid metal. Vermillion-orange light coloured his features, now twisted in patterns of dread. Purple shadows danced with amber and scarlet across his skin.

Wolf-head dunked him deep into the stream, paused as if counting to an accustomed span of seconds, then hoiked his victim from the current again. His flesh was burned away and only the sinews held the skeleton together as it dripped molten metal on the bank.

Even as he held him there – like a dish-rag among a load of laundry – the flesh began to reform on the bones and the howls of bottomless pain emerged from the new-made throat-flesh.

If she could have remembered the sight of a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis and drying its new-formed wings in the morning sun, perhaps this miraculous spreading of new flesh would have brought this to mind. As it was, the piercing pick of her fellow sufferer's screams slammed into her ears and her own terror of being caught pausing and watching too long made her jerk her eyes away and bury herself in her task of loading her steel cart full of the copper ore.

* * *

Once their waggon was fully laden, she set herself behind the hauling bar with her work-gang partner and set to, pushing it to the smelting vats far across the valley.

The effort was wickedly painful, as the weight of the rock they had to pull meant that their feet were forced with greater intensity against the burning ground. Flesh was roasted off their feet as they walked, the tang of their own scorching skin being left in a trail above their pathway. She could feel her bones grinding against the boiling rock and the slicing pain as the flesh reformed between each step.

Her partner was gibbering fitfully. He started by murmuring the usual litany of the Damned: 'I can't go on... I can't go on...' This was a familiar cry and the plea of all of them but, since they all knew there was no other possibility than to submit to their tortures, they contented themselves with the pale satisfaction of bewailing their fate and carried on. There was nothing else.

But his murmurs had turned to flailing cries, his eyes were swimming wildly in their sockets. Now his legs began to crumple and she had to jerk him back to his senses.

'Don't give up. Don't drop – you know what they'll do to you. Get a grip!' She barked at him, trying her best to pierce the fog that was clearly mounting in his mind.

She had vivid memories of the last time he had swooned. As he lay in a crouched heap the hell-wardens – one with a boar's head and thick-bristled arms, another sporting a horse's face but with flesh-eater's fangs – laid into him with their fire-whips and tore the flesh from his bones. He had huddled there whimpering

miserably, pleading for mercy, while they had waited for his flesh to reform and then they did it again – lashed him until the threads of muscle hung smoking on his bones and laughing with each other all the while. Her heart broke to see it but she was powerless. Her tears boiled and burned her smutted cheeks as they rolled down.

Sometimes she was surprised at the strength she found within herself, although she only noticed it when she saw how much more easily others succumbed to the pain and heat of torture. Also, that strength mostly showed itself as anger at her tormentors and a deep resentment of their treatment of the Damned. Now her pulling-mate was spiralling into madness and seemed certain to collapse again beside her.

‘It’s never going to end... the horror, it’s never going to end.’ He fell to his knees and looked up into her face, ‘I can’t... I... see... even the Buddha has come to mock us... we’re damned and it won’t end. No one... Don’t laugh at me!’

She saw him looking past her in a strange haunted way and, as she desperately tried to heave him up, she glanced over her shoulder, to where her companion was looking.

Framed in flame against the high rock walls, a tall robed figure stood, seemingly floating in the smoke-threaded air. In his right hand he held a blazing walking staff; crimson and mauve fire licked around his body as gold and rainbow-coloured light radiated from his heart.

It was the Buddha, and his face, written with the gravest compassion as it was, also carried a distinct and gentle smile.

She had no time to think of what to make of this apparition – or whether this being was truly mocking their misery – she had only the will to act, and *now*. This was her whole concern.

* * *

Her partner had fallen and the burning rock beneath their feet now scorched the skin of his arms and face, his body. Acrid smoke rose as he smouldered there. Her sinews strained as she pulled his inert form up and draped him over the pulling bar. In the same breath she pressed all her weight against the drag of the loaded cart and pushed with every ounce of strength she had, grimly determined to do the work of both of them.

Sweat boiled on her forehead in sizzling rivulets. Her hands were seared by the bar but her pain was by now beyond a feeling.

‘Push! Just push. Don’t think. Just *do*.’ She muttered aloud, ‘They will not get him. I will not let them.’ Her will was a bright diamond, a seed of blinding radiance, impervious to heat and pain, untouched by reek and racket. In that moment her being was drawn into a single blazing point. All else fell away and she knew that she had won – the waggon was underway and she was unstoppable. Her friend had been saved from further torture.

As the flush of success dawned within her breast – its thrill almost rapturous amid the gloom and threat – she seemed to feel her own strength faltering simultaneously. The landscape shimmered and shifted around her, everything started to feel thinner, distant, as if she was losing her purchase on the world, although she still seemed to be pushing the cart along with ease.

A collage of images filled her vision as it began to swim, dream-pictures that linked with each other yet were drifting apart; they had reached the smelting pools so she was stopping the cart; her ears were filled with a soft rushing sound, like waves shooshing across a shore and soaking into the sand; her partner raised his head and smiled; the heat that pounded relentlessly from the ground below was there but it caused no pain; the scarlet fires and molten pools seemed transparent, shell-like, and a golden light rose around everything she saw.

It was cool; there was softness; she was fading, rising, floating in a gently giddy spiral.

She was disappearing into a single point but that point was everywhere.

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Chapter 2:

Forbidden Fruit



don't know, Krishna, it doesn't feel right to me. It isn't honest.' Maggot's brow furrowed around the rose-coloured circlet that she habitually wore. 'I don't like it at all, hiding away, in secret.'

'But Maggot, most people can't see you anyway – you're permanently hidden from almost everyone,' Krishna glanced at his partner sideways, checking to see if his point had been convincing. It had not.

'If it's not a secret, why have you not told the other monks about me? Why do you have to sneak away to spend time with me and make up excuses to fool the other monks and novices? You're even proud of how clever your lies are. They can't see me because I'm a kinnari, but they can see you and besides, whether they can see me or not, I'm sure they would not approve of a monk having a girlfriend.'

'But that's just it!' Krishna grinned, 'Since you're not a "girl" but a "celestial being" it's *not* against the rules – at least I'm pretty sure it's not – well, not for monks anyway. I'm only nineteen Rains old, so I'm not a full monk yet and I've never heard anyone say a novice should not have a partner who's a deva.' As he was saying this, he was aware that he had made sure that he had not told Khujjuttara about his relationship with Maggot. She was a much respected lay follower of the Buddha, and a friend of Krishna, but she had no abilities to see devas and Krishna had not wanted to risk her disapproval. On account of this he had 'neglected to mention to her' this partnership with Maggot. His other elder mentor, the ragged monk Dusaka, who was from some remotely related spiritual tradition, seemed to be aware already that Krishna and Maggot were lovers but for his own reasons had not scowled at or scolded them for this. He was always difficult to read and could never be second-guessed.

'Well that's not a surprise,' she grumbled, continuing to be unimpressed, 'how often does the subject come up in an average conversation? And isn't the monastic life based on "*brahmacariya*" – everyone in the monastery living as brothers and sisters and *not* having husbands, wives, partners?'

'You know, Maggot,' Krishna, fully determined to push his point, now tried a different angle of attack, 'there's this theory about the word "*brahmacariya*" – it can mean "divine conduct" and they like to translate that as "celibacy", no love-partners and so on, but it also means "walking with the gods" or "going with the holy ones" – don't you see? *You* are one of the divine ones, *you* are a goddess, so if I "go" with you, I am in fact following the "*brahmacariya*". It's right there in the word.'

'So, why do you have to pretend to the other monks that you are doing other things when we are spending time together – I don't get it.'

'Well, it's a philosophical problem,' he looked at Maggot sideways again, testing the effect of this proclamation.

‘Oh,’ Maggot stretched out her legs meaningfully across the width of her nest. She leaned back on the weave-work of branches, looked up through the leaf-canopy of the Ghositarama forest and laced her fingers behind her head. ‘This sounds like it will be interesting. Please go on,’ she fixed Krishna with a stare that was equal parts innocent flower and hawk surveying a rabbit, ‘I can’t wait to hear this.’

Krishna settled himself into a niche of branches, his dark face alight with the relief of at last talking this all-important subject through with his beloved, as well as with some trepidation that it might go in a direction that he was keen to avoid.

‘You see,’ he leaned close to her, ‘the truth is...’

‘*The truth?*’ Maggot raised an eyebrow, well-knowing Krishna’s ability to make presumptions and to be ‘certain’ where a guess would be more realistic.

‘Alright, *how I see it* is that the Master only keeps up a front about all this “abstaining from sexual desires” stuff because that’s what’s expected of the traditional monks’ life. The Buddha secretly approves of seeking sensual pleasure but only *pretends* that the standard is celibacy and renunciation for monks and nuns because that is what society expects. It’s because he has to get along and work with all those life-negators that things *appear* to be set up in the way they are. Those who are in the know realize this and are aware that the Master in truth sees that such life-affirming ways, like the pursuit of love and pleasure, are all beautiful and good.

‘After all, what about his teachings on “The Middle Way” and his rejection of the old ascetic path of self-torture – doesn’t this all shout loudly that he is a lover of life and not one who would deny or oppose it?

‘The Master’s message is the very spirit of freedom, breaking through the tight shell of austerity and life-denial.’ Krishna warmed to his theme. ‘That spirit, that urge towards enlightenment, is the life-pulse of the universe – how could it go against our love for each other? Don’t you see how our being together helps us to drink in that spirit, helps us to emerge from our small-minded habits? In fact we should always reach for that spirit, that life-impulse – to have it *sooner*, to always seek for *more* – this is the *Way*, the Great Mangala! I know it!’ Krishna’s eyes were alight with inspiration.

‘But I don’t like to feel that it all has to be secret,’ Maggot’s sincere and open gaze met that inspiration and followed it back to Krishna’s heart, ‘don’t you understand that?’

‘I do. But, you know, I like the excitement of it – don’t you? You are my gorgeous, succulent forbidden fruit – Jambu-sirivanna, “Beautiful Radiance of the Rose-Apple” is your proper name – see: “Jambu”. It’s even there in what you are called,’ he smirked.

‘I prefer being a “maggot” to being “forbidden”, thank you.’ She smiled at Krishna, enjoying his artless, excited innocence if not his message. ‘It makes me feel bad too, the idea that the Master might be deliberately deceiving people.’

‘No, it’s not lying,’ Krishna jumped in, leaning forward with his hands now on Maggot’s knees, ‘it’s what we call “skilful means”, as it has a noble cause in mind. It’s not the whole of the story but more like a tale made up for children, like the

Tooth Fairy. When they're ready for the truth, they will be let into the secret.' He felt he had finally got his point across but could see there was disquiet still written through the look on Maggot's face.

'One thing I don't understand,' his tone changing as he leaned in, 'is why you have become all worried about this now. We've been together here at Ghositarama for more than a year and you've been fine with the coming and going in my monk's robes and splitting my time between you and the routine of the monastery. What's brought this on, about how you and me are together?'

As his words formed, the eyes of his celestial partner looked downwards. 'I'm not happy mainly because it's not just the two of us any more.'

'Why should that be a problem?' Krishna seemed genuinely puzzled. 'The fact that your kinnari friends, Ant and Bee, and Gumby the yakkha, are around all the time now? Hardly any of the monks and novices can see them either, and even if they could, why does that make difficulties for you and me? I don't get it...'

'No, you *don't* get it!' Maggot now glared at him and, stretching the rose-pink film of her gown tightly over her (slightly-larger-than-usual) midriff, she arched her back and brought her bowing, navel-free belly up level with his nose.

'Speaking of shells and emerging from them – *look!* It's not just the two of us now; soon we'll have a hatchling to think of as well.'

* * *

To their mutual delight Sugandhi and Jayanta had been married in Kulluta, on a day rejoicing in many marks of good fortune, not long after Krishna had left the village. The wedding had cost her parents a large slice of their fortune, the bulk of it going on the elaborate and extensive purification rituals needed so that a girl from the lowest ranks of candalas, the matangas, the animal slaughterers, could wed a member of the sudra caste. The boy was the Headman's son too so that, in addition to the priests, the dowry to Jayanta's parents had been extortionate. Even then his mother – known by all as Mata-ji – still twitched an uncomfortable nostril at the 'arrangement'. There were the appropriate smiles and inclinations of the head but the signals below the orders of propriety were that: 'The girl is disgusting and probably spiritually polluted, despite all the ritual cleansings, but never mind... I have no objections to the match.' The gold coming from the girl's family stemmed from her father's role as the appointed Royal Slaughterer; he was responsible for the care and eventual dispatch of warhorses injured or too old to fight, as well as the pasturing of brood mares and foals for the King's stables. Caste-wise the family could not have been lower but the gleam of coin had won the argument when Jayanta had declared the girl to be the one he wished to be his bride.

The house that Sugandhi and Jayanta lived in was at the north end of Kulluta, on the steep western bank of the rushing Vipasa River, so it was one of the first ones to catch the morning sun as it climbed above the Himalayan foothills to their east. The air was fresher here – well away from the rank fume of the knacker's yard

where she grew up – but still it was tinged with odours of conflict. Mata-ji was always on her back correcting her clothes, the food she cooked, her speech, even the way she walked – nothing she did was ever right. Things had eased up a bit, Sugandhi admitted, when her fertility had been proven by motherhood now being imminent. The endless clucking litany of corrections were now interspersed with occasional self-satisfied crowings, which surprised her as it seemed that Mata-ji had forgotten that it was her daughter-in-law that was the mother-to-be, not herself.

The improvement of mood around the house was tempered in Sugandhi by a concern that only she was party to. She was anxious about the forthcoming child, as any mother might be, but for reasons unbeknownst to her husband or anyone else:– That ‘goodbye kiss’ with Krishna turned into a little more than she had planned, and his skin was darker than baked-on blood at the bottom of the vats. What colour was her baby going to be?

It was with great relief, when her daughter was born, that she saw the infant’s skin was not blue-black like Krishna’s. Rather, in what she took to be a small miracle – and perhaps revealing her own wished-for royal ancestry, as she had often fantasised that she was in truth ‘The Lost Princess of Taxila’ – the baby girl was blessed with the fair complexion her mother most admired.

‘I think I’ll call her Harittaca-Kumari, “Princess Golden-Skin”,’ she reflected. For the sunny, big-eyed child, who now smiled up at her, had the golden colouring of a mango.

* * *

Maggot was not the only kinnari in the Ghosita forest with an unusual partner. Her friend Bee had settled into a colourful and occasionally raucous relationship with Gumbiya, a yakkha who had once threatened to eat them but who had, in the process of helping to rescue her sister Minti from a grisly death, saved Bee’s life and won her heart. Then there was Ant, the third of the kinnari companions who would have loved to make a nest with Ninka, an exotically beautiful deva from the heights of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, had she been given the chance. Ninka’s duties in the Thirty-Three meant she needed to make an appearance there from time to time; this should not have been a problem had not time itself been problematic: when Ninka ‘slipped away for a few minutes’ from Ghosita’s forest, those ‘few minutes’ in the Thirty-Three were several seasons long, even a whole sun-turning, in the Human Realm.

Gumbiya was a few cups of nectar-mead into the retelling of one of his favourite war stories – the volume consumed matching the likelihood of him forgetting that he had told Bee the tale before – when Ant arrived at speed at their nest among the trees.

‘Bee, come quickly. Maggot’s egg is on its way – now!’

With impressive agility, Gumbiya dropped his cup, stepped outside the broad branch-woven nest Bee had made with his help, and expanded his form to almost

tree-height. Gently picking up both Ant and Bee in his rough-clawed hands – without pause in the fluidity of motion – he sprang aloft and shot across the forest to where Maggot and Krishna had their place, buried deep in the undergrowth at the far edge of the trees.

The moment of the ‘first birth’ had come whilst they were on their way. An aura of weary peace hung over Maggot and her nest; Krishna sat beside her wide-eyed and open-mouthed, while in her lap, nestled and swaddled in layers of petal-film and flower-down, lay the opalescent jewel of Maggot’s egg.

Kinnari are called the ‘twice born’ not because (like the brahmins) they have a physical birth and then a ceremony to make them ‘proper brahmins’ but because like birds, or flowers, they are born twice. Flowers and trees produce seeds or nuts, birds lay their eggs and so do the kinnari. The child remains egg-born for the first three Moons, while it quickens and grows within the shell, then when it is fully formed and ready for the open air, it breaks the shell and is born its second time.

Gumbiya put Bee and Ant down with as much care as he could, then shrank to as compact a human size as possible. He was never going to be trim but he could fit into the narrower space with all the others if he tried. They crowded around.

Maggot glowed with joyful pride, with Ant and Bee either side of her, stroking the radiant colours of the eggshell together. Krishna was still agape; despite being very aware that his beloved was an earth-deva, a kinnari, part of him was expecting a child to be born like other children. The utter strangeness of Maggot producing an egg, and then the iridescent beauty and size of it, fully boggled his mind. And what made it even more amazing was how normal it seemed to Maggot and her friends:– He loved her and he loved... *it*... but it *was* an egg... which was pretty strange... for him at least. Love and confusion.

* * *

‘What is it?’ Loni, one of the smaller children asked.

‘I don’t know,’ the eldest and tallest, Dinka, replied, trying to edge up a tree-trunk to get a better look. ‘It’s bright and shiny, but its colours keep changing, like a rainbow on a bubble of soap. It looks like a stone – its shape stays the same...’

Bhima drew close through the bushes, looking down for snakes and giant centipedes as he made his way.

‘I can’t see!’ complained Dido, ‘someone lift me up,’ this was a common occurrence for the smallest of the friends from the village, out on their daily mission to gather grass and leaves from the forest for animal-feed.

Dinka, the leader of the gatherers hoicked tiny Dido onto her shoulders so he could see through the dense shrubbery and tangled vines.

‘Oh,’ now Dido had the best view of them all, ‘it looks like it’s floating on air. It’s a big coloured stone and it’s in a kind of huge nest – and it is in the air, like a bubble...’

‘Let me see,’ Loni elbowed her way forward, past her sister, trying to peer through the confusing mass of leaves and branches. ‘Look! The way it changes colour – they’re all moving around. What *is* it?’

‘It’s an egg,’ a firm and friendly adult voice spoke from behind them. ‘It’s a deva’s egg, to be more precise, that of a kinnari – one of the flower spirits.’ The children all turned, ready to be scolded, but the wrinkled and ragged monk smiled broadly.

‘Be quiet and respectful, and maybe you’ll be able to get a little closer. Come this way.’ Dusaka led them around the side, to Krishna’s secret entrance to the nest. He was there with Maggot on a visit but sitting off in the shadows, and the two of them had been chuckling at the wonder-filled conversation of the village children. It was Maggot herself who had suggested Dusaka invite them in.

‘Come on,’ Dusaka beckoned them into the narrow open space within the tangled bower. He sat himself down on a branch to one side and the five youngsters gathered round the mysterious presence. To their eyes the opal-coloured egg floated – its shell shimmering and glistening with ever-shifting hues – about a hand-span above the soft flower-down and moss-like lining of the nest. In reality it sat cradled on Maggot’s lap but as the children could not see her, it seemed to hover like a strange jewel from another realm, like one of the nine gems of the Bejaratana, which in a way it was.

Maggot smiled in warm appreciation at the five wide-eyed, bedazzled children. One or two of them glanced at her as if they could almost, from the corners of their eyes, discern her outline and see her face. She lifted the egg that contained her precious child and gently moved it towards them.

Dusaka asked, ‘Who would like to offer a blessing to the new baby? It will emerge from its egg very soon.’ Five faces turned to him. ‘Any of you?’

‘Us?’ Dinka was shocked.

‘We can’t give blessings,’ her brother Bhima chimed in, ‘we’re not brahmins or monks and nuns who follow the Buddha. We’re just farmers from the village.’

‘According to the customs of the kinnari,’ explained Dusaka, ‘all beings are considered to be of equal nature; all friends and visitors alike are invited to offer a blessing.’

One by one, in order of age, the children came up and laid their palms on the warm shell of the egg: Dinka, Bamba, Bhima, Loni and Dido. Close up, the egg was fragrant as well but none of them could say just what that scent reminded them of – a flower, spring mist, the earth after rain – petrichor – there was no name for it but they would not forget it either.

Five pairs of grubby hands, fingernails dark and broken, were laid in turn upon the nascent child, blessing and being blessed in return.

* * *

Krishna had his arm round Maggot, the two of them transfixed by the gurgling newborn in her arms. The nest was crowded. Ant and Ninka sat on one side while Bee held up a finger for the baby to grab on to.

Gumbiya sat behind her, wedged on some thicker branches while Rhamba and Salassa, of the lineage of heavenly dancers and musicians, wove protective charms and spells to ward off all ills, spinning and undulating through the air around them.

‘What shall we call her?’ Maggot was asking herself as much as Krishna beside her, looking into the child’s new-hatched yet ancient eyes. ‘What’s your name, little one? Half-human and half-kinnari that you are.’

Her skin was tawny and her few tufts of hair were copper-lit in the morning sunbeams, sieved by the bower. ‘Her hair is just like my sister Tamba’s was – almost red when it catches the light,’ said Krishna.

‘Should we call her that, “Tamba”? Or would that be a bad mangala, inauspicious?’ Maggot smiled as she mused.

‘How about “Tambaka” then?’

‘It’s close enough to honour her memory but different enough too. She was my sister, after all, and even though she did a lot of bad things it wasn’t all her fault, and she had many wonderful qualities too. I’d like to remember her in a good way and this pretty little mite can be a way for us to do that. Are you happy with that?’ Krishna was not sure that this was wise but it seemed so right at the same time. He looked sideways at Maggot to gauge her response.

“‘Tambaka”, is that who you are?’ Maggot touched her finger to the baby’s lips.

The newly-hatched girl lifted her hand to her mother’s and smiled, her eyes flashing bright fire, like shining metal.

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CHAPTER 3:

THE STOLEN CHILD



‘You haven’t shaved your head yet,’ remarked Ananda.

‘Wha...?’ responded Krishna, surprised to see the Elder coming down the path, at this back part of the monastery woods.

‘It’s the full moon – look – the sun is setting there in the west and the moon is rising in the east. By the time it’s above the forest we should be at the hall for the Recitation.’

Krishna realized he had completely forgotten this fortnightly head-shaving but he could not reveal to Ananda that it was because he was taken up with caring for Maggot and the new baby. That was out of the question.

‘Oh, right!’ He blustered, ‘I’ll do that before dawn tomorrow.’

‘And,’ Ananda continued, giving Krishna a somewhat studied sideways glance, ‘as it’s the Komudi full moon, this makes it your birthday; if I remember correctly. And isn’t your proper name Komudi – that no one ever uses – on account of you being born on this day?’

‘You remember everything!’ the impressed Krishna retorted.

‘Perhaps not *everything*,’ Ananda smiled, ‘but a lot.’ He was arranging his robe over his shoulder as they spoke. ‘And, as this is your twentieth, you could request full ordination and become a monk today – a fully fledged bhikkhu.’ He repeated the slightly loaded side-glance, checking Krishna for his reaction to this thinly-veiled hint. ‘Since the Master is here in the Ghositarama, if you were to request the Full Acceptance today, it could be a very short and simple ceremony; he just says, ‘*Ehi bhikkhu*’ and it’s done.’

‘That would be a great honour, as well as being really convenient,’ Krishna replied, his mind now racing to calculate how long all of these unexpected (at least for him) ceremonies would take.

He was now in a dilemma, torn between loyalties, as he had promised Maggot that he would take care of the baby for the night whilst she went to visit her parents over in the Simsapa grove, outside the city of Kosambi. He wondered if he had time to ask Bee or Ant, or Gumbiya to take a message to her, or to fill in for him, or if it would all be over quickly so he could get back while Tambaka was still resting peacefully, as she had just dropped off to sleep before Ananda had appeared.

‘What should I do?!’ His mind raced. Not being risk-averse he decided to gamble on the baby sleeping peacefully for the next hour – hidden away in their nest in the deep thicket – so he said, ‘Let me get my robe from my kuti and we’ll ask if I can be ordained this evening – that will be a great opportunity. Let’s do it!’

Ever since Krishna had joined the Sangha as a novice, after the tragic and dramatic deaths of his two sisters, Amba and Tamba (latterly known as Queen Samavati and Queen Magandiya) the kindly Ananda had taken him under his wing,

offering solace and companionship when needed and a steady stream of small tasks to keep the young and restless spiritual aspirant supplied with some outlets for his abundant energies. It had been Ananda's hope that young Krishna would make this more substantial commitment to the monastic life when the time came so he was pleasantly surprised now how little conversation had been needed to encourage the lad to see that this increased level of discipline and rigour in his endeavours would be a worthwhile step to take. It is true that part of him wondered whether the boy really appreciated what he was now asking to take on – with all the extra observances and limitations, a monk having 227 rules compared with a novice's modest ten – but Ananda was always inclined to look on the bright side, taking the optimistic view. Thus he was delighted to be striding down the moonlit paths of the small Ghositarama forest with young Krishna, to support him in undertaking the monk's life with the Buddha himself as his preceptor – the one inducting him into the Order.

The fat yellow moon glowed above the trees ringing the small assembly hall. Crickets and cicadas filled the warm evening air with a susurrating wall of sound. An owl hooted before taking off on silent wings and dozens of robed figures gravitated quietly to the open sides of the hall from narrow paths between the shadowy trunks and forest undergrowth.

As Krishna and Ananda approached, they saw that the Buddha was seated on a small bench, in the open area just before the hall. He was talking with a group of monks, seated on a grass mat below him. The monks turned as Ananda approached and, in a familiar fluid movement, made space for the Buddha's attendant and his young dark companion to kneel and pay their respects to the Master.

'This is the novice Krishna, Venerable Sir,' Ananda began, 'also known as Komudi since he was born on this full moon day twenty years ago.'

'I remember him too,' the Buddha responded, 'as the brother of the two queens of Vamsa, who both died not yet two years ago.'

Krishna was flushed with pride that the Master recognized him and remembered his notable background.

'I also recall meeting their father, the pilgrim Kamanita, who was resistant to the teachings I offered him but who may yet, in future ages, come to understand the Dharma that I taught him.'

Krishna was not so sure what to make of that comment – whether to be pleased that the Buddha had met the father that Krishna could hardly remember or whether to be chastened that his father had failed to appreciate the Master's words – so, into the ringing silence of that moment he spoke, to both get away from the awkward feeling and to express his current aspiration:

'Venerable Sir, may I request the Full Acceptance as a bhikkhu in this Dharma and Discipline?'

'Do you have your alms-bowl and three robes?' the Buddha asked, these being the physical necessities that every monk must possess, in his community.

‘I have my bowl and *two* robes,’ Krishna began, ‘but the third robe, the double layered robe of patches that novices don’t have but monks do... that I have not made yet... I...’

‘I can help with that,’ interjected Ananda, reaching deftly behind him to where a small bundle was placed on the mat at the edge of the cleared area in front of the hall. ‘I believe that this double-layered *sanghati* robe is the same size as your upper robe, Krishna. This is offered to you – I prepared it in case you were inclined to ask for ordination as I noticed that, amongst the many ways you liked to spend your time, sewing was not included.’

* * *

‘*Ehi, bhikkhu*’ – ‘Come, monk’ was formally uttered by the Buddha, with Krishna as the sole candidate that evening.

At that moment his life as a fully-ordained bhikkhu began. The surge of excitement and inspiration was great but, in the back of his mind, he was looking to see how he could get away and return to his parenting duties at the nest:– How was Tambaka doing on her own?

After his ordination – which was impressively brief – the Recitation of the Rule took another hour. However, as that ceremony came to an end, he had a sinking feeling that he was going to be there quite a while longer as the crowd of lay people had thickened at the back part of the hall and the Buddha was invited to ascend the Dharma seat to offer a discourse. The Master began by greeting the many visitors: locals from Kosambi as well as travellers from Magadha, Koliya, Kosala, and his homeland of the Sakya kingdom as well as the northern land of Uttarakuru.

The monastics were from various regions too – nuns as well as monks – so the range of his listeners was very broad, suggesting that the Master’s discourse would cover a lot of ground, to meet the experiences and background of such a variety of folk.

Krishna sat in agony, hardly hearing any of the wise words, as he was desperate to get away but, as the lone new bhikkhu, he had no choice but to stay seated near the front, vainly trying to pretend he was keenly hanging on every word.

When the Buddha finally closed, with his customary words of, ‘Now is the time for you to do as you see fit,’ the assembly of lay people began to disperse but quite a number gathered around Krishna, to wish him well with his new undertaking and to offer him gifts.

He was, again, hoping this would be over soon but at the same time he was charmed by the dewy-eyed devotion that some of the women were displaying towards him. He was eager to get away but something in him was relishing the attention and the affection being shown to him. It was well on into the night, at least the end of the first watch, before, scurrying hurriedly in a most unmonkly way, he got back to the nest and, to his horror, found that Tambaka was gone.

'Oh no!' Krishna's mind was a storm of thoughts and emotions: trying to guess where the baby had gone, and how; trying to think of a way he could get help to find her; making up excuses as to how he could have lost her when he was the responsible adult, supposedly – it was a tumult of anxious feelings and scattered, flailing ideas.

There was no sign of any disturbance of the nest and no bloodstains so it didn't look like she had been seized by a wild animal or a hawk.

The bright moonlight now cast intense black shadows up against the silvered fronds of the trees and the leaf-litter on the forest floor, thus it was hard to see if there were any footprints or broken twigs to show if people had been present. There were no signs at all. The forest rang with the incessant buzz of crickets, laid over an eerie foreboding silence and stillness. There were no sounds of movement, like the baby crawling in the bushes or murmuring for her mother; there was nothing.

'Help. I need help... Bee and Gumby, they're nearby!' Krishna's feet started down the path to where his friends had their own bower in the woods. He raced through the stripes of moonlight and roused them, shouting their names as he approached, heedless of any disturbance he might have been making to the others who might have been meditating or resting in the area.

'Bee! Gumby! Come quick! I need you!' He crashed into their forest shelter, waking them from their contented slumbers.

'What on earth is the matter?' Bee grumbled, 'It's halfway through the night, don't you have any respect...'

'I've lost the baby' Tam's gone!' Krishna's face was such a picture of fear and distress that Bee quickly changed her tone from disgruntled to concerned.

'What?! What happened? How could you lose a baby who is too young even to crawl?' Krishna gabbled a description of events, trying not to come across as too foolish or irresponsible whilst giving them the facts of it.

'So, how long were you away from the nest?'

'It was the whole first watch, four hours altogether, but I was sure it would only be short while.'

'You were sure – well that was wrong for a start,' Bee raised an accusatory eyebrow and was about to launch into a colourful listing of Krishna's shortcomings but his shattered expression and the need to act fast dissuaded her.

'We need to get Maggot here as soon as possible – right, where's my cintamani?' She rummaged for the talking-stone that she and her kinnari friends used to communicate with over great distances. Gumbiya, meanwhile had roused himself to action and was about to offer Krishna a drink of flower-mead to bolster his spirits when he remembered that Krishna was a novice monk and thus prohibited from taking alcohol.

Krishna saw him pulling out his flask and said, 'Don't mind me – you go ahead and have a stiffener. Besides, I'm not just a novice now but a fully-ordained

monk – that’s part of what took so long – so mead is even more forbidden than before.’

‘When did that happen?’ Asked Gumbiya.

‘Just after moonrise. So I’m pretty new to this.’ Krishna thought for a moment, then added, ‘There might however be a case for calling it “medicinal” as it would certainly make me feel better.’ Gumbiya, despite being a warrior yakkha and not one of refined morals, felt this was pretty dubious logic but responded, ‘It’s your call. If you want some, here it is.’

Krishna looked at the flask, looked away, then reached out for it, taking a hearty pull as he shut down his reservations.

* * *

‘Maggot, come back here quick. There’s no way to dress it up, Tambaka’s gone missing... Yes... Krishna lost her somehow... No we’ve no idea... Gumby will come and get you, he can go at ten times your speed. He’s on his way already.’ Bee’s tense words punctured the midnight silence of the forest. ‘See you soon. I’ll tell Ant and Ninka... We’ll start the search.’

When she arrived, crashing through the canopy of leaves on Gumby’s stout arm, she was equal parts distraught at Tambaka’s disappearance and enraged at Krishna’s thoughtless folly and his divided loyalties.

‘How could you have been so stupid!? So selfish! What kind of a father are you?! Don’t answer that!’

Ant and Ninka, her deva partner from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, appeared and the whole group began to search the paths and undergrowth all around the nest of Maggot and Krishna.

There were traces of Tambaka’s fragrance in the nest itself but nothing remained on the ground or on any of the paths or bushes nearby. No hints of it lingered on the air as it was now several hours since she had gone, or been taken, or whatever had happened. There was no sign.

‘Ninka, you’re the best tracker, at least your deva-senses are a bit more acute than the rest of us. What do you make of this? There are a few human footprints in the dust of the path but they could have been made any time, by anyone walking through the back part of the monastery. What do your eyes see? Any clues?’ Ninka knelt in the space around the entry to the bower but, since Krishna and Maggot had tried to keep their place hidden, it was understandable that it was hard to be sure of anything. There were recent footprints but she wasn’t ready to say exactly what time they were made or who might have made them.

‘I think we need to do more searching,’ was all she eventually said.

* * *

The rest of the night passed as the team of friends searched high and low, calling Tambaka's name in the vain hope there might be a response. Also fearing that they might come upon her small, lifeless body somewhere. This, thankfully, they did not find but otherwise the hunt was fruitless. The baby had vanished completely.

'She must have been taken by someone, or *something*, but by who or what?' Maggot's tears were not abating, even as dawn approached. She was slumped at the edge of their nest.

Krishna cleared his throat, 'Er... I will need to be going.' He winced, even as he said it as he knew how out of place it was, in the midst of this crisis.

'It's my first day as a monk and I'm expected to go on the alms-round with the others this morning.'

'What?' Maggot snapped. 'Are you serious? Really?!' Krishna made a careful study of the ground around his toes and kept quiet in the awkward ache of the moment.

'Just go. Don't say anything, just go.'

She was at breaking point, the loss of her precious child pulling on her heart-strings and now to have to deal with the fecklessness of her supposed beloved. Krishna left without a word, as quickly as he could.

* * *

Dawn light came to the forest and with it some of the children of the village. The five friends scurried up the path that led through this back part of the Ghositarama forest. From the other direction the familiar ragged figure of the monk Dusaka appeared.

'Guess what we saw!'

'Last night, when we were collecting firewood.'

'It was so strange – the baby from the nest, the one you showed us.'

Dusaka calmed them with a gesture and said, 'One at a time – what did you see?'

As the children clustered around him the kinnaris, Ninka and Gumbiya, all unseen by the youngsters, swiftly gathered round to listen too. Dinka, being the eldest was the self-appointed spokesperson:

'We were 'ere in the forest collecting wood and kindling for the cook-fires; it was after sunset but the moon was bright so we could see clearly, at least clearly enough to gather sticks. Anyway we were round here near the hidden nest when we saw the baby being lifted up in the air, floating like we'd seen 'er when she was in 'er mother's lap. At first we thought it was the invisible mother carrying 'er but then, when a few of us asked to look at the baby again – zoom! It was carried off real fast. Like we weren't supposed to see or follow. Whoever had the baby went flying off down the path then up into the trees and away. It was so different from the time we came before that we all guessed that some demon or a deva had stolen the baby

away. That's what it looked like so we came to tell the dad, the black-skinned novice we met before, but you can tell him for us, and the baby's mum too. That's what happened. We wanted to tell someone 'cause they're bound to be worried.'

* * *

Dusaka was some kind of a monk – and he had been known by the kinnari and Krishna and their friends for a long time – but none of them were quite sure exactly *what* kind of monk he was. He had a loose amalgam of wraps and shawls, scarves, malas, waistbands and bandoliers that he called his robes. His hair was long and grey and worn in a bundled top-knot that was held together by a couple of artfully placed twigs. He had large bone rings in his earlobes, that hung nearly to his shoulders, a twisted staff to support his gammy leg and a small scruffy dog, of uncertain ancestry, called Tingri, who was his constant companion. He was very respectful of and friendly with the Buddha and there seemed to be occasional reference made to them being of the same family, or lineage, or of some type of close relatedness. But mostly, who or what he was exactly was a mystery.

The anxious group of deva friends now clustered close to him, all pressed together in the leafy bower that was Maggot and Krishna's den. He had repeated what the village children had told him a couple of times now as they had been joined by Rhamba and Salassa.

'Do you think she was stolen by the fair-folk, the rukkha-devas? They sometimes take human children who they deem attractive or valuable for some reason,' Salassa asked.

'I don't think so,' Dusaka replied, 'if the fair-folk take a child they usually leave a changeling in its place. There was no fairy child left to substitute for Tambaka.'

'Do you think it might have been Asa and Saddha,' asked Bee, 'The devas who were caught up in that plot to drain kinnari blood and use it as a drug. They got hold of my sister Minti and nearly killed her. They might be aiming to spite Maggot, as she helped to catch them.'

'Unlikely, they were condemned to smell terrible for a long time and that stench would still be here.'

'Well,' began Gumbiya, 'it definitely weren't any yakkhas. That baby would hardly make a marfful and... oof! What?' Bee had jabbed him sharply in the ribs and flashed a glare that would have shrivelled a young oak-tree.

'Oh, right. Sorry, bad taste to say any think like that. Pardon,' he blushed with the realization of what that mental image would have been like for Maggot. Abashed he mumbled, 'I'll keep quiet.'

'Do you think it could have been the kumbhandas, the pot-bellied imps from the underworld?' Ant suggested.

‘That’s quite possible,’ Ninka looked thoughtful. ‘They are greedy and impulsive too. They might have snatched her away just on a whim and simply to spite the family.’

As the conversation rolled around, exploring various possibilities, Maggot looked forlorn and dejected, head drooping. Tingri sniffed the path and made some meaningful yipping comments that only Dusaka seemed to understand.

It was mid-morning by then and, as the sun began to bring some serious heat to the forest again, Krishna appeared in a flurry, his monks robes fallen awry from his rushing. ‘Has she been found?’ He began but a moment’s sight of the miserable expressions of all gathered there told him the answer.

‘I...’ he was about to offer some more apologies and excuses but Maggot, emerging from her saddened funk, stopped him short.

‘I have had it with you, this place and your dishonesty. If you’re going to be a monk then do it properly. I’m finished with you and this deception. I know what we’ve been doing has been wrong and now I’m going to find my baby.’

‘Goodbye!’

==*==

CHAPTER FOUR:

'TO FULFIL DESIRE IS HAPPINESS'



elp *me!*' Krishna stood forlornly in the track, looking at Dusaka and crying out both to him and to the universe in general.

'Help *you?*' Dusaka raised a bristling eyebrow, 'By that you must mean you are asking me to help find your child.'

'What should I do?' moaned Krishna, not taking in what his wise friend had just said. 'You've got to help me.'

A silent exchange passed between Dusaka and Tingri – as if debating whether to stay with the kinnaris and offer advice, or to respond to Krishna's plea – Tingri yipped a couple of comments but before any conclusion was apparent Krishna had taken hold of Dusaka's arm and was tugging him along the path. A final shrug from Dusaka and a snort from Tingri indicated that their discussion was being brought to a close, so they followed along with Krishna's now urgent strides towards the central part of the monastery.

They reached Krishna's kuti, in agitated conversation all along the way, and settled in a shady spot between the stilts holding up the hut, as they had done so often before.

'I don't know what to do! She's kicked me out so I can't help to look for our baby – she's my baby *too* – why can't she see that there's nothing wrong with our love for each other, our relationship?'

'Well,' Dusaka began, 'she sees that if you want to be a monk, according to the way of life that the Buddha and the other monks lead here, then you can't be a family man and have a girlfriend, or a kinnari-friend, for that matter, at the same time. The two are incompatible. If you weren't a monk it wouldn't be a problem at all. The fact that you lost the child through being heedless is only the sour cherry on top of that bitter dessert.'

'But she's wrong!' Krishna warmed to the subject, 'and you're wrong too, if you agree with her!' He darted a look at Dusaka to check his reaction to this accusation. Tingri snorted, clearly not impressed. 'My friend Arittha the monk, the vulture trainer, he's very clear about how things like enjoying sensual pleasures that the Buddha *sometimes* calls "obstructions" are not really obstructive to those who indulge in them. He told me how he said exactly that, to the Master's face, when he was questioned about his views not long ago.'

'And did he say how the Master gave him an earful on account of that? He did not agree with Arittha's take on things at all. He used the similes of carrying a grass torch against the wind, being dropped into a pit of burning charcoal, waking from a pleasant dream, having borrowed jewels taken away, cutting down a tree to get the fruit, and others, to show how attachment to sense pleasure always leads to suffering.'

‘Yes, but he had to *seem* to go against Arittha’s perspective because there were all kinds of other people around too – all those “monkish” types who are convinced that the rules are to be taken literally and followed to the last detail.’ Krishna was glad of the opportunity to expound on how he saw things and what was now the driving force of his spiritual and thus monastic endeavours.

‘I had this insight, you remember, when I met Gavinna, the old court lady who was burnt in the fire at the palace. She said the way to enlightenment, the great mangala, was to keep remembering “Sooner! More!” This amulet you gave me,’ he fished it out of the pouch on his belt to show Dusaka that he still kept it close, ‘it provides *physical* protection from death and injury but it doesn’t help the mind. To keep up the attitude of “Sooner! More!” is a devotion to life. It’s a rebellion against death and, in the monastery, against the prissy, frigid, rigid and sterile formalism that the narrow-minded like to take refuge in. It’s a devotion to the Goddess of Complete Being, the Mother of Nature, like the Holy Deva Dharani who rose up as a witness and vouched for the Bodhisattva at the time of his enlightenment and transformation into the *Anuttara-Samma-Sambuddha*. The Master could not have conquered Mara under the Bodhi Tree without her help. Isn’t that so?’ Krishna was warming to his theme.

Dusaka raised each of his eyebrows in turn, indicating that he was hearing what Krishna said but without giving any sign that he was in agreement with this particular philosophy. ‘Go on,’ he urged.

‘So, by welcoming all sensual experience, like living with Maggot and having Tambaka as our child, and living here in the forest close to the great enlightened Master – all this is embodying the spirit of being open to all of life, it’s a devotion to all reality. Death is conquered by saying “Yes!” to all of life. “Sooner! More! Give me all of it. Now!”’

Tingri cleared her nostrils, meaningfully, (she could make her snorts express an eloquent variety of opinions) to which Dusaka nodded sagely, the set of his mouth and silent wagging of his chin indicating to her, ‘I think you’re right.’

‘So,’ Dusaka started quietly, slowly, ‘What does your friend, young Samiddhi, the monk from Rajagaha, think about all this? Didn’t he have a deva friend too?’

‘That’s right. That really pretty deva from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. She’s gorgeous... and yes, they’re close. He brought her to see the Buddha and I was one of the few who could discern her. She’s quite something.’

‘I wasn’t mentioning her on account of her looks,’ Dusaka scowled, half a wry smile fitting itself into his expression too, ‘it’s possible Samiddhi might have some useful thoughts about how he has handled having a devoted deva friend and how that fits into his monastic life. What d’you think? Let’s go and see him. He’s in a kuti just down the way.’

* * *

'You're disgusting, Krishna.'

'What d'you mean?'

'You're calling your attitude, this philosophy of yours, something refined and spiritual but you were smirking about how you were flirting with and touching up those women from the town who were visiting Udayin's kuti the other day. You're proud of how you positioned yourself in the narrow corridor so they would have to squeeze by you. This is somehow a spiritual thing to you!? I don't think so.'

'They liked it, especially when I gave that one a tweak – she giggled.'

'Did it occur to you that women sometimes giggle like that when they are shocked and distressed, and don't know what to say when they've been treated abusively? And what did her husband think?? He was right there too. I saw him, he was practically purple with rage.'

'I didn't realize he had arrived.'

Samiddhi was getting exasperated with his friend by this point. Krishna, with Dusaka watching from the corner, carried on explaining, doing his best to convince himself as well, as he made the effort to spell out his views to his friends.

'It's not just Arittha who sees things from this broader perspective, by the way, but Udayin too. He's very knowledgeable and can quote all kinds of scriptures. Like how in the Long Discourses it says: "In as far as this self, being blessed and endowed with the pleasures of the five senses, indulges in them, then that is when the self realizes the highest Nirvana here and now."

'Then, in the stories of the Master's past lives, the sage Narada says: "The following of desires is happiness; to fulfil desire is happiness." And, in another life, the Buddha's former wife, Princess Yashodhara (who has now become an enlightened nun, I might add) said:

*"Great is the joy of sweet desire: no greater joy than love:
Who follow this attain the bliss of paradise above!"*

'Not only that but the Bodhisattva himself, in a former life as the King Arindama said, when being preached at by a Paccekabuddha called Sonaka, "I have no need of monkish blessings" since he saw the precious value of sense pleasures. You see – in all these places, in the scriptures themselves, this same life-affirming philosophy is displayed. These sages, the great nun Yashodhara, the Master himself, all were guided by the same principles that I'm committed to following.' He felt pleased indeed at his presentation and how he had managed to remember all those significant quotations accurately:– Surely the debate was now closed, wasn't it?

'Krishna,' Samiddhi scowled, clearly unconvinced by all this, 'you do realize that all the things you just recited are there in the scriptures as examples of *Wrong View* – I can't believe that somehow you missed that! That's the whole point; people think and say these things when they've got it *wrong*. Even the Master made many mistakes and broke the Precepts during the long long succession of lives before his Supreme Enlightenment. The scriptures even state how he broke all the Precepts –

against killing, stealing, sexual misconduct and using intoxicants – except for the one against lying. A Bodhisattva cannot lie under any circumstances: “A Bodhisattva can not tell a deliberate lie; for, being attended by deception, intentional false speech violates the reality of things.”

‘Yes! That’s what you’re *supposed* to think; these statements are presented as “Wrong View” but to me that’s a code – it’s a clue that such attitudes are what the Master’s *real* message is.’

‘You’re hopeless,’ Samiddhi shook his head, ‘What kind of monk are you and how do you think your way of life like this is going to be a blessing to others?’

‘For one thing it encourages the inspiring and enjoyable life-affirming spirit,’ Krishna retorted, ‘but how come you are being so ascetic and rule-bound all of a sudden? Don’t you have a deva girlfriend like me? And didn’t you introduce her to the Buddha yourself? How do you square that with what you’re saying now?’

Dusaka looked up from his long study of the bamboo flooring of the kuti, glancing in Krishna’s direction to see how he would hear Samiddhi’s story.

‘Yes I do have a friend who is a female deva but, when she propositioned me, at the hot springs near Rajagaha, saying: “You have gone forth while young, bhikkhu, a lad with black hair, endowed with the blessings of youth; enjoy sensual pleasures, bhikkhu! In this way you will not abandon what is directly visible to pursue what takes time,” I was not at all interested in following that path. Instead I brought her to meet the Master who, with great compassion, taught her directly, with insightful instruction on the deceptive nature of identity. When she had fully understood this subtle teaching she replied:

*“Having abandoned sense pleasures,
Mindful and clearly comprehending,
One should not pursue a course
That is painful and harmful.”*

‘It’s true I have a deva friend, but she is devoted to the Master’s teaching now and we have a beautiful and wholesome relationship like sister and brother, appropriate to my life as a monk. It is possible, and very liberating I might add, to establish spiritual companionship like this!’

‘Such a bhikkhu,’ Dusaka chimed in, ‘who has freed the heart from attachment to sensual pleasures, is called: “One whose banner has been lowered, one whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered”.’

Krishna felt cornered. ‘These are good points but I’m not worried, even if I’m criticized for unmonklike behaviour. As I quoted, the Bodhisattva said, “I have no need of monkish blessings”’; he was doubling down on the supposed ‘hidden message’ of those refuted teachings.

‘I’m sure the meaning is really “Don’t be worried if people criticize you or look upon you as unmonkly”.’

‘But if the Master is really not encouraging monkly behaviour, why on earth do you think he bothers to live as a monk – and an impeccable one at that?’

‘Well, he has to, doesn’t he? Because that’s the way all spiritual teachers have to appear.’

‘I give up!’ Samiddhi, Dusaka and even Tingri shook their heads and rolled their eyes as one.

* * *

Against the backdrop of the mountains above Kulluta, Maggot sat apart from the group of friends. In deep sadness she sang an ancient lament of the kinnaris:

*‘What matters it, O breeze,
If now has come the spring
When I have lost them both
The garden and the nest?’*

Just as two kinnari lovers were known to have wept for seven hundred years after having been separated, or the kinnari Chanda, whose cries over her wounded husband, who had been the Bodhisattva, reached the throne of Indra himself in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, Maggot wept from the depths of her heart for her lost child.

The group had formed rapidly, in the forest at Kosambi, and had initially approached one of the rukkha-devas, a guardian of one of the great trees of the Ghositarama forest and asked if she thought one of her kind might have been the being who took Tambaka. This woody Elder, who dwelt in an aged and gnarly *sal* tree, gently made it clear that abducting babies of humans or other earth-devas was not something that the tree-spirits could or would do.

‘When we practice what is called “gracious exchanging” it is always done for a good reason and we invariably replace the babe with one of our own precious offspring.

‘Admittedly sometimes a lost or stolen child is kept in the arms of our boughs. If a babe has been carried off by an eagle, or one of the supanna, they might tend the child in a nest in the upper branches of one of our trees, and even raise it there for many years, as was the case with Little Wild Rose, but that is not something we as devas can control.’

Ninka who, as a higher deva, had the greatest intuitive powers of the group affirmed that this *sal*-spirit was speaking the truth. The *sal*-deva then departed and the group – comprising Bee, Gumbiya, Maggot, Ant and Ninka, Rhamba and Salassa – came to the conclusion that the kumbhandas were the most likely culprits since it was well-known that these often clumsily-formed beings loved the softness and delicacy of human children, the beauty they were often blessed with, so they had been known to whisk them away to the Underworld, to be raised as their own there

and never leaving a changeling in its place. This is what had brought them north to the mountains and where they now searched for an entry-point to the mysterious Underworld dimension.

Ninka was nervous, as she had been given permission to spend time away from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three and, even though time passed very differently in the lower and the higher realms (a day and night in the Thirty-Three was one hundred years in the human world) this lower plane was considered coarse and vulgar, it was almost shameful for a deva of the Thirty-Three to abide here. It was regarded as so corrupting and foul that to get to spend any time here at all one needed to have permission and a good reason to be around for more than a few moments. So Ninka worried that she would have her permission revoked and that she would have to go back to the upper realms at any time.

She had discerned that a way into the Underworld was somewhere close by but she needed to calm herself and concentrate in order to get an accurate inner reading.

Maggot sat to one side, quietly singing her lament; Bee and Gumbiya, Rhamba and Salassa were gathering some food and Ant sat nearby, trying not to distract Ninka as she focused. Slowly the image of a huge oak of the Himalayas formed in her vision. The base of this forest giant divided close to the ground and a dark cleft opened there, like a cave-mouth.

'I know the place,' she spoke aloud, almost surprised to hear her own voice. 'It's close. Very close.'

'What's close?' said Bee, landing just beside her, newly returned from their scavenging of the area for edibles of various kinds, to meet their different appetites.

'The entrance to the Underworld. There is an open portal near the stream, at the base of an old oak only a short distance from here. I had a feeling there was one nearby.'

'So, once we're in there,' Bee continued, 'How do we go about looking for Tambaka – traces of smell are all we might have to go on and it could be pretty stinky among the kumbhandas, from what I've heard anyway.'

'The Underworld is a strange domain,' Gumbiya chimed in, 'I've bin down there from time to time, on various missions – there was this one time...'

He was about to launch into a favourite war story when a sideways glance from Bee caused him to get back to the subject at hand.

'Right... well you can go in one entrance an', even if you've not gone far, by yer own reckoning, you can come out in a completely different place, far away like. It's weird. And time – you can go in there and think it's just a day then when you come out half your team has retired, or died. Or it can be a minute later on the same day – throws you right off, it does. Everything's catawampous, distorted, y' need ter watch yerself going down there – anyfink can happen.'

'Sounds interesting,' Bee grinned. She and Ant went over to Maggot and handed her some pollen that Bee had collected.

‘Have some of this. We’re all going to eat, then what say we head straight into the Underworld? Ninka’s a good guide, and Gumby’s been in that realm before, so we won’t be completely in the dark – s’cuse the pun.’ Her attempt at humour didn’t exactly lift Maggot’s spirits but she appreciated the gesture of comfort from her friend. The chance of finding her lost child was the main thing on her mind so she ate quickly and, without registering much of the taste, she was soon up and ready. ‘Let’s go.’

* * *

Ninka went first, into the dark cleft at the base of the ancient oak. Her eyes were more sensitive so she could effectively see in the manky dimness of the downward winding tunnel. Maggot insisted on being right behind her, Ant, Bee, Salassa and Rhamba followed with Gumbiya bringing up the rear.

Silence reigned, but for their footfalls on the dank earth floor; down and down and down, the tunnel turned and narrowed, broadened and straightened, according to its own underground logic. Down and down they went.

As the feel of the ground beneath their feet changed from earth and moisture to solid stone a voice in the dark brought them up short: ‘What brings you into the realm of Queen Oghabala and Little King Lhak?’ The voice echoed as the tunnel had now opened into, apparently, a vast cavernous space. Slowly lights glowed forth from crevices in the rock walls, revealing the shape of the space and the beings gathered before them, blocking their way.

‘I asked you a question,’ a huge rotund figure at the centre of the group of kumbhandas stepped forward. Gumbiya instinctively moved to the front of the group of searchers and, battle-ready, expanded to his full warrior-yakkha size. He was still considerably smaller than the being who had addressed them.

‘And, in case you were wondering, I am the Little King.’

‘Why’s he called “Little”?’ wondered Ant, in a whisper that came out louder than she had expected, ‘He’s huge!’

‘Wait ’til you see Her Majesty,’ one of the Little King’s attendants countered, also a bit louder than he had intended.

‘We seek a lost child – one who is half-kinnari and half-human.’ Maggot spoke up in a clear and penetrating voice, ‘A stolen child, perhaps.’

‘A half-human child that got lost down here would have wandered far indeed. How old is this missing child?’ The King asked, somewhat guardedly, ‘Is it a bold youth or a spritely maiden?’

‘No – a babe but a few Moons old.’

‘One that age could not have ventured into the Underworld unaided,’ a scowl formed on the crags of the Little King’s face.

‘◆SO◆YOU◆ACCUSE◆THE◆KUMBHANDA◆OF◆KIDNAPPING?◆’

A thunderous voice rumbled from the depths of the cavern. The Little King and his retinue stepped aside and revealed a throne against the back wall of the

echoing stone chamber. A magnificently ugly being filled the stone throne's embrace; she was at least three times the size of the Little King.

'WE ARE INSULTED BY THIS ACCUSATION OF THEFT AND BY THE IDEA THAT SOME SCRAWNY CHILD OF A FLOWER-SPIRIT, WITH NO FLESH ON THEIR BONES, WOULD BE OF INTEREST TO THE KUMBHANDA, TO STEAL AND TO CALL THEIR OWN. WE ARE *DISPLEASED*. YOU SHALL BE HELD IN OUR CAVERNS UNTIL SUCH TIME AS OUR PLEASURE CHANGES.'

'What does that mean?' asked Bee.

'It means you will entertain Her Chthonic Majesty's pleasure in her dungeons.'

'"Entertain" – do we sing and dance for Her?' Ant wondered.

'He means "detain" – we are to be locked up for the foreseeable future,' explained Rhamba, 'no dancing or singing.'

Gumbiya stepped forward, protesting, 'Ang on a minute, I'm a warrior-yakkha of King Kuvera's old guard...'

'◆ AND ◆ I ◆ AM ◆ THE ◆ QUEEN ◆ OF ◆ THE ◆ UNDERWORLD ◆'

Her voice rang with currents of boiling magma, the thunder of tectonic plates grinding beneath the oceans.

'What right have you got to imprison us?' Ninka bravely spoke up. 'And how long do you intend to keep us? Some of us are devas of higher realms, like you.'

'◆ IN ◆ THIS ◆ DOMAIN ◆ WORM ◆ MY ◆ WORD ◆ IS ◆ LAW ◆ MY ◆ WILL ◆ IS ◆ YOUR ◆ REALITY ◆ YOUR ◆ SHALLOW ◆ NOTIONS ◆ OF ◆ SPACE ◆ AND ◆ TIME ◆ DO ◆ NOT ◆ HOLD ◆ SWAY ◆ HERE ◆ GET ◆ THEM ◆ OUT ◆ OF ◆ MY ◆ SIGHT ◆'

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CHAPTER 5:

THE UNINSPIRING MONK



o, what did you make of all that?’

Krishna had returned to his kuti after the communal meal and had invited his friend Surama, an Elder amongst the community of monks, to come along and continue the conversation they had begun, once the Master had departed, after he had given some forthright instruction to the community.

‘Well,’ responded Krishna, ‘I had hoped to ask him if he could use his powers to tell me where Tambaka had disappeared to but, since he was mainly addressing Udayin about how misguided he had been with those brahmin visitors, I didn’t feel it was the right time. He even laid down a new, serious rule about not coming into contact with the opposite sex, with lustful intent, and he gave Udayin the full “Mogha purisa!” treatment – “Oh foolish man!” If I had asked him about Tambaka he would almost certainly have enquired if she was a relative, or how she was known to me; then what would I say? It wouldn’t be a good subject to raise in public.’

‘Good point,’ Surama replied, ‘you were best off keeping a low profile.’

He saw that Krishna was looking fraught and unsettled so he continued, ‘You know that I agree with you about how the Buddha has to keep up a front for the sake of the public, and that in its essence the teaching he espouses is a lot more broad and accommodating.’

‘In his usual way of speaking, about the Middle Way, he says how happiness cannot come from pursuing sense pleasure as you will always want more. When the thrill is gone you just desire something else to replace it. That is one extreme.

‘Then the other extreme is to try to suppress all desires, to annihilate them, but that is doomed to failure as life keeps producing more things to want. No matter how hard we try.

‘He says the Middle Way is “to let go of desire” but I agree with you that that’s just the version for the masses. Really, how could that work? If I want something, if I need something and I “let go of the desire” there is still something missing, as far as I can see – you didn’t get the thing you needed and wanted, so surely you are still lacking that – no?’

‘Absolutely, that just how I see it,’ said Krishna.

‘So,’ Surama continued, ‘I feel it’s our duty as living beings to fulfil as many of those needs and wishes as possible, to honour the potential of our lives, and then to let go of attachment to the pleasure we feel. This is the advanced path that the Master is encouraging but that he can’t speak about publicly as it would look like he was an indulgent and less-than-admirable teacher. We should not use the scanty virtue and meagre wisdom of the narrow-minded to measure the vast sagacity and compassion of the Buddha!’

‘After all,’ Surama continued, ‘Look at the example of how he led his half-brother Nanda to full enlightenment. Nanda had gone forth as a monk when he was on the way to his wedding, his faith in the Master having been roused to a high degree that day. Later on the mental image of his betrothed, Janapada Kalyani, brushing her hair aside and saying, “Come back soon, prince!” was frequently in his mind. The Buddha heard about this and called Nanda to him.

“Nanda, I hear that you are missing your fiancée and that you are unhappy in the monastic life – is that so?”

“Yes, Venerable Sir,” he replied. “In fact I would like to return to the household life and go through with my marriage to my beloved.”

‘Then the Master took him by the arm and, through exercising his psychic powers, conveyed them both to the Tavatimsa Heaven – the abode of the Thirty-Three Gods. There the Master conducted him to the Nandana Grove where they saw crowds of apsaras, nymphs with feet as delicate as doves, waiting upon Lord Indra, the ruler of that heavenly kingdom.

‘The Buddha then said to Nanda, “Who is more beautiful, Nanda, more perfect in form, more pleasing to behold, Janapada Kalyani or these five hundred nymphs with feet as soft as the breasts of doves?” To this Nanda immediately replied, “There is no comparison, Venerable Sir! The woman to whom I was betrothed has not a fraction, not half of a fraction, of the perfection of form and loveliness of these nymphs.”

‘The Buddha then continued, “Nanda, if you commit to the monk’s life and take delight in it, I will guarantee you gaining the company of five hundred apsaras, just like these.”

“If that’s the case,” said Nanda, “then I will indeed take great delight in pursuing the spiritual path under your guidance.” The Master then conveyed them both back from the Tavatimsa Heaven to Jeta’s Grove and Nanda renewed his efforts with great vigour.

‘When the, if I might say, prissy and narrow-minded monks heard about the agreement struck between the Master and his half-brother Nanda they criticized him for being a hireling and a sell-out, shocked at the idea of putting in effort in meditation in order to possess the crowd of nymphs that the Buddha had promised. To me the promise of a Buddha is a powerful thing, of no small consequence, so those shallow monks should not have been so swift to condemn. Anyway, before long Nanda did indeed realize full and complete enlightenment and then went to declare this to the Master.

‘The *public* records of that exchange have Nanda saying, “Venerable Sir, I release you from that promise,” and the Buddha responding, “When I knew you were enlightened that promise was dissolved automatically.” However, I reckon,’ and here Surama looked from side to side, as if checking for eavesdroppers and also for dramatic effect, ‘I reckon this was another of those “dressed up for consumption by the masses” accounts. If we’re right about the Master’s advanced teaching on fulfilling desire being happiness – and I’m sure we are – *privately* his half-brother is

currently enjoying the company of that crowd of beauties in his spare time. What d'you think?'

* * *

Krishna had parted company with Dusaka earlier in the day. The Elder seemed to be intent on travelling further with Tingri, although he had made no indication as to which direction he was headed. Krishna was therefore free to spend the afternoon talking with Surama. It pleased him greatly to have such a supportive friend who was senior in the community, and one who didn't give him any grief, like Samiddhi and Dusaka had done.

By the late afternoon – they had managed to chat for several hours – Krishna was thoroughly confirmed in his understanding that the superior, protective mangala was the maintenance of the attitude: 'Sooner! More!' when it came to sensual experience. This was the great affirmation of life and reality; and to each and every doubt that he had had, or that others, like Maggot and Samiddhi, had voiced, his friend Surama easily explained how their understanding was faulty and their logic was impaired and inconsistent. The story of Nanda and the nymphs was just one of a number of thoroughly convincing examples he gave.

It also became clearer, in Krishna's mind, how for advanced students who were ready for the higher teaching (that allowed and rejoiced in maximum sensual pleasure), part of the discipline, if not most of it, was '*Don't get caught*' rather than the preliminary teaching of '*Don't do*'. On account of the general view that monks and nuns were supposed to be celibate renunciants it was necessary to be discreet; if you were an advanced student then you were free to do as you liked as long as you didn't flaunt things and thereby upset the narrow-minded and simplistic followers. As long as you were not getting attached to any sort of pleasure, then the energetic and joyful engagement in all the delights available was a fulfilment of that 'best way to evade the King of Death, to blindfold Mara' that the old seeress Gavinna had spoken of.

Krishna treasured that advice, but he still kept the amulet that warded off physical death and injury as well:– There was no harm in being doubly careful.

'Now that you're a bhikkhu,' Surama began, 'and seeing that you haven't got much to hold you here in Kosambi anymore, why don't you come with me to Kitagiri?'

'Where's that?' Krishna asked, 'and what makes that a good place to go? I may have had a spat with my kinnari companion but I know lots of others here and it would be a shame to just take off. Besides, the Master is staying here and, you never know, I might be able to have a private conversation with him and then I could ask about Tambaka and who stole her away.'

'Didn't you hear?'

'What?'

‘As the Master was leaving the hall, after having given Udayin an earful, Ananda asked him about setting off on the morrow.’

‘Oh, I missed that, I must have been wrapped up in my thoughts.’

‘It sounds like they will be leaving if not tomorrow then very soon after. So, what do you think, shall we take to the road as well?’

Even as Surama was speaking Krishna’s mind began to ponder:– Well, why not? What’s to keep me here now and, besides, it’s been a couple of years since I trod the paths and forest trails of a wanderer. After all the struggle with Maggot, and considering no one seems to want my help in finding our baby, why not? It’ll be good to be out on the road once more, to feel the wind on my skin and the sun in my face.

* * *

The Master did indeed leave the next day, right after the mealtime, with a substantial group of monks walking with him. All those remaining monastics, together with the devotees and well-wishers in the Kosambi area, paid their respects after asking for forgiveness for any irritation they had caused him or for any negative actions by body, speech or mind, intentional or unintentional, that had caused any difficulty whatsoever.

Krishna noticed his heart rate increase a little in the communal ceremony, but, even as he recited the words, he reassured himself he had done nothing at all blameworthy. Any lingering doubts were not allowed a voice.

He was now free to make his plans with Surama. He knew him fairly well but he was hard to pin down as to his background and other personal qualities. He was quite senior, so as a junior monk Krishna could be officially apprenticed to him, in ‘dependence’, as it was called, but exactly what his original language was or his family history – the conversation always seemed to drift away from those details when the subject came up.

Kitagiri was east of Kosambi so they took a different route to the Buddha and the great group travelling with him to Savatthi. Krishna had been surprised at the heartfelt pangs of separation he felt as they packed up their bowls and robes and he said goodbye to his companions of the last two years and to the Gositarama forest. So many memories: the sight of the now-empty nest, where he and his dear Maggot had spent such sweet hours, and where the egg had rested almost glowing with its ethereal opal colours, and when it hatched and beautiful little Tambaka had appeared, tawny-skinned and her coppery hair, and as flower-fragrant as her mother. ‘Jambu-Sirivanna... I never used Maggot’s real name... “Radiant beauty of the Jambu tree.”’ His eyes moistened, heart aching at the loss, but it was now time to move on.

Once away from Kosambi and heading towards the rising sun of the next morning, Krishna felt a surge of energy welling up within him. The dust of the footpath under his feet, the new types of tree and birdcalls as they covered the

leagues, the roof of branches and the starlit sky overhead at night – he was astonished how much he had forgotten about life on the road, how inspiring and invigorating it was.

‘You know, Surama, this reminds me of how I spent more than a year working in a knacker’s yard in Kulluta. I had not realized how stuck I had got in the place; I forgot that other valleys, other hills and towns existed.’

‘I wouldn’t say that the Ghositarama is quite as bad as a slaughterhouse,’ Surama quipped, ‘but I know how oppressive any place can be, when time for a change has come.’

The town of Kitagiri lay in the country of Kasi, to the north of Varanasi and on the road through there to Savatthi. As they drew closer to it, and their arrival was imminent, Krishna’s stride naturally lengthened, making it necessary for the shorter Surama to scurry to keep up, to his great dissatisfaction. Every now and again Krishna would recollect that he should not be getting ahead of the Elder so he would pause and apologize profusely. As he was only twenty, much younger than Surama, the over-exuberance was forgiven.

Along the way Surama had often mentioned how the people of Kitagiri, the lay-folk as well as the monks, were very amenable to the advanced, refined philosophies of the Buddha. When they sat in the evening, at their various forest camps, Surama would expound on the excellent leadership and teaching of the two great Elders there, Assaji and Punabbasuka, meanwhile making sure that Krishna knew, ‘*This great Elder Assaji is very different from his stuffy namesake – who is very pleased to let anyone and everyone know he was one of the original Five Disciples*’.

His clear and sonorous voice, replete with reason and good stories, described how they had nurtured Kitagiri as a haven of the higher teachings both for monastics and lay people too. Krishna loved to hear his eloquent descriptions, as they mingled with the sounds of the forest night – the ringing of crickets and cicadas, the calls of night-birds and the hoot of owls – so when they finally stepped onto the dusty main street of the town, Krishna felt he knew the place already.

The locals called out friendly greetings and Surama called back, chatting in a most casual and familiar way. As they walked towards the monastery they came upon a group of children playing hopscotch on a pattern of yantras marked upon the ground.

‘Come and play, sirs!’ The youngsters called out. To Krishna’s surprise, rather than Surama declining, as any Elder, or indeed any monk or nun, would do in Kosambi, he said, ‘What fun, let’s see if I remember the sequence of right and left correctly.’ And off he went, quite expertly in fact, completing the hops and steps onto the patterned squares without making any mistakes.

The children were impressed and beckoned Krishna to join in too but, since he had not tried this game since he was a lad of seven rains, he demurred and said he was too big and clumsy:– His Elder had already shown how to do it best.

'That's something different!' Krishna chuckled as they continued to the monastery.

'Oh, just you wait and see.'

Surama gave him a sideways glance and a substantial smirk crossed his visage.

* * *

Krishna was astonished. They did *everything* here: the monks grew and picked flowers and made garlands for all the womenfolk of the town – wives and daughters, female slaves, everyone. They would sit and share food with women, often from the same dish; they would snuggle up close, even lie on the same couch with women or laymen; they would eat at any time they fancied during the day or night; they happily drank alcohol; they would sing and dance, play music, as well as engage in all kinds of games with the children; they practiced archery, rode horses and elephants; they would wrestle and box sometimes; and would even lay out their robes as a stage and say to the dancing girls, 'Here, sister! Dance for us!'

Krishna was greatly impressed by it all as it fitted so well with his own understanding of the Buddha's teaching. Surama had prepared him thoroughly and the two presiding Elders, Assaji and Punabbasuka, welcomed Krishna with open arms. Everyone here seemed very liberal and no one found fault with his deep dark skin. 'Anything goes' seemed to be the ethic of the whole town and Krishna fitted in perfectly:– Now we're talking!

He decided to stay and did so for the next fourteen years.

* * *

After those fourteen years had gone by it so happened that a monk by the name of Parisuddhi set out from Varanasi, the capital of Kasi, on the bank of the River Ganga, to make his way to Savatthi, to spend time with the Lord Buddha. His path led him along the road that ran through Kitagiri. He was a very innocent person by nature (hence the name he'd been given, meaning 'Purity') so the stories that circulated in the area close to Kitagiri did not register with him as anything of significance if they registered at all.

He had camped in a forest glade half a league or so before the edge of the town, and he made his way through the streets after dawn, when folks were up and about and preparing their first meal of the day. This was a familiar and time-honoured pattern that he had followed for all the many years of his monastic life.

To Parisuddhi's surprise, rather than being offered any alms-food, he was heckled and abused by many townspeople, saying such as:

'Who is this idiot, a fool amongst fools, a simpleton even to other simpletons. Who would give alms to such a one?!'

Parisuddhi had, as he always did, made sure that his robes were on neatly, his bowl was half-concealed by his robe as the Vinaya discipline dictated. His eyes were properly downcast, looking only a plough's length ahead, and he was walking at an even pace. He wondered what was wrong, 'Is my upper robe stained without me knowing it? Is my lower robe falling down? What am I doing that is so worthy of this torrent of abuse?'

Someone called out, as if in answer to his unvoiced question, 'Our own masters Assaji and Punabbasuka and their followers are friendly and chatty, always smiling and are the first to speak. It's monks like them that are worthy of alms, not a stuck-up dummy like you.'

He patiently carried on walking through Kitagiri but received no alms-food at all until a certain layman came up to him and asked if he had been given anything as yet.

'No, nothing by way of alms-food but I've been given plenty of mockery and heckles.'

'Please,' the man urged, 'come to my place.' He took Parisuddhi there and offered a full meal to him.

'I'm honoured that you have come to my house, Venerable Sir, my name is Sudhamma. Can I ask where you are headed, because I'm sure you won't want to stay around here.'

'I am travelling to Savatthi, my friend, in order to visit the Blessed One, the Buddha.'

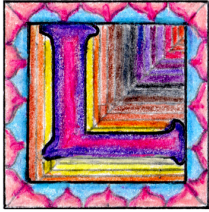
'Then let me ask you to bow down at the feet of the Blessed One and tell him, in my name, that for years now Kitagiri has been thoroughly polluted. The followers of Assaji and Punabbasuka are shameless and self-indulgent. They engage in all sorts of practices that are contrary to the life of a true seeker of the spiritual path and the discipline established by the Master. Please ask him to send some worthy and responsible Elders to re-establish good conduct here. Those who had faith in the Master have seen that faith eroded and those who go about in his name are not following his True Path.'

Parisuddhi was moved by this polite, heartfelt request and it helped make sense of how he had been treated in the town. It had not been because of his sloppy or stained robes, or immodest conduct, but quite the reverse; his restraint and composed demeanour had been the cause for criticism owing to the long-standing effects of the attitudes and behaviour of Assaji and Punabbasuka, and their group. He would gladly carry this message of Sudhamma to the Master, to do what he could to restore wholesomeness to the town.

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CHAPTER 6:

THE ENCOUNTER AT THE WELL



Life in Kulluta had become increasingly stressful and precarious over the last fifteen years. Sugandhi had been blissfully happy for the first year, after Harita was born, and even Mata-ji had been reasonably benign, but when her little girl reached the completion of one Rains the broad hints and out-right demands – ‘Now it’s time for a son!’ – began to mount. It was a mild irritation at first, and Sugandhi was otherwise very content with her new life, away from the gruesome duties and stench of her father’s slaughtering yard.

In time however, year by year, the stress mounted and was openly talked about as ‘the family problem’. No more babies came – girl or boy – no matter what lengths they went in choosing auspicious days, fertility potions, spells by local shamans and seers of both genders. It didn’t help that, at least to Sugandhi’s eyes, her daughter might not have inherited her suspected father’s blue-black skin but the set of her features, her ink-black hair and the big dark purple eyes bore a striking resemblance to Krishna’s. Thankfully no-one else seemed to have made note of this but the growing resemblance was a worry.

When Harita turned six Rains the momentum of concern, as repeatedly voiced by Mata-ji, led to a new marriage being arranged for Jayanta. ‘Since you haven’t been able to give my son any more children, other than this *girl*,’ Mata-ji managing to both sneer and scowl simultaneously, ‘we have arranged that my son will take another bride.’ There was no discussion between Sugandhi and Jayanta on this, his parents had decided.

It had always puzzled Sugandhi why so many women only wanted sons and seemed biased against their own sex. She adored her girl and, now that she was six Rains, she was a friendly and helpful companion around the house and shared the village duties with the other womenfolk, both young and old.

The new bride was found, coming from a family of many children and, this time from the same caste as the Headman and Mata-ji, even a little bit more upscale in the social hierarchy. She seemed a nice enough girl, and when Jayanta eventually got round to talking with Sugandhi about it, he was quite apologetic and asked for her understanding about how different things would be. She was touched by this gesture as it was plain he had had no choice in the matter – Mata-ji had pressed the issue and her husband was also keen for a grandson from Jayanta. Their other children were all daughters, who now lived in their new family homes, three of them away and only one who still resided in Kulluta.

Jayanta was also keen to reassure her that she was not being pushed away. As he said these words they had the tone of a prepared speech he was trying to

remember. Sugandhi, who was quick on the uptake, suspected that along with wanting a grandson, Jayanta's parents were also probably keen to maintain the financial connection with her family, her father having the prestigious, and lucrative, role of being the official slaughterer of royal horses – those too old or too injured to serve the royal household – as well as looking after the nurturing of foals and the brood-mares. The summer pastures up the top of the valley, beyond the Rohtang Pass, were under his protection and were valuable grazing during the dry summer months.

The wedding of Jayanta and Ratana duly took place but, to the chagrin of the Headman and Mata-ji, and the frustration of the young couple, no children were forthcoming from this union at all.

* * *

Another four Rains came and went and, on the unreliable but ancient principle of 'third time lucky', a third wife was ordained to be the solution to the 'big family problem'. Their other children, the various daughters near and far, had produced offspring – so they had some grand-daughters and grandsons – but Jayanta was seen as special. He was the heir of the family and the last one bearing the family name:– He *has* to produce a son! Was the now-obsessively held imperative.

Ratana duly stepped into the background, along with Sugandhi, and the arrangements were made for a new marriage. Bride number three, Sukha, was brought to the home, after extensive astrological research had been made, to match her perfectly, in blissful and fecund matrimony, with Jayanta – now well over thirty Rains and still sonless.

Yantras were drawn, mantras recited, holy beings were bestowed with offerings and delicious food, gods were propitiated, seers and sages worshipped, all to multiply the benevolent auspices and to guarantee a boy-child.

To no avail.

Another five years passed but Sukha also remained childless. By this time Mata-ji was beside herself with grief and disappointment. She had often been a difficult character to deal with and now she was lashing out in all directions. Sugandhi and her '*brat*' (although Harita was by now sixteen Rains and no longer a child) and Ratana were barked at daily, Mata-ji having given up on any possibility that either of them would conceive, while she encouraged Sukha to engage in ever-more elaborate rituals that were demanding and uncomfortable, and to take potions and possets that would 'quicken her womb' as she would say.

* * *

Things came to a head with the death of Ahimsa, Sugandhi's father. Her mother, Karuna, had passed away a few years before and Ahimsa had been running

the yard by himself, with whatever help of the candala community he could muster, which was sporadic and meagre.

The ageing of his body and the extra burden of work took its toll and one day, as he was sharpening some knives, he simply said, 'I don't feel quite right,' and keeled over then and there, by the grinding wheel, his heart having finally given out.

Once he was gone, and his funeral rites completed by the candala community, Sugandhi's suspicions about her place in the family proved to be true. Almost as soon as the funeral was over, and before the burning pyre had cooled, Mata-ji rounded on Sugandhi and Harita. 'You two do not belong here anymore! You are never going to bear my son a child – considering the age you are, you are an old woman, like me.' (This was a little unfair as Sugandhi was thirty-seven Rains at this point, hardly a crone). Mata-ji continued, 'I've had enough of you low caste types around this house – you're useless to my son and useless to my husband and me too. You're both just dead weight. I want you and your garish scarlet hair, and your oh-so-pretty daughter, out of this house before the next full moon.'

She was also increasingly suspicious of the fact that her son had failed to produce any children other than the girl who was born so soon after his first marriage. She refused to think of her son as infertile but, if the girl was pregnant by someone else when they married, that might explain some things:– If Jayanta isn't the father of the brat, then these impure vermin belong here even less.

In a way it was a relief, as Sugandhi had been wondering what would happen when her father died. She knew the responsibility for the royal horses would be passed on to an older man, skilled in the field of caring for the old horses and in despatching them when necessary, and it would not remain in her family. So it had only ever been a matter of time. Someone from the palace stables and stockyards would be sent and that would end the family's connection with that lofty role, albeit necessary for a low-caste person to occupy it.

As Sugandhi combed out her five-coloured hair, still rich and thick, and varying from russet, chestnut, auburn and ginger to flaming orange – its own natural redness assisted by regular applications of *madayantika*, she mentally readied herself for the road, pondering the years here at the Headman's house. She had always been an outsider, having had to be on her best behaviour and needing to suppress her natural cheekiness. She had played the demure wife as best she could and Jayanta had always treated her decently. She had had sixteen years to bring up her girl, now on the brink of womanhood; this home had provided food to eat, shelter, and the clothes she wore – although many of those had been paid for by her father's income – so she, at heart, felt grateful and was now ready for the test of the unknown. She would set off with Harita on the morrow, after saying goodbye to everyone, then they would see what the universe had to offer.

* * *

Krishna was now well-accustomed to life in Kitagiri. After more than a dozen years there he was part of the furniture, known to everyone, and was reckoned as a

good sort who was always ready to join in with the games with the village children, picking flowers and making garlands, and happily rollicking along with the singing and dancing with the local men and womenfolk. At the beginning it had been great fun, after the narrower confines of the life expected of him at the Ghositarama, even as a novice. He felt like he could truly break out of his shell here and develop his spiritual life, his journey to enlightenment, according to his life-affirmative principles.

It *had* been great fun at first but now that he'd been here almost fifteen Rains he had to acknowledge some misgivings about the way Assaji and Punabbasuka had led things, and the kind of behaviours they endorsed and rejoiced in. It had been enjoyable to pick up a bow and arrow, and to practice archery again, but when he and some of his fellow monks shot animals and birds, just as targets and not even to eat them, he felt a quavering in his heart. It had been fun to listen to music and to flirt and dance with the local girls, but he saw some of his brother monks force themselves on to people's wives, daughters and betrothed ones, and press them into embraces and intimacies when the women were not so willing. Even unattached young girls were propositioned by some monks and, more embarrassingly, he had found himself a few times, after having had a drink or two, either overdoing it with one of the young wives on the couch or casually teasing, and then dismissing, one of the women who had plainly got strong feelings for him.

'Even if I am not attaching (hopefully) to the pleasure I feel, it doesn't go just one way. Those birds we shot wanted to live. We were seeing them solely as a target to aim at but their pain and fear was very real to them. These towns-women we flirt and play around with, we monks might enjoy it but those feelings, of being taken advantage of, that some of the womenfolk have had and then the way we persuade them not to be attached and uptight – that's not honest or noble, even though we might be able to justify it somehow, philosophically.

'To play with some young girl's feelings too; let her know you find her pleasing and then to just ignore her. It might be a spiritual exercise for us, but for some of them there are a lot of tears, and there was even that young wife who hanged herself because the monk she was in love with made it clear, even though he had played around with her, that he did not really care for her beyond occasional entertainment. That was cruel.'

These kinds of thoughts were coming into Krishna's mind more and more often, though he did what he could to suppress them or distract himself from them. They were on his mind again as he was in the town one day and watching some younger monks racing around the town square, playing at piggy-back fighting with some of the young wives, with a crowd gathered and cheering the antics on.

'I used to enjoy things like this,' he pondered, 'but, honestly, this sort of activity makes sense for children but what's it got to do with enlightenment, *really*?' He was getting up to depart when he saw a steady stream of people heading down the main thoroughfare of the town, all moving towards the northern gateway. He

found himself joining the flow and, as he drew close, asked, 'What is it? Why is everyone going to the north gate?'

'It's the monks,' was the first, not very informative reply. He drew closer to the edge of the town and saw that a large assembly of monks were indeed arriving, walking silently and with gravitas. At their head were Sariputta and Maha-Moggallana, with Ananda and many other well-respected Elders following closely behind, including other enlightened bhikkhus. The serenity and peacefulness of their arrival hit Krishna like a hammer. As he was now one of the more senior Kitagiri monks present, he stepped forward and knelt in the dust of the street. He saw the group had paused and so he bowed three times, head to the ground.

'Venerable Sirs, I am honoured to greet you. What brings such a large and august assembly of the Blessed One's disciples to this humble town?'

Sariputta, ever the dialectician, replied, 'This town may be humble in its physical proportions, however we have been reliably informed that the Sangha here has been behaving in a far from humble manner for a very long time. Please ask the Sangha to convene at the monastery as soon as possible. This assembly, which has travelled from Savatthi, will request accommodation there. If that is not possible, or not agreeable, we will camp in the wild forest. Either way please inform the Elders Assaji and Punabbasuka that we wish to hold a formal assembly tomorrow.'

* * *

'That meeting was intense!' declared Krishna, now walking beside Ananda as they made their way north. They had traversed the hills that gave Kitagiri its name, had passed Alavi, and were heading towards the River Sarayu.

'There was a certain tension, I agree, but for enlightened ones like Sariputta and Moggallana, they are aware when there is an awkward mood, such as was present at Kitagiri, and they take steps to cater for it, but it is not burdensome or personally stressful for them.' Ananda had a wry smile on his face, as he often did, 'but for the less-than-fully-enlightened, like you and me, it *was* intense, and I *was* concerned.'

'They were so cool though, in presenting the Master's message and stipulations – Sariputta with his flawless logic and Moggallana with his penetrating gaze and quiet yet daunting authority – I was very impressed.' Krishna, although by now thirty-six Rains in age and fifteen Rains as a monk, easily reverted to his youthful exuberant manner when with Ananda; his company seemed to draw it out of Krishna, taking him back to his early days in the Ghositarama.

The message from the layman Sudhamma had been relayed to the Buddha in the Jetavana by Parisuddhi. The Master had immediately summoned Sariputta and Moggallana and asked them to travel to Kitagiri with a substantial number of other wise and experienced Elders, in order to establish the verity (or not) of the stories and, if accurate, then to carry out an 'Act of Banishment', a serious formal

procedure, compelling all those Sangha members who were followers of Assaji and Punabbasuka to leave Kitagiri forthwith.

That Act, when carried out, had unsurprisingly met with all kinds of protest and reaction from the over-liberal, unrestrained and unruly monks of the area. In short, most refused to mend their ways, they did not ask for forgiveness but rather abused the monks from Savatthi and argued with them. Many went away and left the Order, a few declared they would stay on with their avowed masters Assaji and Punabbasuka, but a few saw the virtue and goodwill of the great Elders and accepted their Act. Krishna was one of these latter so he had been glad to be banished from Kitagiri, to start anew.

* * *

It was getting close to the end of the day, the 'hour of cow-dust' as it is called, and the group of travelling monks drew close to the edge of a village. There was an inviting forest, with towering trees rising at its heart, a little to the east and already they could hear the distinctive sounds of the roosting calls of many of the local birds as they settled in the high branches for the night.

'I will go to the village,' said Ananda, 'my throat is very dry – probably from talking with you, Krishna, so much – and my water gourd is empty. I will see if I can find a well close to the edge of where the houses are so I won't have to wander its lanes at this time of the day.'

As was often the case, this village had a well dedicated for wanderers and outcastes, candalas and matangas, that was situated at the edge of the inhabited area. Ananda got directions from a farmer with his small wooden plough on his shoulder, returning from his fields at the end of the day. 'Jes' over there, zur,' he pointed down the track. 'Y' can't miss it.'

Krishna tagged along, mostly because he liked Ananda's company and because they had been talking for a while up to this point. As they approached the well Krishna saw that there was a young woman there who had just raised a bucket of water and had it perched on the rim of the well-head. Ananda approached her and asked, in his usual gentle and friendly way, 'Young lady, would you be kind enough to give me some of your water?'

One glance at Ananda was sufficient to tell her he was of the warrior-noble caste. He was wearing robes but, in her limited knowledge of caste laws, and remembering the punishments she had received in the past for disobeying their rigid stipulations, she was taken aback and a little frightened that she was being tested and could be beaten, or worse.

'Sir, Oi can't possibly give y' any of this water. Oi've touched it. Oi'm a candala, a matanga. Oi've worked at the most filthy and 'orrid tasks. Y're a kshatriya, a warrior noble, Oi can see that just from your looks, y'r way of talkin'. If y' drink of this water it will surely pollute y' and Oi would be punished sternly for tha'.'

Ananda was moved by the politeness and sincere kindness of the young woman. He replied, 'I did not ask you for your caste but for water.'

He walked over and opened the top of his gourd so that she could pour the water carefully in, although her hand was shaking a little. This was as much from her heart leaping with rapturous joy at being treated so respectfully and kindly, as it was from caution not to spill anything. She could scarcely believe how matter-of-fact this great being was in his demonstration of friendliness.

She offered to fill Krishna's water gourd as well, which he gratefully accepted. Since he was so dark-skinned, unlike the complexion of Ananda, she felt a little less intimidated by him and asked, 'So, what does your manner of dressin' mean, and where are you all a-goin'?'

'These are the patched ochre robes that are worn by the disciples of the Lord Buddha, the Enlightened One. Have you heard of him? He's also known by some as the Samana Gotama,' Krishna explained.

'As for where we are going – we are with a large group of other monks, who are camping in the forest outside this village, and we are all heading for the Jetavana Monastery, near Savatthi. That's where the Master is residing at the moment.'

The young woman was suddenly struck by an outrageous thought, ignited mostly by her new-sprung adoration of Ananda. 'Can Oi come with yez?!' She pleaded, her big eyes glancing up cautiously into their faces, hardly daring to hope. She felt magnetically drawn to Ananda and longed to be close to him always.

'Don't you have a family here? Can you just walk off like that without letting your loved ones know where you are?' The caring heart of Ananda never took such things for granted.

'No. Oi don' 'ave any family 'ere. Oi'm a lone traveller these days. Oi go from place and find whatever job Oi can that is open to being done by a candala woman. Oi 'ave a small bundle that is at the place where Oi stay at the moment – the kitchen shed where they store the dried cow-dung for fuel – but 'part from tha' Oi just have what Oi'm standin' up in.' She pointed to the somewhat threadbare sari she was dressed in. 'Can Oi?' She implored, 'Come with yez? If it won't break any caste laws. Oi won' be a problem, Oi promise, and Oi can 'elp with chores, like finding firewood or cow-dung for fuel along the way; and Oi can sew, if y'r allowed to touch what's come from moy 'and.' Her eyes moistened with hope and fear that these gentle men might say no.

'What would you do when we get to Savatthi?' asked Ananda.

'To be honest, Oi'm so impressed by 'ow kind and polite you both are, Oi'd like to meet y'r teacher and learn what Oi could from 'im. So, if that's possible, Oi'd like to stay at this Jetavana, or som'ers nearby, and help out where Oi can. Oi know Oi'm a lone woman, and young and Oi'm an outcaste, but Oi might be able to be of some use there.'

'One of the Master's wisest disciples,' Krishna reassured her, 'who lived in Kosambi when I knew her, is a lay-woman who was a slave and is nearly as dark-skinned as me. She has been more than useful, to many many people, so I'm sure a

place could be found for you with her. That woman's name is Khujjuttara; by the way, what's yours?'

'Oi've gone by many names over the last li'le while; mostly Oi'm just known as 'Matanga', which is what they shout when they want me to empty the out'ouse pit or find more cow-dung. My mother passed on a year ago so, since she died, Oi've jes' been Matanga, which is fine by me.'

* * *

"Ow long d'y' fink we've bin 'ere?" Gumbiya asked nobody in particular.

'I thought you were the expert in this territory,' sniffed Bee, by now even she was beginning to despair of ever leaving those dungeons. All seven of them seemed to be being held close together but it was so dark and the sounds of their voices so variable it was hard to know if they were in separate cells or all together, and where the walls and the door were, as everything physical and temporal seemed very fluid and unpredictable.

Sometimes they seemed to be shackled and chained to the wall, or the floor or ceiling; other times they could move freely for a few paces, then they were paralysed again. They never saw any kumbhanda guards but somehow food and drink, suited to their various needs, appeared. Bee tried counting the number of such meals they had had to try and keep some track of time, but then her mind would temporarily lose its sense of number, 'Is seven bigger or smaller than four?' she asked one time, quite seriously at that moment, and was roundly teased for it. She joined in the laughs with the others – it was a brief interlude of humour amidst the grimness – but when all had gone quiet she still wondered, 'But, which *is* bigger?' After she stopped trying to track the time, her numeracy came back again – this was a very mysterious prison they were in.

* * *

Some indeterminate time later Ninka remarked, 'Is it just me, or is it getting brighter in here?'

'It's not just you,' said Maggot, 'I can see all of us, and it's definitely getting clearer.'

They were all stirring by now, from their various reveries and meditations, and looking at where the light was growing strongest. 'I bet it's Dusaka, pulling some clever trick,' Ant offered.

'Or it could be an *obhasa-dhara* of the Buddha, come to give us some teachings,' suggested Ninka.

The glow increased and a form began to crystallize within it. The seven each had a different impression of what was taking shape in the shimmer and glint of the brightening. At last it took shape as a male celestial, which Rhamba and Salassa recognized immediately. 'It's a gandharva!' They declared excitedly. 'I don't

recognize his face but he's one of us – how did he get in here and how come he can light the place up so gloriously? This is most excellent!

A few moments passed and this visitation finally took distinct form. 'My friends, it's so good to meet you. Honoured fellow beings of the gandharva's Eastern Realm, Lady Ninka, your Serenity,' he bowed particularly to her, 'noble yakkha of the Northern Quarter, honoured kinnaris all – at last I have found you! Please allow me to introduce myself, my name is Muñca, I am gandharva of the Eastern Quarter, a subject of King Dhatarattha, majestic and divine ruler of that domain, as are Rhamba and Salassa here, although I am more of a musician than a dancing apsara.' He chuckled:– He was even making a joke in this dire prison they were locked in!

He looked at each of them in turn and, unhurriedly, began a short speech. 'You are all surprised to see me, I can tell. I, like many others, were impressed and inspired by the group of you doing *such* a sterling job of fending off that war between the devas and the asuras over that trivial issue of the invigorating perfume, *amatagandha*. To be honest I became something of a fan, from a distance, and always asked for news of any of you. I heard about Krishna and Jambu-sirivanna or Maggot as you call her, having a child and I also heard that Lady Ninka and Sugandha-kanavera, Ant,' he smiled graciously at them, 'had grown close, as had the warrior-yakkha Gumbiya and Maha-paduma-sundari, or Bee, as you're affectionately known.'

He smiled warmly at all of them, then continued. 'When the child of Maggot and Krishna went missing, I did not hear of it straight away but when I did, and then when I asked about you all, it seemed you had gone to hunt for her and were last seen in Uttarakuru in the foothills of the mountains then – *boof!* – you were all gone, disappeared from view. No one heard a word or saw a sign, in any realm. I've been looking for you all for three sun-turnings, in the human reckoning, although a lot less than that in gandharva time.'

He went on to explain how he had found them owing to certain abilities with concentration and the Divine Ear. He was glad that the prisoners all talked together as that gave his psychic hearing, enhanced with his musician's training over long years, the chance to pinpoint them, even in the fluctuating spaces and timescales of the Underworld.

'I also have the ability to carry beings to different realms so, hopefully, I will be able to get you all out of here without having to wait upon Her Chthonic Majesty's Pleasure.

'Yes!' Maggot shouted, 'Yes, right away! I don't know what spells we are held by or what enforces our confinement here but yes! We must try. From what you say my child is three Rains now and I haven't seen or held her since just after she was born. We have to try!'

'All of you, please gather around as close as you can and take hold of my arms or my body. Lady Ninka, if you would take my right hand; Miss Maggot my left; off we go.

* * *

The apsaras Rhamba and Salassa cried out in unison as they recognized their home in the Gandharva Realm. 'We made it!' Salassa burst into spontaneous dance, whirling his sister Rhamba with him. The seven had all made it through to the Gandharva Realm, which was part of the Heaven of the Four Guardian Deities.

'Thank you, Muñca! Thank you from the bottom of my heart!' Maggot shed a few tears of joy. 'Now let's see if we can find my girl.'

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CHAPTER 7:

MATANGA'S DEVOTION



'y think they will le' me travel with you?' Matanga anxiously asked. 'Oi'll walk far behoid and not cross nobody's shadow nor touch no food Oi'm not supposed to.' She glanced up from having tried to keep her eyes downcast, as was expected of the lower menials, and for a moment looked directly at Ananda's face, meeting his gaze.

'Once again, friend,' Ananda began, 'for those who follow the Way of the Buddha, concerns of caste and rank are put aside. For lay disciples, when they are in their own homes, they will observe the customs and duties of their position in society – like King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika of Kosala – but when they are visiting a monastery, or in the company of nuns or monks, they conduct themselves as humble lay-devotees, *upasika* and *upasaka*, and will respectfully converse with and share the food of all other disciples, whether nobles or farmers or candalas like you.'

'Is 'at true?!' Matanga was amazed – firstly that Ananda had called her 'friend' but even more at this strange philosophy. 'If the teaching of this Buddha can bring about such a change in people, such a diff'rent way of bein', I definitely wan' ter meet 'im. So does this mean Oi can come with you? With all of you, Oi mean.' Matanga's face flushed a little at having let it slip that she mostly wanted just to be close to Ananda but, her complexion having been sun-darkened by so much work in the outdoors and from rough living generally, it was hardly discernible; besides, Ananda was used to being attractive to people as he was so genial and easy to get along with, he was also a handsome man although by now well into his middle years.

'Yes, I think you can come with us,' Ananda reassured her. 'There are about sixty monks in our group but there are also a few laywomen and laymen walking with us to help with any needs along the way. You should be able to join with them but I will check with the other members of the Sangha, just so that people will know who you are and out of politeness to the group.'

'Thank you! Thank you!' Matanga stopped trying to look at the ground and smiled up at Ananda, her eyes locking onto his. 'You are truly the koindest person Oi've ever met – thank you again! Oi'll just go and collect moy bundle and Oi'll find you all at the forest, and Oi'll 'ope that no one objects to me comin' along.'

* * *

To her great relief there were no complaints about the idea of her joining the troupe of lay disciples and she soon got into the rhythm of the road. They left the village, which sat between the River Gomati and the River Sarayu, after the Sangha had walked through it for alms in the early morning. She was glad to be on the road

again, and in this utterly different mode – now there was little if any fear of attack by wild animals or bandits or by men who wanted to take advantage of her, all of these having been a daily concern during her travels. It was blissful, to be passing through forests and fields, to feel secure for once, and to have such noble company.

She tried to get as close to Ananda as she could, whenever it seemed appropriate, but since he was one of the Great Elders he was often near the front of the group, with Sariputta and Moggallana.

Krishna, with the other couple of Kitagiri monks who had opted to travel to Savatthi – rather than to disrobe or stay on as holdouts at Kitagiri – was usually at the very back of the assembly. So, again, whenever they stopped or whenever there was a time of conversation as they walked, and it seemed allowable, she would chat with him. The darkness of his skin had a natural effect of putting her at ease as often candalas and low caste folks were as dark, or nearly so, as him.

During one such time of conversation, after they had all forded the Sarayu River and were drying out the robes and gear that got sodden during the crossing, Krishna sat down close to the group of lay followers so she asked him, “Ow come you and the other Kitagiri monks are always walkin’ at the back?”

‘We’re in the doghouse,’ Krishna gave her a smile, ‘we’re the badly behaved ones and we broke a lot of the rules while we were there. So we’re on probation for a bit, which means we become like the most junior for a while, until we can be reinstated – do you know what that means?’

‘Oi may be a country girl but Oi’m not completely ignorant. It means you get back to where you was afore.’

‘Quite right,’ Krishna smiled at her warmly. ‘I liked a lot of the way we lived in Kitagiri but I now see we took it too far sometimes and we sank into ways of acting that were harmful. There were a few really bad seeds and they seemed to spread their rot to the whole bag of us. I still felt comfy with the basic attitude we had but it all went too far – what I like to call “life affirmation” became “selfish indulgence”. You start out with what feels like having some innocent fun but then it drifts; somehow you keep making excuses to yourself and you end up losing the Path altogether. So, I recognized that, and I’m off to meet the Master, hopefully to rehabilitate myself, and to get onto the proper Path once more. You know what “rehabilitate” means?’

‘Same as t’other word,’ Matanga snipped, with half a smile on her young face too.

‘So,’ a tad chastened for his patronizing manner, Krishna changed the subject, ‘are you originally from round here, and have you really got no family in the world? You said your mother died not long ago. What about her family or your father’s?’

‘Oi’m from nearby, ‘round ‘ere,’ Matanga began, ‘but the family said it was me bringing trouble on the rest of ‘em. See, was my birthdate, that was what was wrong, ‘ccordin’ to them. The family was strugglin’ and they blamed me as the cause of the blight. Moy ma protected me and spoke up, wouldn’t let my dad and the aunts and uncles harass me, but soon as she was gone – “Out you go!” Oi was

chased away like a goat that's had all the bad luck of the village tied to it, driven out into the wilds. Oi've been on moy own since then.'

Krishna was impressed at how well Matanga had fared, considering how young she was and how badly the family had treated her.

'What about you?' Matanga asked, 'Where you come from? You're very dark but you speak wi' a posh accent – tha's odd.'

Krishna was about to launch into his whole family history but decided to keep it simple. 'I'm from Ujjeni originally, way to the south-west of here. I'm very dark but my parents were rich merchants and fair-skinned. I had a proper education before I left the household life, I can even read and write, believe it or not.'

Matanga was impressed by this, never before having known anyone who was literate.

'Oi never knew anyone who could read, 'cept maybe some of the priests who did ritu'ls in the village. Do you ever get mistaken for low caste, loike me?'

'Like I said, in the Sangha, caste is not an issue but before I joined the Buddha's Order it happened a lot when I was on the road; people wouldn't believe I was from the merchant caste. Actually both my sisters married up and were queens of Vamsa.'

'Now y're pullin' moy leg! *Queens*? What, both of 'em?'

'Yes, they both married King Udena but they didn't recognize each other; they got separated when they were young and... it's a long story.'

'Oi like to be taken for a different caste sometimes – not a matanga for a change – and sometimes Oi've tried it on, y'know pretended to be a worker or a merchant girl when Oi've come to a new place. But somehow people know. Even though Oi can smarten up if Oi've got moy 'ands on a newish sari, an' 'ad a good wash 'n' bin out of the sun for a whoile. Oi can look quoite toidy. They *always* know though; some'ow they figure it ou' quick and then – what a beatin' y' get! Oi was bruised all over an' moy ears was ringin' fer a week one time Oi troid it on. Thought Oi 'ad some broken bones. Oi shouldn't 'ave dun it; Oi i'n't a very convincin' liar.'

'Is that why you go by the name Matanga?'

'Aye, that's roight. Keeps it simple, 'n' reminds me to be honest and 'umble, which is the best protection – don' y' reckon?'

* * *

The journey to Savatthi had been a delight for Krishna; to feel the open spaces of the hills and the rich life of the forests, with their many animals and bird calls, to have the company of quiet and friendly monks after the raucous friends he had been with in Kitagiri, was all deeply refreshing. He had not left the environs of Kitagiri since he had arrived, fifteen years before, so the contrast of the wild places, the smells of strange flowers, the changing landscapes all had a liberating effect.

They were now close to the Jetavana; just one or two more days and they'd be there, where he would hopefully be able to work out his period of probation and formal ostracism, and perhaps be able to have a private conversation with the Buddha:— Since he was so friendly with Ananda now, perhaps he could pull some strings and arrange it.

Matanga had been well-received into the group of lay disciples. Her caste was no issue and her natural kindness and humble manner endeared her to everyone. She was very hopeful that she would find some sort of place helping the community of Jetavana and perhaps be able to listen to the words of the Buddha himself too. In the meantime, as she was accepted more and more fully into the community of lay supporters, she was able to get closer to Ananda and she managed, by the end of the journey, to be spending time in his company every day.

Ananda's conduct was beyond reproach, he was known as a Non-returner (one level below full enlightenment and therefore incapable of lustful conduct), and before his ordination as a bhikkhu he had never married or been a womanizer.

He was born on the same day as the Buddha and he had already reached the age of thirty-seven Rains before taking on robes. He was thus not criticized for spending so much time in the company of Matanga, who had indeed 'tidied up' well, but a few of the monks and lay-folk took it that she was over-attached to the Great Elder and tutted at the way she would look at him sometimes with big mooncalf eyes.

Ananda was not oblivious to her attentions – she was just one of the dozen layfolk travelling with them and she seemed to spend hours talking with him every day – but he felt the contact was essentially harmless and she seemed to have a great natural appreciation for the Dharma teachings as well as his company.

When they arrived at the Jetavana the first order of business was to pay respects to the Master and to report to him the events that had unfolded in Kitagiri. He received this news with a grave expression on his face, tinged somehow with a wry smile beneath it, as if bemused by the capacity of people to get lost in their own versions of reality.

On hearing how many of the monks had refused to accept admonishments, had argued and prevaricated, and had snubbed the proceedings, denying the validity of the properly performed Sangha legal procedure, he laid down a new weighty rule, to encourage honesty, respectfulness and trainability. Of the forty or so monks residing at Kitagiri about thirty had left the area and disrobed, either returning to family life or taking up other forms of wandering monkhood. Three had come to the Jetavana to ask for rehabilitation, while the remaining six had decided to ignore the Act of Banishment and had stayed with Assaji and Punabbasuka, as diehards determined to justify their unskilful ways.

Once all this was completed and the Sangha had dispersed, to her surprise, Ananda called Matanga forward from the back of the hall, where she had been sitting with the other lay people, to join him before the Buddha.

‘Venerable Master,’ Ananda indicated Matanga sitting politely beside him, ‘this lay-woman has something she would like to ask of you. She travelled with us from the region of Northern Kasi and has proven herself to be interested in the teachings and to be of much practical help along the way.’

Ananda was then a little taken aback when, rather than Matanga simply saying that she would like to be helpful to the community of Jetavana and to live close by, she blurted out, ‘Master! Please help me and let me live close to Ananda, so that Oi may see him and be the one to look after him. Oi love Ananda, Master, please let me be with him.’

It seemed that along the road from Kasi, she had picked up a substantial portion of Krishna’s views about the compatibility of romantic love and monastic life. He had mentioned one day how he had fathered a child, while he was still a novice, and that though his partner was (supposedly) a kinnari, he felt that there would be nothing wrong with a romantic partnership of this kind between a monk and a lay-woman, especially with such a pure-hearted monk as Ananda – the rebukes from the Great Elders who had come to Kitagiri had sobered him a bit but he still, in his heart, held fast to his notions that to fulfil desire was happiness. This small encouragement from Krishna had informed a lot of her heady eagerness to draw close to Ananda, in the hope that her love would be reciprocated.

The Buddha looked into Matanga’s face for a long time before he responded, his eyes filled with compassion and a warm regard. ‘Matanga, your heart is full of love but I discern that you do not understand your own feelings. As I perceive it, it is not Ananda the person that you love but rather his kindness, which is vast, universal and unconfined, non-personal.’ He paused. ‘And you love what his kindness brings forth from within you – is that not so?’ The Master’s gentle gaze seemed to reach into the very core of her being and to fill it with light.

‘Please take to heart the kindness that he has demonstrated towards you and, if you are able, extend that same kindness towards all beings, near and far, both great and small. Can you do that?’

In Matanga’s heart it was as though something that had been sitting just out of place shifted and fell into perfect alignment. An inner brightness blossomed and grew, and she knew that the perspective of the Master was absolutely correct. It was like hearing a completely new song that was somehow intimately familiar at the same time. She thought, ‘Oi never saw that before but Oi knew it all along,’ but she was lost for words. With tears in her eyes she started bowing, as she had learnt to on the journey, over and over again.

‘Three is enough, Matanga,’ both the Master and Ananda were smiling, ‘We are happy to give you permission to help the Sangha here at the Jetavana, as I perceive that is also your wish.’ The Master paused again, then said, ‘Even though you are a matanga by caste as well as by name, I declare to you that you will be a model, a shining example to those born to the nobility. You are of low caste by birth but brahmins and warrior-nobles will be able to learn lessons from you. If you

follow the path of the Dharma, as you now recognize it, you will outshine the royal glory of queens upon their thrones.'

He lingered again, allowing his words to sink in.

'Ananda, please introduce her to Khujjuttara. She can find her a place to stay nearby and show her this monastery and the town.'

* * *

"Xac'ly what're we doin' 'ere?" enquired Gambiya of the group generally but of Muñca in particular. 'I'm glad you sprung us from the dungeons – that were a neat move – but 'ow do we carry on the search?'

Muñca began, 'Well, I brought you all here because it was the easiest destination for me, being home territory, but of course it's up to you all.' He looked around the group to see if any one of them wished to suggest a plan of action. A breath passed in silence. Bee and Muñca then both spoke at the same moment. After a spell of, 'Please, what do you propose?' 'No, you,' 'No, please,' Muñca said, 'Miss Paduma, I insist – what is your idea? You have been much closer to all this than I have; you know Miss Jambu, Maggot, the mother, and you know the child.'

'I reckon,' Bee began, 'Since we did not pick up any leads from the Human Realm, and the kumbhandas in the Underworld were convincingly clear that it had nothing to do with them, we should make a search as best we can of these other realms, especially since we are now here. Perhaps one of the gandharvas, yakkhas or nagas took her. It might be revenge for the *amatagandha* plot we foiled, and the individual nagas or yakkhas or whoever that got punished, maybe their families have a grudge, and kidnapping Tam is a way to get back at Maggot and thereby the rest of us – maybe we are walking into a trap but if some beings are holding her in this realm I don't care. We can walk into their ambush and deal with it there and then; I'm not afraid.'

Gumbiya glowed a little with pride at this courageous speech by his partner and grunted, 'I agree!'

'I was going to make the same proposal, as it happens,' said Muñca. 'Lady Ninka, you I believe are the most skilled tracker in this group, how do you feel about this idea?'

Ninka, who was as keen to help as any of the others, was also delighted to be able to spend more time with Ant. 'Yes, I agree as well. Rhamba and Salassa know the Gandharva Realm, as do you. Gumbiya is at home in the Yakkha Realm. We have a dear friend in Queen Samuddaja, of the Naga Realm, and I feel we have already tested the Kumbhanda Realm, where we have few friends and would now be considered fugitives, so I concur that that one has been dealt with already.'

The decision was thus made and, whilst the conversation unfolded, the kinnaris began to fully appreciate the sounds and forms of the land they were now in – an unfamiliar upper realm they had never experienced before.

The air was filled with music, tones and harmonies both exquisite and fully natural. Whispering harps like a breeze in the grass; soft chords on vinas and reedy pipes blown in eerie cadences as if a dance made into sound; endless interchanging melodies, woven in harmony that passed beyond hearing, into the depths and into the heights.

Colours of shimmering hue bent the air, curving it into forms that threaded around and amid the dancers – apsaras like Rhamba and Salassa – whom they realized had been drifting and whirling by even as they clustered and had their urgent discussion. They were in some kind of forest glade, the trees vast and strange in appearance, not of any species the kinnari knew, their trunks laced with gold and silver sheens. At the edge of their vision they spied a mansion or a palace of some kind, this also seeming to be covered in silver, or built of it, with rippling banners flying from the turrets and pinnacles.

Ant, steadily but inexorably distracted from the conversation, managed to summarize her wonderment at the Gandharva Realm. ‘This is impressive. Awesome. Wonderful!’ And that was all she could manage.

Muñca then took the lead, ‘We know many of the beings of this realm and can easily visit them to seek information but, since a number of you are visitors from an, ahem, lower realm, and therefore foreign in the eyes of custom and law, we should seek out King Dhataratha first and ask his permission to search the realm and make enquiries of his subjects. It’s the way things are done and can’t be avoided.’

‘We have to see the *King!*’ Bee was aghast, ‘how long is *that* going to take to arrange? We’re in a hurry here!’

* * *

Matanga had become well used to adapting to new places quickly. The elder lady Khujjuttara had taken her easily under her wing and it was plain she knew everyone and was admired and respected by all. The fact that she had once been a slave, as Krishna had recounted, mattered not a whit here. This all meant that Matanga found her feet swiftly at the Jetavana and, within a Moon or two, was fully involved in helping out with food and fuel and repairs, and was able to sit in on teachings at the hall very often.

On the full moon nights in particular, many of the citizens of Savatthi and the local villages gathered at the assembly hall, the sala, of the Jetavana in order to recite the teachings together, meditate, and listen to the Dharma discourses of the Master or other Elders. During this day, the full moon having arrived, Khujjuttara came round and reminded Matanga, ‘Don’t you go promising to do any jobs this evening, young miss. It’s the Observance Day and the Master will be sure to offer a teachin’. In fact, come to think of it, let’s you and me go early so that we can get a good place to sit. My eyes are still sharp but these old ears are getting worn out so, even though the Master’s voice is so clear, it’s handy to sit as close as possible.’ Matanga readily

agreed and moved to finish up the repair work she had been doing, fixing up the little shelter they had found her situated not far outside the monastery gates.

The sala was mostly empty when they arrived, just a few monks were there arranging lanterns and candles and tidying up the Dharma seat for the talk they were expecting.

The two women took their places on a mat near the front as, when there was a large crowd of lay devotees, the Dharma seat would be placed in the middle of the hall and the Sangha would sit beside and behind the Buddha; the lay people would then fill the space in front of him.

Khujjuttara had given Matanga her first instruction in meditation and she seemed to take to it like a duck to water, even though she had never had any kind of guidance on this aspect of spiritual life in the past. They sat quietly and the hall slowly filled around them as the rising clarion of the cicadas mounted in the forest, the daylight rapidly dimmed and the fat golden moon laid its first beams along the sala floor.

Later in the evening, when the moon was higher and had shrunk and turned to ice, the Master ascended the Dharma seat and began to speak.

‘Four *asankheyyas* and one hundred thousand *kalpas* ago, I made the vow to be a Bodhisattva at the feet of the Buddha Dipankara. I was a brahmin called Sumedha at that time and I dwelt in the city of Amaravati. Since that day, so long ago, in all the various lives that have been experienced, the Bodhisattva never consciously told a lie.

‘They who forsake the truth and tell deliberate lies, even though they might sit in the sacred enclosure of the Bodhi Tree, cannot realize Buddhahood. A Bodhisattva and a Buddha, all Arahants too, have to speak the truth. In certain cases a Bodhisattva may deliberately take life, take what is not given, engage in sexual misconduct and consume intoxicating drink or drugs, but they cannot tell a deliberate lie – for any speech or action based upon deception violates the reality of things.’

He let the words hover in the stillness and cast his gaze for a moment around the sala. ‘When giving the novice Rahula, my own son, his preliminary instruction in Dharma, I picked up a water-dipper with just a little water left in it and asked him, “Do you see this little water left in the dipper?”

““Yes, Venerable sir,” he replied.

““Even so little is the spiritual virtue of those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie.”

‘Then I threw away the water that was left and I asked, “Do you see that little water that was thrown away?”

““Yes, Venerable Sir,” he replied.

““Even so, Rahula, those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie have thrown away their spiritual virtue.”

‘Then I turned the dipper upside down and asked, “Do you see this dipper turned upside down?”

“Yes, Venerable Sir,” he replied.

“Even so, those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie have turned their spiritual virtues upside down.”

‘Then I turned the dipper right way up again and asked, “Rahula, do you see this hollow empty water vessel?”

“Yes, Venerable Sir,” he replied.

‘Even so, hollow and empty are the spiritual virtues of those who are not ashamed to tell a deliberate lie.’

‘This is the advice I gave to the novice Rahula, out of compassion and desiring his welfare. For the same reasons, for all those gathered this evening on this full moon Observance Day, I offer this same advice to you.

‘Lastly, although I have spoken so far of lies in the realm of speech, more insidious and often completely unnoticed, are the underlying tendencies, the *anusaya*, whereby the mind can lie to itself. The mind can be influenced by: sense-desire; aversion and grudge; opinions and views; skeptical doubt; the conceit of identity; craving for continued existence and defined being; and, lastly, ignorance, not seeing reality clearly. These seven are consummate liars, causing the mind to not see and know the truth of the way things are, and to thereby create suffering and disharmony for the individual and other beings. Be aware of the deception that these seven are able to cause as they can be subtle, insidious, yet deeply harmful.’

The Master paused again and it was clear that this was the completion of the teaching. Matanga’s heart was singing – she had relished every word, it all being so much in accord with her own intuitions about honesty and humility.

‘Oi’ve got a long way t’ go but this is won’erful.’ And when the assembly all said ‘*Sadhu!*’ three times, with a single voice, she heard herself almost roaring it:– Yes! This is it, yes!

Krishna, meanwhile, was in amongst the large community of bhikkhus, in the shadows between two lanterns. He too was deeply moved by this exhortation but tears were flowing with remorse at just how much lying he seemed to have been doing to himself. ‘I’ve got a long way to go,’ he thought as well, ‘a long long way, but what else is there to do?’

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CHAPTER 8:

KAPILAVATTHU –

THE CITADEL OF THE SAKYANS



King Pasenadi was feeling torn. He deeply loved his queen, Mallika, but in all their years of marriage she had only borne him one daughter, the Princess Vajiri. She, in turn, he loved very much but she was not a male, and according to the laws and customs of the warrior-noble

kshatriyans, only a son born to the anointed king and his queen could inherit the throne of Kosala. If he died without a legitimate son to inherit, it would inevitably fall to bloody disputes between nephews, cousins and boys that had been born from liaisons outside the royal marriage.

One such was Prince Jeta, who was a fine young fellow, and a wealthy and well-regarded personage in Savatthi. He had sold the park he owned outside of town to Anathapindika so that he in turn could gift it to the Sangha. He had not only made a fortune from that but he had had his name enshrined in the minds of the manyfold disciples of the Master since, through no wish of his own, the monastery had become known to one and all as the Jetavana – Jeta's Grove. If he had been the son of Queen Mallika, all would be simple, however his mother was one of King Pasenadi's concubines, the kshatriyan Lady Varshika, a minor princess, descended from a fourth son of his great-grandfather. All of this meant he would need to find another wife and to put her on an equal footing with Queen Mallika, and then hope that this new bride would provide him with the wished-for princely son. It was a worry.

Part of what he dreaded was the need to inform Queen Mallika for he wished always to respect her and, publicly as well as he did privately, demonstrate that he held her in the highest regard. She had come from a humble background and had only been the daughter of the chief garland-maker of Savatthi before King Pasenadi chanced to meet her and had fallen immediately in love, both marrying her and anointing her as Queen that very same day. There had been grumblings that she was a commoner but the King had always come to her defence, asserting his power as an absolute monarch to raise her up to His Royal Level.

When he finally brought the issue to her attention he was taken aback by her responding with the words, 'I was wondering when you would realize that this was going to be a necessity. I've been waiting for you to bring it up for quite a while.'

'You really are a lot wiser than me,' the King smiled warmly, 'I have been chewing on this for the last few years but I didn't want to risk hurting your feelings.'

We have had disputes from time to time but your happiness and well-being are of paramount importance to me. I'm so glad that you seem to find this idea agreeable.'

'Well, it's not ideal but it's the way things are, so why create grief around it? Have you thought about who the lucky girl might be?' She raised an eyebrow.

The King reached for some sherbet water and leaned back on his cushions. The weather was getting hot and even the open-sided chamber they were sitting in, high in the palace as it was, did not seem to provide any cooling breezes. He noticed that Her Serene Highness had a distinct smirk etching her visage.

'You look like you've been not only tolerant of this idea but that you're ahead of me in having given it some thought.' He lowered his eyelids a fraction, as if he would be better able to scrutinize her expression that way.

'You see through me as though through clearest water, oh Royal Husband,' Mallika replied. 'You know how you have grumbled recently – excuse me – have expressed Royal Displeasure at the way that sometimes, when you make an invitation to the Sangha to receive a meal offering here at the palace, you are told that no monks are available to come?'

'Yes...' he was intrigued to see where this might be going, '... go on.'

'This circumstance has been noticed by quite a few of us and, once or twice, when the palace victualler has bought in large supplies in the expectation of a large group of monks coming to receive a meal here, the excess food has had to be given away to the widows and the needy of the city. The poor folk were, naturally, very happy about this bounty, however it made me think, 'Why is this happening? The Sangha knows we have deep respect for the Master; the food we offer is certainly nourishing and abundant; we arrange it so all the palace staff are modestly clad when the monks or nuns visit so, what's the cause?' She let the mystery hover for a moment, enjoying her husband's Royal Perplexity.

'Go on.'

'It seems that we have neglected to consider what is the best kind of food.'

She smirked a little again, knowing that the King was inordinately attached to matters of the palate and had once even been put on a diet by the Master. He was mightily proud of the food his kitchens produced.

'What do you mean!?' His patience now beginning to wear thin.

Sensing the Royal Mood, Mallika cut to the chase.

'When I went to the Jetavana, a while ago, when you were off at the borders, I asked the Master about this. He responded by asking me, "Great Queen, what do you think is the best kind of food?"'

'I was a bit nonplussed by this question and simply raised my hands in *añjali*, trusting that an appropriate answer might arise, because it was clear it was not a question about flavours, textures, ingredients or cooking methods. Before any words came to me, the Master answered his own enquiry.

"The food of friendship is the best, Great Queen," he said, "even sour rice gruel given by a friend becomes sweet."

“In that case,” I asked, “with whom are the members of the Sangha finding such friendship?”

“With their kin, and other Sakyan families here in Savatthi. Many of the community at this monastery are from the north, from the Sakyan kingdom that sits below the Himalayan mountains.”

‘This made perfect sense to me, as the words of the Master always do, so the thought then occurred, “How can this Royal House become kin with the Sakyans and thus feel more of a home to them?” It came to me surprisingly quickly:— Perhaps if the King married a Sakyan princess we would then become related to those Sangha members, and if she produced a son then the succession would be secure and great bloodshed and strife averted. What do you think, Your Majesty?’

‘Brilliant, is what I think!’ And thus plans began to form.

* * *

‘It’s much cooler here!’ King Pasenadi declared, ‘Savatthi in the hot season is Exhausting, enervating, I am glad indeed that I made the journey of this embassy myself.’

‘We are deeply honoured, Your Majesty,’ Prince Mahanama replied. He was the head of the Sakyan people and had been scrambling to prepare adequately for this unexpected visit. Riders had come ahead of the Royal Progress, so they had had a couple of weeks’ warning, but it was a challenging task to put it all together and on so many fronts.

It was not just a matter of arranging food and lodgings, fit for a kshatriyan king and his entourage, but there was also a substantial faction of the proud Sakyan nobility, and even among the servants and townsfolk who, having got wind of the impending visit, felt, ‘Why are we making all this fuss and to-do about some Southern royals on a trip – they didn’t even ask permission from us!’ This reticence was by no means universal but it was voiced, unabashedly and liberally. Mahanama was thus tasked with a diplomatic balancing act along with everything else.

‘Please, Your Majesty let me conduct you to your chambers. I trust they will be adequate to your needs and, I beg you, please do not hesitate to let me know if anything can be improved.’ It might be cooler in Kapilavatthu but Prince Mahanama was now sweating.

As they walked through the palace grounds, and seeing he was nervous, King Pasenadi endeavoured to put him at his ease, making small talk and asking about the welfare of Kapilavatthu and the Sakyan kingdom. By the time they reached the chambers that had been prepared for the royal visitor, Prince Mahanama was more relaxed and felt ready to ask the next big question, ‘Er... how long would Your Majesty like to reside here? Of course we would be honoured to provide for and host you and your party for as long as you would wish.’

‘That, honoured Prince, depends a bit on a question I have for you. This is in fact the reason we have come this distance from Savatthi; I have something to ask of

you. Agreed it's only eight or nine leagues, barely half a moon's journey, but in this season the elephants and horses get thirsty, as do the people. One has to find shade where one can and the leaves have fallen from many of the trees so it's been a short road but hard.'

'What is your question, Sire, that you have taken such pains to come and ask?'

Even as he said this, Mahanama had an inkling of what was coming next, knowing as he did that Pasenadi had fathered no legitimate heir, as yet. It was a question he was dreading as he knew it would be a contentious issue among the Sakyan nobility and in the marketplace as well.

'I would like you to give me one of your daughters in marriage for I wish to bind our houses together. I am, furthermore, in need of a son to inherit the Kingdom of Kosala. If a Sakyan princess became my bride I would raise her up to be Queen, on an equal basis with Queen Mallika, my Royal Wife of many years. In addition, since my kingdom is large and prosperous and Sakya is smaller and less wealthy and since *I* am making the request of *you*, and even though it would mean your grandson would become the head-anointed Warrior-noble King of Kosala, I am offering to forgo any dowry. The girl on her own would be enough. What do you say, good prince?'

The Prince was sweating again and somewhat lost for the right words. He couldn't say, 'I'm not sure if everyone will agree' or 'Let me consider it' – which were the first things that came to mind. He was thinking quickly and, to his relief, in a flash it all clarified:– I need *time*. I can't say no as he's the King and we are a vassal state. There *has* to be a way to work it... Oh!...! I think I've got it; we'll need at least one Moon.

'Your Majesty, we are deeply honoured that you would call upon the Sakyan people in this way. There will be many things to discuss and prepare. I have a big family, with many daughters, and it is not immediately clear which one would be most suitable to offer to Your Majesty as a bride. May I have the period of one Moon to consult with my fellow princes, my wives and my daughters, and then we will have a suitable girl to present?'

'That sounds very agreeable, please take all the time you need and I will enjoy the cool climes of this kingdom and the breezes off the Himalaya.'

* * *

Prince Mahanama had been correct in his assumption that the idea of a Sakyan princess marrying the King of Kosala would not go down well. There was uproar in the court.

'We are *Adicca-bandhu*, Kinsmen of the Sun God, descended from King Mahasammata of the First Age and, after him from King Okkaka – his descendants became the Sakyans and the Koliyans, we never *ever* take spouses outside these sacred clans!'

‘We’re oak-hearted Sakyans!’ Another of the nobles interjected, ‘How dare this soft Southerner presume to ask for one of our princesses?!’

‘Will you please listen!’ Mahanama barked, now seriously on edge. He did not have absolute rulership, like King Pasenadi, for Sakya was governed by a form of collaborative leadership. He had to come to agreements with his fellow kshatriyan princes before important decisions were made. ‘Will you please be quiet and hear me out.

‘Point one: Sakya is a vassal state of Kosala so we cannot refuse the request.

‘Point two: We cannot break the customs of our clan and let a true princess marry outside the Sakyans and the Koliyans.

‘Point three: The words of His Majesty’s request,’ there were a few haughty snorts at the use of the honorific and some cries of, “‘Majesty”! Pah!’

Mahanama continued undaunted, ‘... of *His Majesty’s* request were: “Please give me one of your daughters.” Now I have a lot of daughters and it came to me that, if we schooled one of my, ahem, natural-born daughters in the manners of the court, to a convincing degree, she could be given to Pasenadi, King of Kosala, and I would not have broken my word, and no true princess would be breaking our sacred codes.

‘Your views on this plan, honoured sirs?’ He cast his gaze around the thirty or forty nobles gathered in the Santhagara Hall for this discussion.

‘I don’t like it!’ Prince Sinipura jumped in, ‘Even if she was a daughter of one of the non-royals, like your favourite Lady Piya, I feel that would be an almost equal disgrace. I don’t agree.’ There were murmurs of assent to this view all around.

‘Yes, good point,’ Mahanama continued, ‘that’s exactly why I’m thinking of the daughter of a slave.’ There were more murmurs but quieter, one loudly questioned, bemusedly, ‘Does he keep track of his by-blows?’

‘Who are you thinking of?’ Prince Sinipura asked.

‘Some of you may know the slave Nagamunda, who works in the kitchens. She’s a handsome woman, to my eye, and I’m not ashamed to say we have... er... enjoyed congress from time to time over many years. She’s got a daughter – well several actually, and many sons – who I think could play the part well.’

‘Is she a kitchen girl too?’

‘As a matter of fact, yes, she is.’

‘And you think she can shed the smells of the kitchen and pass for a princess in, how long have we got? One Moon? It’ll never work.’

Mahanama let half a smile lighten his face. ‘This is where it gets interesting. Not long ago I was passing some... er... convivial time with her mother, once again, and the daughter, who is now sixteen Rains, was around the chambers too. We fell to playing the lying game – you know, where each person in turn tells a story and you have to guess whether the person is lying or not. I invited a couple of her other daughters to put down their work and join us; I was in my cups at the time and was feeling magnanimous.

‘This one daughter, Vasabha, who is quite good looking too, was astonishing. She could lie with complete conviction and no matter how hard the rest of us tried she always had convincing evidence for what she was saying, she backed up everything she uttered with completely natural ease. She won every time *and* she could guess the double and triple bluffs of others. I think she’s the solution to our problem.’

Silence hung in the hall for several heartbeats, a rare occurrence for a meeting of Sakyan princes. It was a momentous decision to make.

‘I like it,’ Prince Sinipura said, nodding his head. ‘Similarly,’ followed Prince Nipuna. Murmurs of agreement were emerging all round. Mahanama let it ripen in people’s minds then spoke up, ‘Any *disagree?*’ He looked around the hall – no movement or sound showed any dissent at all. ‘Then I take your silence as approval.’

‘One moment,’ Prince Jali quietly cleared his throat, ‘are you *sure* that this girl Vasabha is your daughter by Nagamunda? I mean, these matters can be hard to determine at the best of times, and in the most reputable families too.’

‘Another good point – I have considered this myself and, to be quite frank, I was with her mother a lot in those days and, for our purposes here, I feel it’s likely enough. I have pondered this and I feel comfortable looking King Pasenadi in the eye and saying, “May I introduce my daughter.”’

* * *

When Nagamunda and Vasabha were summoned and told of this plan they each felt a small storm of emotions. The mother, recognizing that this would make for a totally different and wonderful life for her girl, was simultaneously afraid if, somehow, the façade slipped and Vasabha was revealed as a fraud, what would happen then? It could only be disastrous. Her girl could be tortured, maimed for life or executed on the spot. Her heart quailed at the prospect but, being slaves, they had no more say in the matter than the pots they cooked the rice and barley in had about *their* role in the world.

Vasabha, meanwhile, could only think, ‘Yes! Yes! Now I can get out of the kitchens and the smoke and steam I live with every day. The fires to tend and the pots to clean... Yes!’ At the same time, another more rational part of her mind was thinking, ‘I’ve got a month to learn how to be a princess – they must be jokin’. I’ve never had a hair-do like they have, no idea how to make one. I don’t even know the names for half their clothes, let alone how to put them on; I can tell a good story, and I can imitate voices – I done that, makin’ fun of the high-ups and the snooty girls in town – but the eatin’ customs, the dainty way of walkin’ – how am I...?’ It was baffling. Still, the benefits looked mind-boggling, *if* she could pull it off.

Vasabha knew as well as her mother that she had no real choice in the matter, being one who was owned as a slave. She also had to notice that the attention she was now getting, from the princes and princesses gathered around her, was thrilling.

When she won at things like the lying game, or on those rare occasions when the palace cook grunted approvingly at her work in the kitchen, that gave her a warm glow but this, this prospect of becoming queen of a huge country like Kosala and the mother of the next in line to the throne – this was a thrill like no other she had known in her whole life.

* * *

That Moon was a cascade of new experiences, many of them painful or at least uncomfortable for Vasabha. Her mother joined in, where she could, to lend a hand with fetching and carrying and offering whatever reassuring noises she could make. The vast bulk of the many aspects of the transformation were looked after by a huddle of the Sakyan court ladies and a cheerful, one-handed maid called Kesini. It was exhausting, exciting and exasperating, but the whirlwind nature of the process meant she had no time to think and would collapse onto her pallet at the end of each day and fall straight into a dreamless sleep; that was until Lady Jantu and Lady Piya decided she needed to learn to sleep on a ‘proper’ bed and to learn the names and protocols, customs of the bedchamber, and she got moved out of her lean-to that she had shared with her mother and siblings for years.

On her first night in the bedchamber it was just before dawn that she fell asleep – she had never slept alone before, always having had a puddle of sisters and small brothers around her – and it was only after Kesini looked in on her late in the second watch of the night, and came to lie on the bed beside her, that she finally could drop off.

The days were filled with, amongst other things, the experience of bathing – and in *hot* water! A week of such scrubbing and rinsings was scarcely sufficient to rid her skin of the kitchen reek and the dust of charcoal and cinders that seemed embedded everywhere. It was hard work but Lady Jantu eventually, begrudgingly but almost proudly remarked, ‘You know my dear, you actually smell quite sweet once you’ve been uncaked from all the soot. Who gave you that perfume?’

But there was still more to do.

‘Those hands!’ Lady Jalini declared, ‘Callouses and cuts, burn-marks, we’re going to need a magician to conjure all this away.’ Nevertheless they had the skills and set to work.

Then there was her hair, needing delousing along with copious washes to shed the grease and grime.

And her clothes; all the fittings and the names of things.

And jewellery; she felt like a bangle-tree with all the trinkets and rings, armlets, anklets, browbands, coronets, earrings, pendants, necklaces, navel gems, kamarbands around the waist:– Was there any part of her body they could not contrive to hang filigreed metal from?

Then the names of jewels, precious and semi-precious, and the designations and nicknames of how they were cut.

And the walk, to be dainty and demure.

And the voice; 'How kind of you to let me come to your court, Your Majesty' – though to be fair the voice was one of the easiest of her challenges.

And the family history of the Gotama clan, since Mahanama, apparently her father, was a Gotama and the cousin of the Buddha, the most famous of the Sakyans in these times.

And then the knowledge of the basics of the Dharma, since King Pasenadi was a devotee of the Buddha too, she would have to be ready to join in with discussions. She was brilliant at faking stories but she needed to get some essential terminology down too, but not *too* much, to keep it convincing.

And her nails, which she'd never thought of as having any use but to prise open a nut, or scratch or pick apart the various ingredients of various foods, and to nip head lice. And her toenails too – who would have that that anyone in their right mind would consider their *toenails* as part of their beauty scheme?

And lastly eating – how to share a plate properly with the nobs and with the King.

There was probably more but, as the crowd of ladies kept saying, 'Just the essentials, just the essentials' – this was the bulk of it.

By the time the Moon was complete she hardly recognized herself and, one time, a younger sister of hers came to the chamber and, not recognizing Vasabha in her finery, sparkling with silver and jewels, she asked, "Scuse me y' Ladyship, d'y' know where Miss Vasabha is?" 'Her Ladyship' stifled her giggles for a moment and then, striking a pose, said in her poshest accent, 'Why, foolish child, she is *here*,' and grinned, watching her sister's dawning recognition wash over her grubby face:– This was fun!

* * *

The Presentation was to take place over a formal meal with King Pasenadi. Rumours had circulated that the King had dropped a comment, without malice, that had been overheard by a Sakyan servant who was knowledgeable about the ruse being pulled. Apparently the King had remarked, to one of his own courtiers, 'These Sakyans are desperately proud, especially in matters of birth. Suppose they should send a girl who was not one of them, not a royally born princess yet say that she was so?'

'Sire,' his companion replied, 'one sure way to tell is by eating together. If the girl eats from the same dish as her father and he eats with her in the same way, I feel it will be safe to say she is exactly what they say she is. A Sakyan prince would never eat from the same dish as anyone lower in rank.'

The mindful servant hurried to pass this on to his masters. They, in turn, doubled their efforts to keep the King distracted by hunts in the hills, large banquets in the region of the palace away from where the training and decorating of Vasabha was taking place, and elaborate picnics, with music and dancing, as well as more lavish food, in locations both beautiful and conveniently remote.

The day arrived and Vasabha, fully bedecked in her finery, was brought into the dining chambers. Prince Mahanama was there with his senior wives, Princess Bhatta and Princess Maddarupi; King Pasenadi and two of his attending lords were already settled at the far end of the low table. Cushions of bright colours were spread liberally around to sit on and the cool breezes from the Himavant forest and the high mountains rippled the fine draperies. Clusters of servants hovered in attendance, ready to bring in the food once the royal party was all gathered.

Vasabha moved demurely and gently into the space and Mahanama introduced her, 'Your Majesty, this is my daughter Vasabha, she has been selected from all those vying for the opportunity to be your queen. I trust she pleases you,' he was sweating profusely and trying hard not to show it.

'Enchanted,' said the King, almost in a whisper, and it was plain to all present that he was enchanted indeed.

Vasabha was just about to ask where she should sit but Mahanama drew her to his side and then let her place herself between him and the King. He then glanced over to the servants and, with a discreet gesture, indicated that the food should be brought in.

* * *

Vasabha had been fully briefed on the deception that was planned. Once the food was in front of them all and had been put onto dishes, they began. Prince Mahanama and Vasabha had a single dish between them, along with the others spread around the table. Mahanama reached across and took some food from that plate then put it in his mouth. In a fluid motion Vasabha followed, almost simultaneously but just after, and also picked some food from the same platter. She popped it in her mouth and, just as Mahanama was reaching for another mouthful, a minister appeared in a harried state and begged leave to speak. The Prince made a point of resting his hand on the dish as Vasabha continued to eat from it.

'Your Highness, a messenger has arrived from the ruler of Koliya; the matter requires your immediate attention.'

'Really, can't it wait until we've finished eating?' He endeavoured to sound as convincing as possible and put some genuine fret into it.

'*Immediate* Sire, I regret. The messenger is waiting, and he has a fresh horse saddled and ready to carry your reply.'

'Very well,' he clambered to his feet.

'Your Majesty, please excuse me. Needs must.'

'Quite understand,' the King replied with a mouthful of the delicious offerings that had been prepared.

'I'll be back as soon as possible.'

Which of course he wasn't.

He returned in a feigned rush as the dishes were being cleared. 'I'm so sorry. So rude of me, on such a special occasion; Your Majesty must think of me as the poorest of hosts.'

‘Not at all, not at all. You don’t need tell me how affairs of state can interrupt the best of plans and the most sacred of duties. Will you have some more to eat? You barely started.’

‘No need, Your Majesty, really. I can have something later. What I’m most concerned about is my daughter Vasabha. Is she acceptable?’

‘Acceptable!?’ King Pasenadi had been thoroughly charmed and, having seen the Prince and his daughter literally eating from the same dish, any doubts that had been lingering were dispelled. ‘Not just acceptable, honoured King. We have already been discussing possible names my aged granddam might offer for our son.’

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CHAPTER 9:

A BRIDE OF THE KING



ewildering and bedazzling as the preparations were, Vasabha was determined to stay focused. One slip would be enough to cause disaster; even though she was quick enough to make excuses, there were reasons and there were *reasons* why she might get something wrong. To use some northern vernacular term, or using the kitchen way of counting by numbering her finger joints, might be something she could get away with, but to pick something up with her left hand, when a kshatriya would *never* use anything but their right, would bring the edifice of pretence crashing down.

Prince Mahanama was relieved that the palace coffers would not have to provide a dowry which, for a Royal Wedding, could be ruinously expensive. The cost of hosting King Pasenadi and the Kosalan embassy for over a Moon had already drained the resources of himself and many of the noble houses. One aspect he was still concerned about was how to sustain the integrity of the deception over time. A number of nights had passed in fretful sleeplessness, trying to consider who to send with 'the Princess' and how secrecy could be maintained in Vasabha's court, especially if she had the customary crowd of supposed relatives and familiar servants from home around her:— This really is a problem! People talk, and make new friends. How can it all be arranged to prevent the risk of slippage? And how are the Sakyan monks in Savatthi now to be encouraged to accept the invitations they were declining?

To his surprise it was in an unguarded moment when, happening to see Vasabha being adjusted in her newest sarong and jeweled kamarband by Kesini, it came to him like a perfectly formed and well-wrapped package. He saw how he could send her with just one reliable servant and yet make it seem like this was a sign of great virtue and faith in the King, and in the security of Vasabha's prospective new life in Savatthi.

It was the suspicious and supercilious glances that both Lady Jantu and Lady Piya gave Kesini as they helped Vasabha with her accoutrements that had given him the cue. The girl had just one hand, having lost the other in a tragic fire, and moreover she was from Kosambi in Vamsa, to the far south. The high-class women, and even the other servants, tended not to befriend her, this being on the superstitious assumption that she must have done something really evil in a past life to have had her right hand and forearm burned off. The fact she was a foreigner simply made the off-putting quality of this woman more complete.

She had come to Kapilavatthu with an embassy from King Udena, sent to open up more trade opportunities, with her being one of many maids along to serve

the needs of the courtiers and their wives as they travelled. After her beloved charge Gavinna had passed away she had been at a bit of a loose end in King Udena's court, and being one-handed didn't help. The embassy to the north and the chance of a change of scene was like a beacon of possibility and she had jumped at the opportunity. She was a self-reliant person by nature, confident and unflappable in most circumstances, but still (understandably) was reactive in proximity to fire. The memory of Gavinna holding her, as the heat and flames intensified in the burning seraglio in Kosambi's palace, the tears running down her face from the smoke and the terror of it all, was something that she suspected would be with her all her days. When one of the Kosambi lords had fallen ill in Kapilavatthu, he and his wife had stayed on with Kesini and a few others, as he was too sick to travel by the time the embassy was due to head south again.

Kesini found she was very comfortable in the north and, when his lordship had recovered and the family were preparing to head back to Kosambi, she was quite happy to have had an invitation from Lady Jalini, who was much less superstitious about bad karma than her friends, and who was not so bothered by national pride and the belief that Sakyans and Koliyans were somehow special and sacred.

'Please consider joining my household,' she asked Kesini one day. 'You are a person of great good qualities, I can see, sprightly and energetic, cheerful, yet you can be assertive when you need to be. And you are conveniently unwed, so your duties would neither be interrupted by children arriving and needing your care, nor by a husband who wished to have your attention. I do *not* consider your loss of a hand to be a problem,' she rolled her eyes fractionally as if to comment on the irritating folk-beliefs of her fellow Sakyans. 'What do you think?'

'I will have to ask the master and mistress but I can't see them objecting,' she was surprised and delighted at the idea. 'They've got plenty of help for the road to Kosambi and they'll prob'ly be glad to see the back of me.'

No objections were raised and thus it was that Kesini joined Lady Jalini's household. She was now the ideal person to help fulfil Mahanama's plan.

* * *

King Pasenadi had left the practical arrangements concerning the journey back to Savatthi to the various ministers and court advisors. The day before they were due to travel, Prince Mahanama came to see the King and, as best he could, check that all had been agreeable with the Royal Visit and that all the necessities for the procession back to Kosala had been provided.

'Splendid, honoured Prince, splendid. It has been a most agreeable sojourn. And I am very pleased indeed with this daughter of yours that you have offered. She's a fine girl, young, but very poised, I think this will all work marvellously to our mutual benefit.'

Mahanama was relieved to hear this and continued. 'Sire, as a gesture of our faith in you, and out of respect to the vassal nature of Sakya to Kosala, we would like to commit the Princess Vasabha completely into your hands.'

'I thought you were doing that already. Had you been thinking of this as a loan?' Pasenadi chortled at his own wit. 'What do you mean by "completely"?''

'No Sire,' Mahanama was now anxious to explain, 'not a loan or any kind of partial or temporary arrangement – perish the thought! In fact, quite the opposite. We know that often, when a delicately raised princess has to leave her family and move to a new household, commonly never having met or even seen a likeness of her new husband, she will be accompanied by a group of maids and familiar friends, companions she's grown up with as well as perhaps a cousin or an aunt as well. This is taken to be the best way to alleviate homesickness and to provide a bubble of people, and daily customs and routines, that sustain the taste and textures of home.' He paused to level his breath for a moment; this was the crucial idea he had to sell.

'Go on.'

'We Sakyans are proud by nature, our womenfolk as much as the men, so we would like to demonstrate our keenness to honour you – and to show our faith in your wisdom and kindness since you are an eminent disciple of the Lord Shakyamuni, my Venerable cousin, the Buddha – by sending Princess Vasabha to you with but a single servant. We will dispense with the need for the Princess to have her own support system in your court as we are completely confident that Your Majesty will provide all the support, spiritual and emotional, as well as material, that she might need.

'Just as you magnanimously offered to forgo a dowry for the Princess, we would like to commend her fully into your care. She's a proud Sakyan and she too is eager to forgo the safety net of family and friends, in order to give herself into the secure embrace of your Royal Protection in as wholehearted a way as possible.' He finished there and endeavoured to lower his shoulders, breathe out, and relax his drum-tight stomach.

The King looked pensive and took a moment before responding. Despite his efforts to relax, Mahanama's heart began to race:– Everything depended on this moment – *everything*!

'I'm deeply touched,' the King replied at last. 'Very touched indeed.'

Mahanama restrained himself from grinning, as he wished to, and managed to confine his rejoicing to a long and steady out-breath:– It was all going to work.

* * *

The grand procession formed at the gates of the palace. Gaily caparisoned horses and elephants, carriages and carts clustered, and were efficiently manoeuvred into formation for the Royal Progress. Final gifts had been exchanged and flowers offered, banners of many hues streamed in the Himalayan winds, billowing and flapping their farewells. The state elephant of Kosala was brought to the centre,

where Prince Mahanama stood with King Pasenadi. The Princess was ushered forth by Princesses Bhatta and Maddarupi. She was radiant, and commanding the attention of all with her remarkable dignity and beauty.

‘You are stunning, my dear’; the King was aglow with admiration. Mahanama then formally took her hand and placed it in the King’s. ‘I offer her to you, Great King, may she bear you many sons so that the line of Kosala may continue for a hundred generations.’ Loud cheers were raised all round, both from Kosalans and Sakyans alike, and Pasenadi turned to begin the mounting of the elephant – this was going to be harder than usual as he had increased his already substantial girth through all the feasting in Kapilavatthu. After taking one pace he stopped and turned back to Mahanama.

‘I quite forgot. I’ve been meaning to ask you – who is the Princess’s mother? I never heard that mentioned or, if I did, I failed to register it.’

A bolt of fear shot through both Prince Mahanama and the assembly of his courtiers, wives and concubines. In all the various preparations none of them had given this point any thought. Vasabha too was shocked and reflexively clenched her hands, but to her relief and to that of everyone in the Sakyan Court, in half a blink Princess Maddarupi stepped forward, raised her hands in *añjali* and, bowing her head respectfully, simply said, ‘Your Majesty.’ She made sure she said no more, not wishing to tell a deliberate lie.

‘Ah, so you’re the lucky person to be my new mother-in-law. You look younger than me but never mind,’ the King, again highly impressed with his own wit, carried on, ‘We’ll leave it to the pundits to explain how the son can be older than the mother.’ He paused a little and then added, ‘I trust you’re at ease with handing over your precious and beautiful daughter like this. Is it not a pull on the heartstrings to say “farewell”? You might not see her again.’

‘I count it an honour of the highest order, Your Majesty. I have other daughters and sons who will keep me company, and who have already brought me grandchildren to soothe and warm my heart. I commend Princess Vasabha to you with no regret.’ Maddarupi hoped that the exchange would end there but her heart sank when the King asked directly, ‘Is she your youngest daughter?’ There was no more room to wriggle or to evade, or to be deliberately misunderstood, she had to give a straight and deceiving answer, ‘Yes, Sire, she is my youngest child.’

Mara, the Lord of Lies, watched this scene as it unfolded, as he had been watching and prompting since Queen Mallika had pondered how to draw closer to the Sakyans. A bright idea planted here, a little nudge made there – it did not take much to move the world. He reflected:– Oh, this is good. This is *very* good. There is going to be havoc.

* * *

Bee was peeved. She could not believe how long it had taken to organize the visit to King Dhatarattha, and all the fuss and palaver involved in the audience itself,

even with a high deva from the Tavatimsa Heaven in their party. 'And how many colours and how much jewellery can one deva wear?!' There were so many adornments, let alone the musical accompaniments, that it had been hard to stay focused.

'At least the niceties have all been observed and we're permitted to carry on searching,' said Ant.

'But *time!*' Bee objected, 'time's passing. Agreed, if Tambaka has been kidnapped by someone in the Bhumma Deva Realm, or here, with the Four Guardian Deities, it's not so urgent but in the Human Realm time is passing much more quickly; three Rains went by there just when we were trapped by Queen Oghabala in the Underworld. Agreed it was hard to tell anything accurately about time in that domain but still, if we delay too much, and if she's in the Human Realm, she might be an old woman by the time we find her.' She didn't say, 'If she's still alive.'

'It's urgent anyway, Bee,' Maggot quietly stated. 'She was a tiny baby, *my* tiny baby, scarcely six Moons old when she was taken. We have to find her soon, whatever age and state, wherever she is.'

They were all still for a moment, taking in Maggot's aching pain and longing for her lost child, lost in so many ways.

'I'm sorry,' Bee took her hand. 'I didn't mean to say it like that.' Maggot reassured her with a brief smile, squeezed her hand then asked, 'What now?'

Muñca spoke up at once, 'There's a couple of places in this kingdom where almost every gandharva or apsara passes through at one time or another. They are hubs of communication and meeting – not exactly like a market place or a town square in the Human Realm, but somewhat similar, although most of the communication is through music or dance. I feel those places are the obvious ones to try first.'

'Let's go!' Bee was eager to get up and moving, the words of Maggot having touched her profoundly.

* * *

The kinnaris, being unfamiliar with this realm, had assumed that the comparisons with 'town square' and 'marketplace' implied buildings but structures like the King's palace, and even much more humble abodes, were quite rare. It seemed that apsaras and gandharvas preferred to dwell in sylvan surroundings – forests and glades, floral bowers and by lakes decked with lotus-blossoms and waterlilies. The first such hub was in a park-like open area with glorious bright gardens and tall mysterious trees that rustled musically in the soft winds that ran between their branches. Leaves and trunks were silver and gold and every imaginable shade of green. They could just discern in the far west the distant peaks of the Yugandhara Range that stood at the centre of the four kingdoms of this realm.

‘You kinnaris wait here, with Sergeant Gumbiya; Lady Ninka, please come with us of this realm while we make some enquiries. Your intuitive powers are very keen so you might be able to tell if any of those passing through or abiding here give any sign of lying or dissembling.’ Muñca was very much at home in this realm so they let him lead, for now.

‘Honoured friends Rhamba and Salassa, Lady Ninka, let us make haste.’

The kinnaris took the opportunity to replenish their food supplies with what pollen they could gather from the celestial flowers. As they searched and collected what they could, they naturally sampled what they accumulated along the way.

‘This is good stuff,’ Ant and Bee declared simultaneously, discovering that flowers in the higher realms were blessed with many more nutritive and restorative properties than the less exotic blossoms they were used to in the Ghositarama and in the human world generally.

It was a thankfully brief wait before the searchers returned. ‘None of us picked up any hints, unfortunately. All the gandharvas and apsaras we spoke to seemed completely unaware – no word or even a rumour of any human or kinnari babe being carried through and no hint that anyone we spoke to was hiding anything.’ Muñca looked almost mournful in his disappointment. ‘So,’ Bee was already airborne, ‘let’s try the next place.’

* * *

They arrived at a similarly configured park-like grove that was far to the northwest of their first try, this was near to the border with the Yakkha Realm. Muñca guided their arrival to an area at the edge of a thick copse of the great trees, where a large number of gaily-clad gandharvas were making their divine music together on their different instruments. It looked like a good place to begin as there were so many gathered together.

As they reached the ground, Rhamba and Salassa started to approach the assembly of musicians, prepared to interrupt their playing if need be. They had not gone two steps when Maggot called out, ‘WAIT!’ I can smell her! She’s *here*, or she’s been here recently. It’s *her*!’ She raced toward the trees and the thick undergrowth beneath them. ‘Tambaka! Tam! Are you here?’ She used all the sounds and phrases that had been the ways she spoke with her baby, the lullabies she sang, in the hope that the babe would recognize her voice. There was no sign of the child.

All of them clambered through the bushes looking for signs until Ant found a little space naturally formed between some of them. ‘I think I can smell something here too.’ Maggot reached her as quickly as she could. The fragrance of her child – so distinctive to her kinnari mother – was strongest here, there was no doubt. Someone must have brought her here, at least it seemed that way.

‘So what’s this, d’y reckon?’ Gumbiya had been having trouble making space for his bulky body, despite having shrunk down as much as he could. At the edge of the little open space, barely an arm span across, he had spotted a strange colour on

the ground. It was a thick and smooth piece of shell, its convex surface opalescent and shimmering. Maggot reached over and took it from him.

‘It’s her shell, it’s hers!’ She smiled at Gumbiya gratefully. ‘Thank you! Tam used to like holding this, like a comforting doll or a toy that most babies play with. This was her treasure, she liked to clutch it all the time. Smell it, it’s got her fragrance too.’

‘What does this mean then?’ Bee wondered. ‘Was it the apsaras or gandharvas who took her?’

Ant was then struck with a bright idea. ‘When we foiled the *amatagandha* perfume plot, and when Bee gave her evidence at Lord Indra’s court, were any gandharvas or apsaras named?’

‘No,’ said Bee, ‘I gave them the list of what I saw; the Tavatimsa devas who were the drivers of the whole thing, some nagas, some yakkhas and kumbhandas.’

‘Were there any gandharvas or apsaras at the trial? Maybe they were cronies of the ones who were caught.’

‘I really can’t remember. I was at the end of my pollen bag. I think I fainted as soon as my testimony was over.’

‘Anyway, that doesn’t really matter for now,’ Ant carried on, ‘as I’m thinking that maybe there were some gandharvas or apsaras involved in the plot and they never got caught. Perhaps there has been an agreement to punish us all by stealing Maggot’s baby to wreak revenge on us, that seems most likely to me. Since no gandharvas were known to be involved, they could move around without suspicion; they would not be in the families of those who were punished and imprisoned, so no one would be keeping an eye on them.’

‘So what does that say about where they might have taken her?’ asked Maggot.

‘Well, I’m not sure on that; I haven’t got quite that far in my thinking. However,’ Ant was on a roll now, ‘perhaps this was some kind of meeting point that they used and Tambaka was handed over to some others. We’re very near the border of yakkha country,’ she risked a quick glance at Gumby, ‘and if they wanted to hide her away securely, the yakkha community is much more known for its muscle-power and weaponry than the apsaras and gandharvas – no offense meant,’ she glanced at Rhamba, Salassa and Muñca. ‘I still think we should search some more here and ask as many of the folk as we can but I’ve got a strong suspicion that your baby’s been hidden amongst the yakkhas.’

Maggot heard this with a measure of dread as it sounded plausible if not highly likely. Before they made any more moves, though, she wanted to double check.

‘Ninka, your senses are much more refined than the rest of us. This bush here is the one where the scent is strongest, and here is the piece of shell – can you give me your impression of these? I want to find Tam so badly I don’t fully trust my own senses.’

Ninka took the shell fragment, which was quite thick, and held it up to her nose, inhaling deeply. She said nothing at first and then went to the lower branches of the bush Maggot indicated, bringing the leafy fronds close and sniffing several times. She was silent for a while, looking at Maggot and Ant and around the group – their faces some anxious, some hopeful. She eventually nodded her head, saying, 'It's her. There's no doubt about it.'

* * *

The Royal Progress lasted less than half a Moon and Savatthi was soon reached. It felt like they had been travelling on a golden road, out of the hills. Vasabha's inner world was one of great excitement and enjoyment mingled with intense concentration and mindfulness of the vast array of new things she had to adapt to. She had certainly had had 'the essentials' drilled into her – and she was confident with what she had learned – but every day brought surprises, the first of which had been how to sit in a howdah on elephant-back without lurching from side to side like a rag-doll shaken by an angry child. Still, she had made the whole journey, with Kesini at her side providing quiet prompts, and it had all gone off without an error, as far as she was aware.

Before the wedding, which was due to take place only seven days hence, she was formally introduced to Queen Mallika who was genuinely warm towards her; she in turn brought her only daughter, the Princess Vajiri, forward to meet her.

'This is my daughter Vajiri; she is about the same age as you, what, sixteen Rains? I hope the two of you will become good friends. It can be lonely living in a palace, so to have trustworthy and supportive companions is important.'

Vasabha got the sense that the Queen was speaking of her own experience when she had been brought from the garland-makers shop to marry King Pasenadi, some seventeen Rains previously. 'You are too kind, Your Serene Highness. I'm sure that Princess Vajiri and I will delight in getting to know each other – you are very thoughtful.'

Vajiri was indeed the same age and, it had to be admitted by Vasabha, that the Princess possessed a natural beauty far more refined than hers. She was a doe-eyed, golden-skinned, graceful girl who looked like she had stepped out of an ancient epic – like one of the ones Vasabha had been memorizing, such as Sita, the perfect wife of Rama, or Parvati, the powerful wife of Lord Shiva.

It was a surprise and a delight, once the formalities were over, that she beckoned Vasabha, and Kesini too, to come and sit with her in a small nook that overlooked the gardens. As if to belie her goddess-like beauty, Vajiri turned out to be an easy-going, artless person whose main concern at present was figuring out how *not* to be married off and sent away from her home.

'I'm not the slightest bit interested in marriage, despite the *pressure*' and on the word she flared her eyes for dramatic effect, 'that is being applied to me. I'd much rather stay home and go to the Jetavana and the nuns' monastery – the

Visakharama – and the Eastern Park Monastery with my mother, and occasionally my father. Who knows how long I'll be able to get away with it?'

As she heard Princess Vajiri speaking, and recollected how sincerely friendly Queen Mallika had been – and bearing in mind how good Vasabha was at seeing people's bluffs and pretences – she reflected:– This is looking easier than I thought; these two women, who could easily make my life into a hell realm, seem as sweet as warm ghee mixed with honey. I like it – this whole thing might really work!

* * *

The seven days passed and the grand occasion of the wedding arrived. King Pasenadi had caused the whole city of Savatthi to be decorated and, during the ceremony, he placed Vasabha upon a carefully arranged pile of treasure which he gifted to her and, with the ceremonial sprinkling of lustral waters, he made her his Queen, to rank alongside Queen Mallika. Vasabha was already dear to the King, and beloved.

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CHAPTER 10:

PRINCE JETA'S GROVE



fter the wedding ceremonies at the Palace, with all the grandeur of the court around her, Vasabha was surprised to hear that they would go to the Jetavana for a smaller, follow-up ceremony as well. The actual wedding was conducted by brahmin priests since the monks and nuns were prohibited from performing marriages by their Rule.

This other ceremony was a blessing by the Sangha to wish them well as a couple and to invoke as many benevolent forces as possible – from all around the *cakkavala*, the universal system – and to encourage the kindly, noble, unselfish aspects of the heart within to be strengthened and to bless their union as well. It was going to be another test of her adaptability and resourcefulness as this was a further item that had not made it on to the list of ‘essentials’.

‘I’m so glad you’re going to meet the Buddha, Miss,’ Kesini was quite excited. ‘I had the chance to go to his monastery in Kosambi a few times, with Gavinna who I looked after. She was a concubine of King Udena’s grandfather and had been put out to pasture long ago. She was very old and completely blind but she saw everything – if you know what I mean. She could tell exactly what was going on in people’s minds just by the sound and feel of their walk or the tone of their voice. She had visions too that she would tell me about sometimes.’

‘Anyway, when we had the opportunity, and when the Master was in the King’s good books, we’d go to listen to his talks. It was wonderful.’

‘How would the Buddha not be in the King’s favour?’ Vasabha took care to use her posh voice at all times, even when it was apparently just her and Kesini in her chambers. You never knew when someone might be eavesdropping or just coming up to a doorway, many of which were only equipped with a curtain rather than a wooden door.

‘Uhh! King Udena blew hot and cold all the time. You never could keep track of his moods. One Moon we’re all to go with him, in full pomp and with armloads of offerings, to pay respects to the Master and listen to his teaching, then two Moons later he’s lost faith again and he’s banned any of the court from going near the Ghositarama. It was frustrating but, we had a secret weapon,’ Kesini gave her a cheeky side-glance.

‘What was that?’

‘There was a slave woman who was a maid for Queen Samavati. She had an incredible memory so – being a slave – she “did not count” as part of the court that was forbidden to go. She’d attend the Master’s teachings then come back to the seraglio and repeat it all. Most of the womenfolk in the palace would gather for these

talks by Khujjuttara, the slave. That's one *very* rare instance of a slave having an advantage over a queen, eh?!

Kesini had come from quite a high-ranking family in Kosambi but, like Lady Jalini, was not at all bothered by issues of rank and birth; this had been another quality to her credit when Prince Mahanama had been pondering who to send with Vasabha.

'So, what do I need to know about this blessing ceremony?' Vasabha asked.

'Not much, thankfully,' Kesini replied, fishing through Vasabha's supply of saris, sarongs and wraps. 'The dress code for a monastery, and for a do like this, is smart, modest, top all covered up, a little bit of jewellery... well, actually, since you and the King are being blessed, the jewellery should be a little more than what the other court ladies and Queen Mallika are wearing but not by much. We should go for "small but expensive" for this.'

Vasabha was deeply grateful for these cues. 'Kesini, you are a *great* friend! I'd never be able to...' she caught herself about to talk about pretending, '... adapt to the customs of Kosala without you.'

* * *

The royal party made their way out of the city in the mid-morning. Carts and wagons bearing the food offerings to the Buddha and the Sangha had gone out earlier in the day for, although this event was going to be a lot smaller than the splendid affair of the wedding – with a thousand nobles gathered from Kosala, Maghada, Kasi, Malla, Videha and Vajji, as well as rows of pavilioned tents for several thousand citizens – there would still be many mouths to feed on this day.

A modest marquee, draped with royal colours and decked with flowers, had been set up at one side for the royal couple and the close family to dine in. Before they sat down though, with Kesini prompting from one side and Princess Vajiri from the other, they led Vasabha into the sala with King Pasenadi and Queen Mallika; they all then offered rice into the alms-bowls of the Buddha and the line of monks, seated at the front of the low platform alongside the Master.

On her first sight of the Buddha, Vasabha felt a flush of powerful emotions. She had never had the chance to see him before since, for many years, the Master had not taken the opportunity to visit his ancestral home, Kapilavatthu.

Her thoughts were stilled and she felt a warm glow in her heart welling up and then filling her eyes and head as well. The air seemed filled with a golden lustre and a loud ringing, a roaring sea of silvery sound, brimmed in her hearing. Yet, mingled with these joyous rapturous feelings, there was a jarring discord of intimidation and resentment:– He's going to see right through me and know I'm a fake. I'm a slave girl, *what* am I doing here?! How could they treat me like this? Make me into some kind of performing animal who has to do her tricks well or risk being tortured to death?! I might be a slave but I'm human too.

The thoughts came flooding through after the brief glowing silence ended. Still, the expression on the Master's gentle face remained warm and open as he looked towards her. There was no scowl in that moment of contact when their eyes met, besides, the burst of anxiety and ill-feeling were soon overwhelmed with the joy-filled brightness once again.

After the meal-offering was over, and all the bhikkhus and novices had washed their alms-bowls, they returned to the sala and King Pasenadi and now Queen Vasabha came to the front, to sit on a pair of brocaded cushions before and below the Buddha. Three or four rows of monks were seated beside and behind the Master. All Vasabha had to do was sit demurely, with eyes downcast and hands in *añjali*, while the verses of blessing and recollection were recited by the Sangha.

The warm flow sustained itself within her throughout the ceremony and, thankfully for her, the agitated and fretful concerns did not return. She allowed herself, in fact, to *be* blessed. The idea of fakeness fell away at the unexpected realization that, in some ways, everyone is pretending – playing at roles that are not much more than a puppet show:– Yet we are all human, and we can wish each other well, and I can let their kind hearts genuinely bless me. Why not? I will need all the help I can get. Apart from the pretences and games people play there *is* goodness, and that is something real.

Once the ceremony was over, and the Buddha had departed to the seclusion of the Gandha-kuti – the 'fragrant chamber' as it was known since it had an exquisite natural aroma – there was a general movement of people getting up and preparing to take leave and go home. Vasabha was with the King but Kesini seemed to be waving discreetly at one of the monks, trying to catch his attention. After a moment the tall, dark-skinned monk, who had been sitting in one of the middle rows, came over.

'Is that you, Kesini? I haven't seen you since the funeral of our dear Mistress Gavinna. We're both getting older, eh?' Krishna cheerfully greeted her, but was not able to restrain his glance at her missing hand.

Smiling equally broadly, Kesini held up her stumped forearm, 'Yes, still gone, but I'm so used to it by now I hardly notice.' She was glad to see an old acquaintance from Kosambi but she had to be going. 'I'm a maid for the new queen so I'd better scoot and do my duty, otherwise I'll get the sack and that would definitely ruin my day. So, you're still a monk and I suppose you live here... oops. I'm starting a conversation again!' She grinned at her own over-keenness. 'Farewell, I think we'll be here often.'

* * *

Vasabha settled into a rhythm of royal visits to Prince Jeta's Grove. On some occasions it was a grand affair, when she accompanied King Pasenadi, sometimes it was just the court women who made the excursion together: Queen Mallika – who took any opportunity she could to visit the Master and receive his advice – Princess

Vajiri, and herself. When it was just the group of women there was a lesser degree of formality and often the opportunity to meet with other members of the Sangha.

There were only monks and male novices living at the Jetavana as the nuns had their own residence at the Visakharama, up against the outer walls of Savatthi. If any of the royals wanted to talk with one of the monks, they would request the opportunity and, after the meal-offering was over, they would meet in the sala, or on some mats spread in the shade of the trees around the central area.

Kesini was keen to see Krishna and to catch up on the many years since their time in Kosambi. It had been sixteen or seventeen Rains since they had seen each other and they were now both in their mid-thirties. Queen Mallika and Princess Vajiri were taking the opportunity to ask some questions of Sariputta and, since Kesini knew he often gave very extensive analytical responses, she suggested to Queen Vasabha that she might introduce Her Serene Highness to her old acquaintance from Kosambi, who had also known her beloved Gavinna, albeit briefly.

Vasabha greatly appreciated these informal opportunities, one reason being that it gave her the chance to mingle with a wider variety of folks than was possible at the Palace. There the protocols and expectations were somewhat rigid but here in the Jetavana, and even more so when they went to see the nuns at the Visakharama, there was a refreshing social levelling. The teachings of the Master on the irrelevance of caste and rank were made flesh – people were polite to the royals and gave them a front seat, but in essence, once inside the monastery gates, they were all just *upasikas* and *upasakas* – women and men lay disciples – no less, no more.

This meant that, even though Vasabha diligently maintained her *façade*, she also got to spend time around people from the poorer strata of society, sudras and candalas as well as merchants, in whose company she felt more natural ease.

When Kesini introduced her to Krishna, at first she assumed that this good-looking dark-skinned bhikkhu must be one who had come from a low-caste background as the brahmins and warrior-nobles tended to be fairer skinned and the sudras, candalas and matangas were often dark. She was as surprised as most people then when he spoke and showed that he had a highly educated accent.

Krishna was very used to this dynamic and had trimmed his standard explanation down to, 'I'm darker than most from the merchant class.'

Kesini, despite being 'just' the maid and doing her best to be restrained, soon chimed into the conversation, asking about Krishna's doings of the last many years. He did his best to give her the gist of it, summarizing his time in Kitagiri as 'enjoyable' but that he realized it would be good to spend some more time close to the Master after so many Rains away.

'You know who's here in Savatthi now? He asked Kesini, expecting her not to be aware of it.

'Who?'

'Khujjuttara – the maid of Queen Samavati – she's quite old now but still as sharp as a tack.'

‘Really!’ Kesini was excited to hear this welcome news. ‘Ma’am,’ she turned to Queen Vasabha, ‘you remember me mentioning her to you. She’ll be a great friend for you I’m sure, once you get to meet her. She was always at Queen Samavati’s side, except when the fire happened,’ she held up her missing hand by way of illustration. ‘She was so cut up about that but she’s a wise woman, so she has not harboured any grudges. She got liberated from her slavery, didn’t she?’

‘That’s right,’ Krishna replied, ‘she was manumitted by King Udena after Queen Samavati died, in gratitude for her service. And he gave her a royal pension of two hundred and fifty gold *kahapanas* every year. She moved to Savatthi to spend more time close to the Master, like me; she’s white-haired and still has her infirmities – her back has not improved – but she’s very comfortably situated. She’s got a small house outside the Jetavana gates. Perhaps you noticed it? She’s highly respected, by the monastics as well as the lay community. She’s known as one of the most learned of the disciples and is humble and straightforward with everyone.’

Vasabha did her best not to visibly light up at the news of a former slave rising so high, and validly too, in the eyes of society. She was thrilled to hear more about this extraordinary person but she channelled her enthusiasm into the remark, delivered as naturally and casually as possible, ‘Prince Mahanama, of Kapilavatthu, does the same thing from time to time. Shortly before I left Sakya he,’ and now she had to fish the new word out of her recent memory, ‘manumitted a slave, Nagamunda, and her whole family, out of gratitude for her service to the state.’ She was confident there was no shred of a hint that this was her own mother. ‘He said to her, ‘You are now a free woman. Go with your children and family on any path you choose.’ And he gave her a pension too though nothing so grand as that Khujjuttara received from King Udena.’

‘Please send word, if you can,’ said Krishna, ‘when you next plan to visit, Ma’am. I will then alert Khujjuttara and she can be introduced to you.’

‘It’s important to have good Dharma friends. They can help us a lot, inestimably really, as I’ve found over time. Here in the Jetavana Ananda has been the best of friends and advisors to me. In Kitagiri, for the first little while at least, a monk called Surama was a wise guide and mentor for me. When I was growing up in Ujjeni, and at the Ghositarama in Kosambi, there was a monk, not quite of this tradition, who was the most wonderful teacher and companion. Anyway, I’ll be sure to let Khujjuttara know and I suspect she’ll be very happy to see Kesini again as well.’

* * *

Ninka kept getting messages she did not want to receive. Even though time passed much more slowly in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Devas, she had been away for long enough for Prince Malabhari to be getting disgruntled. According to the customs and mores of the Tavatimsa devas, it was considered vulgar and tawdry to be ‘slumming it’ in the lower realms. Ninka had been given the permission of his

Divine Highness to come and help her companions from the past, but now he was lobbying her vigorously to return to her home:– She was needed!

She did not require a cintamani talking stone to communicate as it was easily done mind-to-mind, across realms, for the devas of the Tavatimsa. Without responding she closed his message out, pushing it into an internal closet, ‘Not now. Not yet.’

By this time they had decided to act on Ant’s idea of moving to the Realm of Yakkhas. Gumbiya was put into the lead on this as it was his home territory.

‘No need t’ go talk to the King. ‘E’s bound to be off fighting somewhere and ‘e would be surprised we’d gone to the trouble of askin’ if we did.’

This was good news to the friends so they set about combing the landscape and approaching the denizens, following Gumbiya’s lead. This land was a stark contrast to the Gandharva Realm. Looming castles and fortified city-walls abounded. The yakkhas they saw, on the ground and in the air, were often huge, making even the sturdy Gumbiya look slight in comparison. He had expanded to full height for this part of the search but still some of the yakkhas he sought out for information towered over him.

Most of the males were battle-clad, bristling with gold-chased armour and weaponry; the yakkhinis meanwhile were more lightly dressed but universally, it seemed, had a couple of golden-bossed knives in their belts, a throwing axe or two, and were full-fleshed and sturdily built, if not muscle-bound.

Gumbiya was plainly well-known and well-respected. That he had been personally honoured by Lord Indra, ruler of the Tavatimsa Heaven, and was a friend and companion of General Punnaka, opened doors for them but every avenue they tried proved fruitless. The General called in his spymaster, a yakkha of considerable intelligence and shape-shifting abilities, and grilled him on any rumours or hints of a half-kinnari half-human babe, either in transit or in a remote refuge in the Yugandhara Mountains or similar hiding place – nothing.

The General was one who was highly trustworthy and knowledgeable, he was not hopeful of any leads appearing in the yakkha community, in addition he was the nephew of King Vessavana, Lord of Yakkhas, and had been on the raid they had carried out together against the asuras.

‘You should talk to my wife, Princess Irandati, she is the sister of Queen Samuddaja, wife of King Virupakkha, Lord of Nagas himself.’

Gumbiya looked to his companions, Ninka, Rhamba and Salassa, Muñca, and the three kinnaris, and was about to ask, ‘What d’ y’ fink?’ Before he could speak Ninka said loudly, ‘We should go on! Let’s try the Naga Realm.’

Nods and murmurs confirmed this all round. General Punnaka called Princess Irandati over to confer, and the whole group took off straight away. Once they were settled in the naga capital Bhogavati, which was somehow both under Lake Anotatta in the Himalayas and below the slopes of the Western face of the Yugandhara Mountains, they met up again with their old friend Queen Samuddaja.

The story of their search was quickly recounted by Bee. When the Queen asked, 'Isss Krishna not helping with the sssearch? He isss the father, isss he not?' An awkward silence hovered for a moment, then Maggot put it simply. 'We have gone our separate ways,' and left it at that.

Samuddaja had known Krishna since he was a boy, Amba and Tamba too. She knew his character and saw that it was not going to be wise to press the question of what had happened.

Irاندati and Samuddaja went into a huddle and conversed urgently in their naga tongue – to outsiders this sounded only like a flow of hisses accompanied by breaths and subtle movements of the head.

'Dear friendsss,' Samuddaja began, 'sssince you do not inhabit thisss realm, any of you, and sssince sso many nagasss live in the watersss, impassable and unwelcoming to mossst of you, I sssuggessst that we nagassss look for you. Ssstay here and resst, eat, for I can sssee that you are all drained and weary from your laboursss.'

The first impulse of Maggot and her kinnari friends, and the others, was to say, 'No, we'll go too, somehow,' but reason caught up with them. How would they survive?

As this realization sank in, the wisdom of Samuddaja's advice became clear and they all agreed. It hit them then how right she was about their exhaustion too:– When had they last rested or eaten properly since they escaped from the Underworld?

* * *

Rhamba and Salassa, sister and brother apsaras, managed still to look elegant and to breathe sonorously as they slept. Gumbiya – fully exhausted – had reverted to his natural size in sleep, double the height of Bee, she was nevertheless contentedly curled in his right armpit with Maggot on her other side, still holding her hand in her slumbers.

On the far side of the pile of cushions, strewn across the green and gold chamber, with its spirally inlaid pillars, glittering with gems in the lamplight, Ant and Ninka were side by side, exhausted too, at least Ant was, but still muttering dozy words, full of endearments and warm secrets.

Irاندati and Samuddaja had asked to borrow the precious shell fragment, in order to fully catch the scent. 'Excussse me,' Irاندati said, then flickered a surprisingly forked tongue across the inner and outer surfaces; Samuddaja did the same. 'We have nosssesssss but thissss issss how we sssmell thingsss bessst,' she explained. Then they had taken off, in dragon-serpent form, to search their community and the Naga Realm for information.

Even Gumbiya's heroic snoring had not been sufficient to interrupt the rest of the sleeping seekers. They were all out, except for Ninka – who needed little sleep

generally. The two naga sisters had returned by the time they all awakened. Their search too had been in vain.

Ninka had had a sleepless night not just because of the difference of constitutions but also because of a terrible truth she had been hiding. She had known from the moment they found Tambaka's scent, and the shell fragment, that those clues had been planted there. Her deva senses discerned immediately that the group were duped by a false trail. However, being so desperate to be with Ant and so afraid she'd be called away to the Tavatimsa Heaven and thus separated from Ant for what would be long years for the kinnari, even if it was but a short time for Ninka to be feasting with her deva companions and attending to Prince Malabhari:— She had not spoken up then, and how could she say anything now? It was too shameful to admit she had known it was false all along. She was in terrible doubt as to what she should do; make a confession and be hated by everyone, including Ant; or not admit anything and carry on with this fruitless wild goose chase?

Round and round it went.

She was on the brink of breakdown and utter despair when another urgent message came from Prince Malabhari, in the Nandana Grove of the Tavatimsa Heaven. As a weird kind of relief from her dilemma, without thinking it through further, she blurted out, 'I have to go – back to the Tavatimsa, I've been putting it off but it's not possible to stay any longer. I *have* to go!'

'Wha', Ant was hardly awake yet. 'How can you...?' Ninka looked at her pleadingly and, with one last hug, she vanished from the Naga Realm and reappeared in the Nandana Grove.

* * *

Everyone was shocked; at the most they had seen that the beautiful, radiant Ninka was a little less glowing than usual. To Ant, all she had confided was that, 'That annoying Prince, Malabhari, he won't stop calling for me. It's really irritating.' She had had no idea that she and Ninka would soon be separated, and for who knew how long?

Ninka was good at making excuses so they been able to be together often but a few days in the Heaven of the Thirty Three was a *long* time in the lower reaches – a single night and day in the Tavatimsa Heaven was a hundred years in the human realm. So just part of a morning away from Tavatimsa had given her twenty years with Ant.

'So, what do we do now?' Bee was up and wide awake. 'We had a supper last night so we don't need breakfast,' Gumbiya's stomach, with eerily good timing, rumbled in disagreement as she said this, 'but which direction do we go from here? We can't risk the Realm of the Kumbhandas and we're pretty sure that Tam's not there, we could go to the Human Realm but we know she was brought through *here* so there doesn't seem much point in that.'

Muñca cleared his throat. 'This might seem a very long shot but, if we made a brief visit to the Tusita Heaven, I believe I could secure us an interview with Lord Maitreya, the future Buddha. We would need to keep it brief but, if we were properly prepared, he is almost certain to be able to give us unequivocally clear information on the baby's whereabouts. He is a Bodhisattva, now awaiting his final birth in the Human Realm, and his principal quality is kindness; that's what his name means.'

'How will we all get there? I mean, the Tusita is way up in the heights,' Bee was still to be convinced.

'I have some skill in these areas and I think I can do it – carry all of us there, at least for a brief visit. We have to do everything we possibly can, we've got to try, haven't we Miss Jambu?'

'Let's do it,' Maggot replied. 'At least this will be decisive,' she looked around the group, her eyes etched with both determination and despair. 'We will find her, whatever it takes.'

==*==

CHAPTER 11:

‘TOGETHER FOREVER’



‘Why are you doing all this for us?’ Maggot asked Muñca before he made his preparations to get them all to the Tusita Heaven, ‘The Abode of the Contented’. Her grief-torn concerns about Tambaka had been punctuated more and more by this question over the last hours. ‘You are giving us all this time and attention, you’ve risked your own safety in the Underworld, and now perhaps the wrath of the kidnappers if you help us find my daughter – what makes this so important to you?’

‘It’s simple, really, I didn’t spell it out before but the main reason I hold you and your friends in such high esteem is on account of the way you helped me and my dear ones. As you might be aware, musicians are often fond of their drugs – not just in the Human Realm and amongst the Earth Spirits but amongst the gandharvas too – and when they have made what they feel is their finest music under the influence, it makes it even harder to give up than an ordinary addiction,’ Muñca looked pained as he spoke of this, as if a cataract of bad memories were washing through him.

‘A number of my family members got thoroughly hooked on *amatagandha* and their lives have been sad and painful since. Some have died, some have almost wasted away altogether. This is also why I think that Miss Sugandha, your friend Ant’s, supposition that some gandharvas might be involved in the abduction of your daughter is correct. It’s a grim thought to entertain, but they might be helping not just for spite and vengeance but also to get their hands on whatever diminishing supplies of the perfume might remain.’

Muñca seemed to be enduring this heart-breaking situation well and his story touched Maggot, and the others who were listening in. He paused and said, ‘So that’s the sad story but it’s what motivates me to help and to risk my comfort and safety.’

Maggot’s sombre mood was lifted a little by this impressive display of courage and unselfishness. For a while she brightened up and her countenance matched the iridescent pink and rose-adorned hues of her robes.

* * *

As they tidied their things and bid their farewells to Samuddaja and Irandati, and the other nagas of the household, Bee took a moment to check in on Ant, now alone after Ninka’s sudden departure. Ant was often very quiet, and kept her moods to herself but Bee knew that she felt things very strongly.

‘How are you doing?’

‘Alright,’ Ant replied, a little too quietly. Bee gave her a half-sideways look and squeezed her hand. ‘Actually, not good at all. I should be prepared for separation but, when Ninka goes back to the Tavatimsa, I never know if it’s going to be for a few days or a whole sun-turning, or twenty, or more. The situation of Maggot and Tam – how she was just going for a visit to her family for an evening and then never seeing her baby again, I mean *maybe* never – I feel it can be the same way for us. I might never see Ninka again.

‘I know that the Master has said that, if a couple want to stay together in this life and be in each other’s company in future lives they must have the same faith, virtue, generosity and wisdom – and I know that Nink and I are super-compatible in that way but you never know.

‘We’ve also taken very seriously the advice on “reappearance through aspiration” that the Master has referred to from time to time. If you’ve got enough of those four qualities plus ‘learning’ as well, and if you fix your mind on reappearing after this life is over on, say, the Realm of the Earth Spirits or the Tavatimsa Heaven or wherever, and you establish that thought and develop it, then those aspirations will lead to you being born there. That’s how it works. So, if we do things right we will be able to be together forever.’

Bee did not want to burst her bubble but she couldn’t resist saying, ‘Didn’t the Master also stress the point that, “This is for one who is virtuous, not for one who is naughty” – or something like that – so you’d better both be on your best behaviour,’ she was half-joking since, as a deva from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, Ninka was a shining example of purity and gracious behaviour, and Ant was probably the most quiet and modest of the three kinnari companions.

‘Yes, we know that!’ Ant managed to smile a little. ‘The Master said, “The heart’s wish of one who is virtuous succeeds because of their purity,” I think we can manage that.’

As they were speaking Muñca had taken himself to one side of the broad open chamber where they had all been staying. He sat himself on a flat cushion, framed by one of the wide windows that looked onto the lakes below, and through the sheen of the waters of Lake Anotatta which they seemed to be under at the same time – it was a confusing mixture of dimensions to outsiders but quite familiar to the nagas.

All was prepared now for them to depart for the Tusita Heaven. Muñca became absorbed in his meditation while the three kinnaris sat shoulder to shoulder watching him – the rosy colours of Maggot in the centre, flanked by the magenta-purples of Bee to her left and the *kanavera* reds of Ant to her right. Gumbiya held Bee’s hand on one side and the upper arm of Muñca with the other. Rhamba held Ant’s hand on her left and Salassa’s on her right; Salassa held on tight to Muñca’s upper arm, opposite Gumbiya. The circle was now ready. Muñca’s concentration deepened.

* * *

A year had passed since the royal wedding and, to the universal joy of Kosala, Queen Vasabha had given birth to a healthy son. As a queen she seemed to be expected to hand over most if not all nursing and caring duties to Kesini and the other maids, wet-nurses and helpers, but she contrived to spend as much time as she could with her child, and to still go along with the court's expectations. She loved to hold her boy and breathe in the sweet mysterious, unnameable scent of his hair, his skin – everything!

She was used to babies being passed around, being cared for by older sisters and an occasional aunt, but to have to let him out of her sight so much was another test she had not prepared for. She reflected:– It's strange but still, how can any girl *really* prepare for how it's going to be to have her first baby? It's a test for all of us.

It was a custom among the Kosalans for the eldest female member of the royal line to choose the name for the new heir to the throne. On the naming day the King sent a message to his grandmother, saying, 'A son has been born to Queen Vasabha, daughter of the Sakyan Prince; what shall his name be?'

The courtier who was charged with this message was, unfortunately, slightly deaf. He went and told the King's grandmother, passing on the message correctly, but when she replied he misheard her. She said, 'Even when Vasabha had not borne a son she was more dear to the King than all the world; now she will be his utter darling.' The courtier misheard the word 'darling' that is to say '*vallabha*' in the Kosalan dialect, so what he *thought* she said was, 'Vidudabha'. So, back he went to the King and said, 'Her Serene Highness, the King's Grandmother, has said his name is to be Vidudabha.'

The King, never having heard this name before, presumed, 'This must be some ancient family tradition,' and chose not to argue with his esteemed grandparent, so he named his son Vidudabha.

* * *

The fact that the little boy was away from her so much gave Vasabha a lot of time to reflect on her situation. When she had been kept going non-stop with kitchen work and the duties she had in Kapilavatthu, she had never had much time to stop and think. There was never a pause in the round of activities in daylight and the night hours had little light available for the slaves, so these were usually passed in exhausted sleep, if not in caring for one or two of the younger brothers and sisters who had the gripes or were just starving hungry.

Things were different here. Some days she would have the entire afternoon to herself – the King being taken up with some business, Vidhu being carried round the gardens by his nurse and a page boy with a sunshade – these were the first days of her life in which she had experienced such open hours.

She was now well-settled and the ruse she was pulling on everyone was slipped on daily like a comfortable pair of shoes, or some familiar gloves, it was an easy fit now. She reflected:– What am I *really* doing here? And what is its value? I am

serving an important role in the Kingdom of Kosala which is one of the great powers of Jambudvipa. If I continue to play my part convincingly all will be well but it's not just about doing a good job of acting... that's one small part of it... the results of it will be good for me and for everyone else too... it's an act of service but one which is sadly based on a lie... but if I do it right the lying part becomes insignificant. What the biggest thing is – which is hard to get my head around – is that my actual son, my baby, will be the head-anointed, warrior noble, King of Kosala. That is not just about playing a role... that's history... that's forever... that's *real*. My actual child – me the slave from the kitchen – *my* child will be a ruler, and *his* children, and theirs too... Wherever I've come from, I'm now a part of a big story so it's my responsibility, for everyone's sake, to do this right... my life, my child, what I do, what I say... it's all significant now... these are real swords and arrows, as the lads say, not blunted ones for practice.

She stared at her image in a polished bronze mirror, now speaking to her new self, 'When I was little I never got the chance to dress up and play with my sisters and the other girls and boys, we had none of all that, being marked as slaves. We didn't have any spare clothes to pretend to be someone else in and the boys would be beaten if they picked up a stick and pretended it was a sword. Now I've got all this finery to muck around with, I realize I do get a thrill from the costumes and the sparkles, from ordering people around – I can get giddy over all of that, it's fun! So, if I am really going to make a go of this I need to be wary... Don't get puffed up and proud like one of those ghastly... what d' they call 'em... pompous nobles. Don't get drunk on it, don't believe the story, stay alert and we'll be alright... Some of the maids, when they want to flatter me, say I light up the dark, as if my skin was something special... Don't make nuthin' of it... *Anything* of it...', she corrected herself, even in her solitary monologue.

'Come to think of it, how the Buddha talks about "heedfulness" all the time, his way of levelling everything, well at least as much as possible – I like that. That's a great thing for everyone I reckon... How he's happy for an ex-slave like Khujjuttara to hold such a high position in his group – the fact that she's dark-skinned and has a crooked back, as well as starting out a slave, that all counts for nothing as far as he's concerned. It's all to do with good qualities – how you *are*, that's all that matters to 'im, to *him*, the Master,' she corrected herself again.

'The King and Queen, the other Queen, they all love what he does, what he stands for, without there being any danger of anyone finding fault with his choices, so that's something I can do... Help support those levelling ideas somehow, so that there's less, what's it called... *prejudice*... and less rigid ideas about the castes... so... How can I, as a queen, help with that?

* * *

Vasabha had finally met Khujjuttara on an outing to the Jetavana with the King and many of the court. Kesini had sent word to Krishna about the impending

visit so he, in turn, had made sure that Khujjuttara was informed. This way she could be introduced to the young new queen.

The royals made offerings to the Buddha and the Sangha, as they usually did, in the form of alms-food and other gifts, then, after the meal was over, the King and the Queens, along with Princess Vajiri and the assembly of palace officials, and many other lay people who happened to be visiting that day, gathered around the Master and requested a Dharma talk.

Vasabha was doubly pleased that he focused not just on the blessings of generosity and virtue (which was an uncomfortable point for her, especially the Fourth Precept: 'I undertake the Precept to refrain from lying') but he also spoke at length about the nature of 'a true brahmin'. He took the usual caste designation and opened up the meaning to refer, instead of to birth and bloodlines and all that puppet-show, to the purity of heart. The words struck her deeply:

*'One who meditates in seclusion,
Free of the stain of defiling conduct and
Who has done their duty well,
One who has cleansed the heart of
Corruptions and has reached the highest goal;
Such a one I call a real brahmin.'*

Vasabha's feelings of inspiration and understanding of the principle of this teaching were tempered by the truth she concealed about her own life, but it was enough for her, for now, to park the disquiet and regret about the deception, the reflection that, 'I'll get back to that later,' was as much as she could resolve on for now.

Once the formal talk was finished the Buddha took his leave and Ananda accompanied him back to the Gandha-kuti. Krishna, who had been sitting close to Ananda on the low platform, remained behind and indicated to Kesini to come up to the front of the hall for a moment.

'Khujjuttara's here, just over by that pillar, would this be a good moment for Queen Vasabha to meet her?'

'I'll check with their Majesties, but I think this'd be ideal. The King always enjoys her quick-witted wisdom. Hang on a moment.' Kesini swiftly ducked away, approaching first Queen Mallika and Queen Vasabha, then the King, who agreed they could tarry for a while to spend some time with the sagely elder.

As they had all approved, Kesini brought her aged friend over to where the royal party was now seated. King Pasenadi, Queen Mallika and Queen Vasabha in turn, had made it their habit to sit at floor level whenever in the monastery, whether the Master was present or not. Khujjuttara, and her companion, Matanga, came over and paid respects to the King and to the other royals.

'No need for that here!' Pasenadi was bluff and cheery in his greeting. 'I'm glad and honoured to see you again.' Vasabha took note of his words and his

expression – he was being quite sincere and this wasn't just some empty politeness out of form – this King was truly honoured to be meeting a former slave-woman. This was a wonder to her eyes.

After the King had spoken to her for a little while, forgetting that the point of this had been to introduce Khujjuttara to Queen Vasabha, the Princess chimed in, 'Father, can we let Queen Vasabha get to know Khujjuttara? She's never met her before.'

'Of course, I'm getting ever more heedless as I age. Vasabha, here is the wisest of women in the Master's community of lay disciples. Any Dharma questions you might have, if you wish to know about any teaching the Master has ever given, she's the one to ask. Her recall is almost as flawless as that of Ananda – if you don't mind me saying so. Please, take some time to talk together. I'll walk for a while around the Grove, a bit of exercise will do me good.' He did not add, 'After having eaten too much, *again*, even when sharing food at the monastery.'

Vasabha was hyper-vigilant in her meeting with Khujjuttara and her young helper Matanga. Inside she was excited and her heart leaped at the delight of meeting someone from exactly her background and who was so at ease, and so respected by the King and Queen, as well as by Vajiri, for her wisdom and spiritual qualities. This was something totally new and inspiring to her so she definitely should not get carried away or over-enthusiastic in her voice or in her eyes. 'Don't light up and grin like a child getting a lump of palm-sugar!' She steadied herself:– Cool, demure and cool; relax the hands, shoulders; be *very* cool.

The time flew by. She had delighted in Khujjuttara's company, and her helper was a sweet person too. Now that she was quite old, white-haired and with her back so distorted, getting about for Khujjuttara was much harder, so Matanga had become her constant aide as well as a friend to her. She helped Khujjuttara to her feet, which was now a bit of a process, and they took their leave once the King and his group of courtiers returned from their stroll among the tall trees of the Jetavana.

Vasabha saw how he smiled at the sight of his two queens, and his daughter, sitting and chatting freely with an ex-slave and a candala woman. There was, again, not a shred of disapproval or discomfort in his manner but a pure and simple sympathetic joy – a delight in the happiness and good fortune of others. She was also impressed by how fully at ease Khujjuttara and Matanga were in such company, and how they wore their names – meaning 'bent back' and 'bottom of the heap' – with such breezy comfort. They were not ashamed or humiliated in the slightest by being known by what probably started out as insults. These were fine and remarkable people.

* * *

To the west of the Nandana Grove the jewelled walls of the city of Lord Indra, Masakkasara, with its multitude of gateways and golden turrets, filled the view. The air was scented with the fragrances so familiar, yet now so unwanted by Ninka. She

turned her back on the glittering city and entered the grove, crossing the Lotus Lake and following her intuition of where Prince Malabhari was waiting for her. This was not difficult as the sounds of rich and rhythmic music emanated from a glade that was well known to her as the Prince's favourite. Ninka wasted no time, now that she was here, in hurrying to the Prince's side. She was supposed to be betrothed to him but she could see that she was serving more as an exquisite embellishment of his merry-making, a trophy of his splendour and power, than one who was truly loved by him.

The crowd of accharas, the nymphs with dove-like feet, were absorbed in their musical creations. There were Gitava and Hasaccanari playing vinas, Sadhu was on the flute, the drummers on their variously sized instruments were Mahatumudi, Tapanaggi, Panggi, Nanda and Yama. The wall of sound was entrancing, compelling, intoxicating and Ninka began to be carried by the sheer beauty and power of it; her inheritance and nature as a deva of this realm had a lot of potency, so that even her mood of resentment in having to come here and be separated from Ant, and not to be able to help with the search for Maggot's daughter, was being overwhelmed by the sensory flood of it.

The ancient verses celebrating their divine life came into her heart, joining with the beat and empowered by the intense fragrances rising from the censers and flowers of the Grove.

*'While you are dancing, with all your limbs in every way,
Deva-like sounds stream forth, delightful to hear.
While you are dancing with all your limbs in every way,
Deva-like scents are wafted around, sweet scents, delightful.
And the perfume of those sweet-scented, delightful garlands on your head
Blows in all directions, like the mañjusaka tree
You breathe that sweet scent, you see the unearthly beauty
Of those devata, beyond all human forms.'*

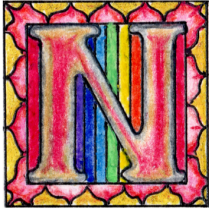
'Ninka! My beloved – I've been calling you for the last, I don't know, the sun's shadow has moved at least by half a handspan,' Prince Malabhari gushed at her arrival. 'Sit by me, have some nectar, this ambrosia is particularly fine too. You look a little tired. Where have you been? Well, never mind, this will soon refresh you.'

Ninka dutifully settled in at his side and did her best to let herself be carried away on the flushing tide of colour and scent and movement, for many of the dove-like nymphs and devas were dancing with great grace and vigour. Try as she might, however, there was a tight little knot right at her heart that would not loosen, a pining for her beloved in a different realm.

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CHAPTER 12:

A KANAVERA FALLS



ninka felt as though something within her was fading, becoming thinner, paler. The vibrant and colourful dances continued around her, the waves of exquisite perfume ebbed and flowed, yet she felt a dimming, a diminution, a strange dampness and sense of dross edging in around her, dulling the gleeful delights of the party.

There was a banquet of exotic foods laid out for all the revellers, the rich aromas mingling with the scents exuded by the devas and the accharas, as well as with the fragrances of the celestial flowers – *mandarava* and *mañjusaka* – it was a feast, a delight to the eye and to the sense of smell, but Ninka found herself turning away. All this bounty, this joyful play, palled and lost its glamour.

She was seated beside her betrothed, the deva prince she was soon to be wed to but, perhaps affected by the waning of her interest in all around them, he had been ignoring her and was deep in rapturous conversation with a deva to his left, a jewel-bedecked beauty whose eyes shone with fascination and delight at Malabhari's every word. She was entranced by him. The prince was equally fixated on her so Ninka scarcely had to say, 'Please excuse me,' before she drifted quietly away.

The dancing and the party-games, the absorption in the food and drink, were undisturbed by Ninka's departure. Quietly she floated beyond the edge of the glade; she had had nothing to eat, after the token sip of nectar she had had to take at Malabhari's bidding.

In the shade of the trees across the lotus pond Ninka noticed that her gossamer robes seemed more sombre in tone than they usually did. She moved her arm out into the full sunlight of the morning yet, even there, the blues and purples were definitely less rich, the edges almost grey. As she moved her hands around, picking up different pieces of the fabrics she was wearing to look at them more closely, she felt a strange stickiness in her armpits. 'What is this?' she wondered, reaching to test the sensation with her fingers. Not only did a faintly rank tang strike her nose but she saw flakes of skin, a dusty slough, gathered on the tips.

'I am fading indeed,' she realized, 'and there's nothing I can do about it.' She had not had any food when with the nagas, having lost her appetite and she knew that having not eaten for some time, the signs she was now experiencing meant that the deva-life she had lived for so long was coming to an end. Her hands and feet now hurt and she could see that she no longer had the radiance, the aura that would, in the past, have easily dispelled the shadows beneath the circle of trees beside the pond where she was sitting.

A wave of tiredness washed over her but she felt restless, agitated at the same time. She curled her legs beneath her and leant against the trunk of one of the trees,

trying to find a comfortable way of sitting but the moss bank she was settled on now felt hot and hard, and the tree-trunk, the bark of which should have been soft and spongy, dug into her back and seemed to be a mass of knots and gnarls.

‘My end is approaching fast,’ she realized, ‘I don’t think there’s going to be the usual seven days of fading. What should I do?’

* * *

From the age of about three Rains, Prince Vidudabha was aware that he was doubly special; not only was he the first true-born son of King Pasenadi, and thus heir to the throne of Kosala, but he was also half Sakyan and of the same family as the Buddha who everyone revered so much. As if any extra glory needed to be added to his name, he was also often told how very rare it was to have a Sakyan mother and a father from Kosala or Magadha – no one of his nurses or nannies or pages could recall such an honourable match since the Sakyans were famously proud of their purity of birth.

The King doted on him – as his longed-for heir – and since Vasabha did not have any more children in the immediately following years, Vidudabha was showered with attention and praise. As Vasabha’s only child she cared for him deeply, but she was forced to bury her dismay and disapproval when he behaved in ways that would have earned him an earful in the lean-to that Vasabha grew up in but, here in the glittering chambers of the palace, his brattish selfishness and moodiness were chuckled at and labelled ‘charming’ and ‘princely pride’ and even praised.

When he had just reached five Rains there came a day when Princess Vajiri, now in her early twenties, came to the end of her patience with him. As a much bigger sister, or at least half-sister, she had more liberty to speak her mind than most in the court. She was a much-loved and respected member of the family, her only fault, in the eyes of her royal parents, being that she had determinedly refused every offer of marriage ever made to her.

The family were all together sharing a convivial meal at the palace. One of the servants brought in some dishes of food and, unwittingly, since he was carrying several items, had put his left thumb into the edge of the food arranged on one of the plates. The young prince saw this as the dishes were brought to the table and barked out, ‘Take your disgusting shit-covered hand out of my food. You should throw that all away right now and, Father, order his hand to be cut off!’

‘Vidu! Don’t be such an obnoxious little prig,’ Vajiri snapped at him. ‘Here, Sudhamma, give it to me, I’m happy to eat it. I’m sure your hands are clean.’ Vajiri always being one to be ready to set formalities and conventions aside when practicalities demanded it.

Vidudabha, despite being only just five, was very ready to display his authority. ‘How dare you talk to me like that! I’m the Crown Prince, I will be your

King soon, you should have your tongue pulled out for speaking to me that way! Father, *do* something!’

Glances were rapidly exchanged across the table, between King Pasenadi and Mallika and Vasabha, Pasenadi and Vajiri, Vajiri and Vasabha... The King realized it was up to him to take some action – he would not take such drastic steps as his son asked for and he searched for an equable middle way.

‘Come and sit by me and share my plate, my boy. This is all guaranteed pure. I’ll sort things out with the servants later. Let’s not spoil what was such a pleasant repast. Vajiri, apologise to your brother for being rude, please.’ He shot his daughter an imploring look, as if to say, ‘Don’t wind him up or it will be hell for his nannies, his pages, and his mother for days.’

Vajiri was well-acquainted with her little brother’s moods and she understood the need, however, she was still a kshatriyan princess so she responded, ‘I am sorry I spoke rudely to you, Your Highness, please forgive me. Although that *does* look delicious and it would be a shame to throw it away.’ A cheeky smirk formed at the corner of her mouth and she cast her eyes down, not to be too confrontational.

Vidudabha was doubly incensed now. The servant, Sudhamma, had backed off so that the dishes could not be swept from his hands. Instead the prince smashed his fists on the table and knocked everything in his reach to the floor. In the same moment he sprang up from the cushions he was sitting on and stomped out of the chamber trying not to burst into tears of rage and frustration and thus appear to be weak. He was so upset that he struggled with the door latch and his angry sobs were heard by everyone before he could run away. This made it even worse:– I’ll show her! She’ll be really sorry.

* * *

Princess Vajiri’s rooms were in the part of the palace close to Queen Vasabha and Queen Mallika’s private chambers. Vidudabha had not been there very often but he remembered that once, when his mother was taking him around with one of his nannies, they had been invited in and Vajiri had shown him the view from her windows and given him a little tour of her place. There was a miniature painting that she had made a point of showing him. She had said how it was her favourite thing. It wasn’t studded with jewels, or anything like that, but it was very finely painted for something so small. The picture was of a golden stag and, as she had told him at the time, trying to impress him with the story, it was about a previous life of the Buddha when he had been a deer who had saved the life of a king who had tried to kill him.

It was a few days after the incident with the servant and the dish but Vidudabha was still seething and bent on revenge. He waited until there was a time when the King and his royal mother, together with Queen Mallika and Vajiri had all gone off to the Jetavana in the evening, to listen to a talk by the Buddha. With the

thought in mind, 'Now's my chance,' the Prince feigned sleepiness and seemed to be dead to the world in his own rooms. He kept as quiet as a mouse.

Once all was still in his part of the palace, the servants either dozing or absent. He snuck warily along the passages, his heart beating wildly. He got to the Princess's apartments without being seen and, to his great joy, he found there was no lock on her door.

Just as he recalled, the miniature painting, with its enamelled frame made of different metals, was fixed on a pillar just by the main window. He climbed up on a low bench, expecting to unhook the picture and take it away. When he reached up and grasped the frame, however, it seemed a little stuck and, wanting to be quick and not wanting to be caught, he wrenched it away from its mounting which was much more solid than he had bargained for. It took a good tug and, along with the picture, a big lump of plaster came off the pillar as well.

His not-very-well-thought-out plan had been that it would be a few days before Vajiri noticed that it was gone:- She's got so many fancy things, she's bound not to realize!

Now, with this great big block of the coloured plaster missing, she'd see it was gone right away. What should he do? Beginning to panic he looked around the room and saw there were lamps burning beside the small shrine she kept there. He grabbed one of these and held it at the corner of one of the draperies. The flames caught the cloth; he shoved the painting into a pocket at the back of his breeches and ran for the door.

The walkway was still empty and, with heart pounding even faster than before, he scurried back to his rooms as fast as he could. To his horror, just as he was at his door, his mother came round the corner from the opposite direction. She was not looking in his direction so he quickly turned around and pretended that he had just come out of his chambers rather than being about to go into them.

'Hello Mother,' he greeted her casually. 'I thought you were all going to the Jetavana today.'

'We were, but then we heard that the Master was away so plans changed. What are you up to?'

'Oh, nothing. I was just going to see...' he had to think quickly, 'some of the other boys,' meaning his occasional playmates among the children of the Kosalan nobles at court. He tried to sound as casual as possible.

To his even greater horror, his mother then asked, 'What's that in your pocket?' He must have let a corner of the picture frame stick out or make a weird bulge.

'Oh, nothing.' His heart going like a high speed tabla player's fingers. To his amazement she said no more and took him at his word. He then heard the shouts of, 'FIRE! FIRE!' coming from the distant reaches of the palace. His mother and the maids she had with her all turned to where the cries were coming from. The clamour rose rapidly and palace workers appeared from all sides, some running

toward where the smoke and noise was coming from, while the maids and other helpers ushered the Queen and the Prince away from the chaos and smoke to safety.

* * *

They had heard that the Master was away just as they prepared to set out and Princess Vajiri had not actually been that far away when the fire started in her rooms. She had stayed with Queen Mallika and Kesini, chatting briefly after the evening excursion had been cancelled. The smoke had swiftly spread to her mother's apartments where they were sitting. As soon as Kesini got a whiff of it she was up and in action at great speed, virtually shoving the Queen and the Princess out of the garden doors with her stump and her one good hand, and away from danger. After her own trauma in the seraglio in Kosambi, any hint of such peril from fire rapidly triggered her instincts. Out in the open area of the garden Vajiri clung to Kesini, her eyes fixed on the flames now filling the windows in dark gouts, billowing into the evening sky.

'Don't worry Miss, we're safe out here. And I think the men are on to it already. They've got a line of buckets from the well over there. I think it's going to be alright.' She did her best to reassure her, though Kesini was as glad as Vajiri to be holding tight to someone.

* * *

Vidudabha did not actually want the painting – he had only taken it because he wanted to hurt Vajiri's feelings and to deprive her of something that was precious to her. It was pure spite, not greed, so now he had to get rid of it.

In the aftermath of the fire, which he was glad had not spread too far, the absence of the painting was noticed but the room had been so badly damaged in so many other respects that its absence was not made much of. He heard a comment or two being made and it was assumed, that it had been simply knocked off the pillar in the effort to put out the fire, and it had been trampled or broken or lost in the general conflagration.

His sister was saddened and upset by all the destruction the fire had caused, and had been very scared by the flames, so the Prince felt that he had got his own back on her. To his amazement his response to his mother that evening had aroused no suspicions, and the 'What's in your pocket?' question was never followed up. He had got away with it completely.

He thought it would be easy to get rid of the picture but it took a while to decide what to do, to make sure it was never discovered. He was never allowed out in the woods around Savatthi alone so he couldn't just chuck it into the bushes somewhere. Besides, a hunter or a trapper might easily find it.

He could not bury it either – if someone saw him digging a hole in the garden, it would be such an odd sight that he'd have to explain what he was doing.

He couldn't keep it in his rooms because people were always tidying and rearranging and decorating things, without asking him if they could, so any hiding place would not be sure to stay secret. He had it stashed for the moment in an air vent, high on the wall behind a latticed screen, but he had to get rid of it soon. Otherwise everyone would know he stole it, and that he had started the fire too.

It was thinking about the fire, then how they put it out, that made the Prince realize that the well in the garden would be the best place; it would only take a blink to drop it in and, since no one would or even could go down to the bottom, it would never be found there. He did his best to make a time when he was 'just happening to be walking through the garden' by himself:– If only people would leave him alone sometimes! It was infuriating how his mother, and all of them, never let him be.

Nevertheless he managed to be alone one afternoon and he contrived to have the picture with him, in his pocket again but better hidden this time, and to go by the well-head. He leant over the rim, as if curious to see down into the depths, and tried to sneak the picture around to his front. It snagged a bit but he got it there and then let it drop. There was a silent moment while it fell then a reassuringly loud 'plop!' as it hit the water.

'Yes! Done!' He was very happy. When he turned around he realized that there were other people in the garden:– Had someone seen him? Did they know what he was doing all along? Were they waiting to catch him and punish him? His heart raced as he looked about him. But no one seemed to be about to scold him, or drag him to his Royal Father's Presence.

He was afraid, *very* afraid, and at that moment his role as Crown Prince and heir to the throne felt like it counted for nothing. His heart knew only fear of being caught and disciplined, shamed and beaten – and it was the shaming that frightened him more than any pain.

There was no indication that anyone had seen what he had done with Vajiri's picture but that made no difference. In a blur of anxiety, terror, he decided he should hide. It didn't make sense but that didn't matter to his five-year-old mind: 'Hide! Where can I hide?'

Still away from his nannies and helpers he ducked into a hay barn near the stables. No one was about at this time of the afternoon so he climbed up a ladder into the loft and hid. His fear was now the only force driving his actions.

Buried in the hay he listened for any sounds of wrath and retribution, people coming and looking for him. Time went by.

He did not know how long he'd been there but his belly had begun to growl. He did also hear voices calling his name and, as far as he could tell, they did not sound angry. The heated fear he had felt was now muted to a sick dread. Reason had begun to dawn and so he clambered down from the loft and met, straightaway, one of the stable-hands.

'Young master! You're 'ere! They bin lookin' for youse everywhere! You bin playing up in the 'ay? Off y' go.' The Prince was tempted to get irate at one of the lower servants addressing him with such familiarity but the general cheerfulness of

the lad had given the clue that rage and punishment were not in the air; a spark of hope dawned.

‘There you are my love! Where on earth have you been?’ Vasabha was wreathed in smiles. ‘You’ve got hay in your hair. It’s time for supper. Let’s get you tidied up.’ And that was it. No suspicion, no wrath, no punishment, just supper with a lot of nice food to eat. And the servants on their best behaviour. He really had got away with it completely.

Mara saw this all; a gratified smile and a narrowing of his eyes showed how fully pleased he was:— My boy is a good liar. He’s beyond suspicion even when so young. He will go far.

* * *

Ninka was alone at the water’s edge. The morning had brightened, by the usual reckoning of things, but her vision was becoming faint. Her raiment had lost all its colour; her skin was as washed out and lustreless as a wet rag.

She recalled the many conversations she had had with Ant regarding how to be joined in the next birth with your loved ones. She knew beyond any doubt that this life in the Tavatimsa Heaven was coming to its end so now it was the time to act. Everything depended on how she focused now.

She gathered her energies and brought her mind to a single point, the memory of her beloved fixed in a mental image before her. She was determined to be born as a kinnari so that she and Ant could continue their life joyfully together. She concentrated on the deep red colour. It was emblematic of her dear one and after which she was named: ‘*Kanavera, kanavera, kanavera...*’

The world around her paled further and lost its definition: the sound of revelry across the lotus pond grew faint, the pounding rhythm of the drums merged into the beating of her heart: ‘*Kanavera, kanavera, kanavera...*’

A light within her heart grew a little brighter, softer. She lost the sensations of the tree against her back, the ground beneath her. All external sounds and forms were subsumed in a silvery hush of high-pitched scintillation, a shimmering of her inner vision, a merging of all sounds into a song of suchness.

Waves of aching and itching rose and broke, dissolving into the silence; the acrid smell of her body, like a festering lily, registered for a moment then too dissolved into the formless, edgeless energy field that had been her life. All the senses reached their end.

She breathed out and did not breathe in again.

* * *

Queen Mallika had come from humble beginnings. Her father had been the chief garland-maker for Kosala and for the great city of Savatthi. When she had been espied by the roving eye of the King, in his youth, and he had raised her up and

married her that same day, there was speculation as to whether the family would be allowed to carry on with their ancient craft, that had been passed on from generation to generation for centuries.

King Pasenadi was a kind man, as well as a proud kshatriyan, so when the question was asked of him – what would be most appropriate regarding the Queen’s family of origin? – he had said, ‘Let us ask the people in question.’ Mallika’s father and mother were summoned to the palace and were invited to speak honestly on the matter.

‘Father, Mother, what would please you best – to be raised up to be warrior-nobles? To move to the court and serve as a minister and a lady-in-waiting, with your other children as courtiers? Or would you be happier to continue to ply your trade in garlands and floral decorations, with guaranteed primacy in providing the Royal Household for all occasions?’

Queen Mallika’s parents glanced at each other briefly before her father spoke up, ‘Your Majesty, we have been honoured beyond measure in that you chose our daughter Mallika to be your wife and queen. We, however, are ‘umble people and used to the company and ways of craftspersons – we would be lost in the palace and, to be honest, sad not to be able to exercise our skills at making flower offerings and the fragrant decorations that are not just our livelihood, but also the joy and delight of our lives.

‘If we would not seem ungrateful or rude in declining your kind offer to raise our whole family up, we would be glad to remain as we are, being the chief garlandiers of this nation and this fair city.’ He was stretching as best he could to speak in highly proper language, suitable for talking with royals, which was quite different to the conversations of the gardens, the potting shed and the workshop. The King had smiled and given his blessing, warmed by the pure-hearted sincerity and straightforwardness of Mallika’s family.

When she had moved to the palace, Mallika had left behind quite a number of brothers and sisters who all helped with the family garland-making in various ways. They married amongst the other members of the garland- and flower-dealing fraternity and brought many grandchildren and great-grandchildren into the world. Mallika’s youngest brother was called Abhaya and he was married to Siripuppha. They had several children, the youngest of whom was a girl, a radiant child whom they named Pujika who, even as a baby, loved the bright red *kanavera* flowers the best.

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END OF PART I

PART II

CHAPTER 13:

THE GROUP OF SIX



uite soon after Krishna had arrived at the Jetavana he had renewed his friendship with Khujjuttara and that connection had developed helpfully over time. He had been somewhat sobered, chastened by the painful consequences of what he and the other monks had got up to in Kitagiri, so he was now much more motivated by caring and compassion, and an appreciation of the consequences of the choices that he made. He was still thoroughly convinced of the value and validity of his 'Sooner! More!' philosophy of life-affirmation but he was now much more discerning and thoughtful about the impact that his words and actions, and those of the people around him, had upon the world. In this light he was very grateful for the company of Ananda and Khujjuttara and her young helper, Matanga. They were a good influence upon him, he felt, and he was glad of their always practical and sage advice, and their example of modesty and kindness.

Since the Buddha spent most of his time these days at the Jetavana, and since Ananda was his chief attendant, it often came about that he was not available for a chat with Krishna, to offer his counsel and companionship. This led to Krishna regularly sitting with Khujjuttara and Matanga, chatting in the sala or under the trees, and spending many hours of the day in their company. He felt that this was all very innocent; Khujjuttara was, after all a white-haired Elder, and Matanga was pointedly restrained and properly behaved. Certainly she was young and pretty but she was modest to a fault and never roused any flirtatious feelings in the monks or laymen that drew close to her sagacious charge, when they came to Khujjuttara for advice or to be reminded of various passages of the Teachings that she was well-versed in.

It was now a Moon or two after Krishna had arrived from Kitagiri and he was getting very comfortable with this new routine and circle of friends, when his old companion, Surama, walked into the monastery. He had moved on from Kitagiri a dozen years before and Krishna had not seen him since.

'Hello, old friend!' Krishna was very excited to meet him after such a long absence. 'Where have you been all this time? I've not heard a word about you from anyone who came to Kitagiri, or here either, for that matter. What have you been up to? Where have you been living? You look well.'

Surama gave a cursory nod to the two women that Krishna had been talking with, when he had walked up to them, and made it clear to Krishna that it would indeed be good to catch up. With another derogatory glance at Krishna's companions, he suggested, 'Let's go to your kuti, or somewhere quiet, so we can have a proper talk.'

Krishna bade farewell to Khujjuttara and Matanga and took off with Surama, helping to carry the Elder's bowl and robes and chatting ardently as they strolled along. The hours rolled by at Krishna's kuti as the two of them exchanged their news of the previous twelve Rains. There was a lot to catch up on. One element of this was that Surama had not just come to the Jetavana in order to spend more time close to the Master, but also because several of his old respected friends in the Sangha were here too.

'If you haven't met them already, I'm sure you'll be impressed,' Surama was getting energized as he spoke.

'To be honest, I've not been mixing much as yet,' Krishna replied, 'I've mostly been chatting with the people I knew from before – Ananda, of course, then that elder laywoman I was talking with when you showed up; I knew her in Kosambi, years ago. She's very wise, and knows the Teachings inside out.'

'Well, I'll be very happy to make the introductions,' Surama continued, 'the two Elders from the Sakyan nobility are Panduka and Lohitaka, then there are Mettiya and Bhummajaka – they are brilliant fellows too. Also, I don't know if you heard, but your old teachers from Kitagiri have just arrived here as well – Assaji and Basuka – they all know each other from way back and have been disciples of the Master for many years.'

Krishna had some mixed feelings about the Elders Assaji and Punabbasuka arriving, since he was trying to turn over a new leaf and to leave at least a certain amount of the Kitagiri experience behind him. He reflected, however, that the troubles that had been caused, and the hurts inflicted there, had largely been on account of over-zealous or selfish monks misinterpreting the words and the example of the two leaders of the community. The destructive and cruel things that had happened were not anything that Assaji or Punabbasuka had themselves encouraged. With this thought in mind Krishna smiled and responded to the excitement in his friend's voice, 'That sounds like a great opportunity. I had no idea that such wise and inspiring Elders were here as well.'

* * *

'The Group of Six', as they were known, gravitated to a cluster of kutis on the north-eastern corner of the forest of the Jetavana. The three large dwellings in the centre were occupied by Panduka and Lohitaka, who shared the one on the left, Mettiya and Bhummajaka were in the central one while Assaji and Basuka took up residence on the right. A small covered courtyard in the middle of the enclave served as an informal gathering place for the Six and their followers, and those drawn by the laughter and loudness of the conversation.

'It's a frightful pain,' Panduka was waxing lyrically, 'an absolute bore, but that barber Upali has been haranguing the chaps, left and right, about all the blessed rules he assumes we should be keeping, Elders, newbies, everyone! It's an unmitigated disaster,' he leant upon the word. 'If everybody is clued up on the ten

thousand tiny details then we're bound to be pushed and pulled around by every Johnny-know-it-all in the monastery, and by the *lay*-people too.' He sneered superciliously. 'It will be *awful*!' Lohitaka harrumphed his agreement.

'If you ask me,' Bhummajaka chimed in, 'the thing to do is to start a very reasonable and quiet campaign, along the lines of, 'The Master's Dharma teaching is all about ending suffering. So why are these lesser and minor training rules repeated and promoted when they lead only to anxiety, bother and confusion?' He glanced from side to side, pleased to see the crop of shaven heads nodding in agreement.

'Bhummajaka is absolutely right,' Mettiya spoke up, catching everyone's attention. 'If we steadily, and with logic, carefully considered reason, put this into the mix, hopefully Upali's classes will get less popular and there will be a minimum of criticism projected our way.'

Surama had brought Krishna into the edges of the circle and he was slowly making out who was who and how this group had been functioning over the years. Surama had already impressed him with how the Group of Six, and their students, were ardent adherents of exactly the same life-revering philosophy that Krishna had given himself to for so many years. He was delighted to hear of this but it seemed that, as at Kitagiri, there had been a few unfortunate accidents and excesses from time to time. In the flow of conversation – mostly led by the six great Elders but with some of the younger followers joining in as well – there were references to a cowherd who had unfortunately been killed when one of them had playfully tossed a rock off the Robber's Cliff, and which had struck him on the head; a man, whose wife was the object of desire for one of the Six, who was persuaded to kill himself; then there was one of the young, delicate Group of Seventeen monks, who died when tickled by one of Mettiya's students, and a number of other such incidents.

That said, Krishna was impressed by how often they had avoided being harassed by those petty, minor rules. Furthermore, by cleverly making sure that at least four of the Group always attended every formal Sangha meeting, it ensured that no punitive act could be carried out against any of them, since that was how the Sangha law was constituted. If one or two went on their own, they would be in deep trouble! Apparently it was Mettiya or Bhummajaka who oversaw such manoeuvres; they had the best legal minds of the team and were usually a few steps ahead of the game in this regard.

They had been reprimanded, and rules had been established by the Buddha, for a lot of very insignificant incidents, as far as Krishna could tell. Things such as owning too many robes or going to a free food distribution centre too often – these seemed unimportant items for the Buddha to be making stipulations about so he heartily agreed that the Group of Six were justified in their way of operating.

One thing he was uncomfortable about was the way they spoke of the Group of Seventeen – these frail and refined youngsters seemed to be an object of teasing and bullying to the point of deliberate cruelty – but such was the general good humour, the playful and positive way that the Group of Six related with each other, that such misgivings were washed away in the tide of Krishna's joyful appreciation.

‘You are right, Surama, these are all fine fellows!’ He found himself using his poshest accent in his friend’s company and round the Group of Six. ‘It’s like all the best of Kitagiri without (most of) the bad parts. These are my people!’

* * *

Dabba the Mallian was one of a small number of the Buddha’s monastic disciples who had realized enlightenment as a seven-year-old novice. He was in fact so precocious in his wisdom and spiritual maturity that it is said that it was at the first touch of the razor, when his head was being shaved for the first time, that his great awakening was actualized. He was highly respected in the Sangha and generally considered to be above reproach.

A wealthy householder in Savatthi had been making it a practice of generosity and faith to invite four bhikkhus every day to his home, to offer them a meal of fine alms-food. Each day a new group went, according to a roster organized at the Jetavana.

One afternoon this householder, named Punna, went to the Jetavana and happened to meet Dabba the Mallian. He was glad to have this opportunity and, sitting down with the Elder, had an inspiring and illuminating Dharma discussion with him for a while. At the end of his questions about meditation and how best to live a wholesome life he asked, ‘Venerable Sir, do you happen to know to whom amongst the bhikkhus the meal offering at my house tomorrow is assigned?’

It was just a passing thought, and he had not been intending to act in any kind of preferential way, but he found himself upset and disappointed when Dabba replied, ‘Mettiya and Bhummajaka, together with two of their followers, are the ones on the list.’

Dabba thought no more of it as the faithful Punna bowed and departed for his home. The householder, however, was seething, since he was well aware of the poor reputation that those monks had, a notoriety shared by all of the Group of Six and their faction:– How can those awful monks eat in my house with me and my family? It will be an embarrassment for all of us, and who knows what kind of worldly talk they will indulge in, and what favours they might ask of us?’

By the time he had reached his home he had decided what to do. He went straight to the kitchens and spoke to one of the servants there, instructing them, ‘When the time comes for the four monks to visit for the meal tomorrow, prepare mats for them out in the gatehouse and, by way of food, offer them porridge which is made of unhusked rice and with brine from the pickles for a sauce. Nothing else! Got that!’

The servant could tell that her master was in a mood and that there was no room for discussion or questions.

‘As you say, master,’ she replied, ‘it will be done exactly as you have asked.’

Back at the Jetavana it was very much on the minds of Mettiya and Bhummajaka, as well as their two followers who were due to go along with them,

that a meal of fine food at Punna's house was scheduled for the next day. They could not keep quiet about it, imagining how Punna and his wife and children would be lining up with all sorts of rich curries and sauces, condiments and desserts. They had chatted with some of the other monks who had gone on previous days and the prospects seemed very exciting. They could hardly sleep that night for the saliva in their mouths, the rumbling of anticipation in their stomachs and the fantasies running through their minds:— This is going to be really something!

The next morning the four of them walked into Savatthi, to the house of Punna and his family. The servant saw them approaching and, when they arrived, she ushered them into the gatehouse and indicated the mats. 'Please have a seat, honoured sirs.'

Mettiya and Bhummajaka both had the thought, 'It must be that the food is not ready yet, which is why we are being invited to sit in the gatehouse, instead of being welcomed into their home.'

The same servant then picked up the pot of unhusked rice-porridge and offered it to the elders, then the jar of brine. 'Please eat, honoured sirs,' she politely said, making the gesture of *añjali*.

Bhummajaka spoke up, 'Sister, we are the ones here for the daily meal offering,' hoping that there had been some error of communication and that this foolish woman had not understood the instructions of her employer.

She was quite aware how the words she was about to say would go down but, since the master had given her strict instructions, and since she was also aware of the bad reputation that these particular monks had, she fixed her expression – determined not to smirk – and said, 'I know you are the ones here for the daily meal offering, sirs but, yesterday, Master Punna ordered me to seat you all in the gatehouse and to offer you porridge of unhusked rice, with pickled-brine sauce. So, please, honoured sirs, do eat.' Then she bowed and left them to it.

* * *

The meal had been a very unsatisfactory affair, in many ways, and Mettiya and Bhummajaka were determined to get to the bottom of how it had come about that they had been so poorly treated, as they saw it. While they stomped back to the Jetavana, grumbling and grouching as if that would salve their wounded pride and unamused palates, one of the junior monks in the group said, 'Yesterday, in the afternoon, I saw Master Punna sitting and talking with Dabba the Mallian. Maybe it was that conceited Dabba who turned him against us.'

'That sounds highly likely,' Mettiya perked up on hearing this. 'He's a pompous little man, so proud of his "I was enlightened when I was a little novice, when the razor touched my head" story. It's all bunkum as far as I'm concerned.'

The four of them reached the gateway to the Jetavana and sat in the shade of the broad-spreading trees for a bit, before heading to the corner of the monastery

where their dwellings were, as there were a couple of low platforms by the gate for anyone to sit on while they were waiting to enter or to meet an arriving visitor.

The early afternoon heat was a drain on their energies and for a moment they all stopped talking – they were glum, slack-jawed, shoulders drooping and furrow-browed. Just at this moment a nun, also called Mettiya, happened by. She was in a cheery mood and so greeted them brightly, ‘Greetings to you, venerable sirs!’

But such was their sombre mien that none of them gave her any reply. This was odd since her namesake – the monk Mettiya – usually made some wisecrack about them being related, or even twins. Today there was nothing.

‘Have I offended you, sirs? Why no response?’ She was curious now as it was so unusual for any of the Group of Six to be so subdued.

‘If you have offended us,’ the bhikkhu Mettiya began, ‘it’s only by you being in a good mood whilst all of us have been grievously offended by Dabba the Mallian. He has been treating us like dirt.’

Mara, who was close by and taking great interest in the unfolding of this conversation, caused the nun to respond by saying, ‘What can I do to help?’

Then, muffling all cautions and reservations, Bhummajaka said to her, ‘If you really want to be of assistance, you could get the Master to expel Dabba from the Sangha this very day.’

‘How can I do that?’

‘Go to the Master and say, “Where there once was calm, harmlessness and freedom from fear, there is now dread, harm and danger. What was tranquil is now whipped by storms; it’s as if water is ablaze. I have been raped by Dabba the Mallian.”’

Mara, leaning into his task, caused any qualms or hesitancy to vanish from the nun’s mind. The fact that she had just been asked to tell a deliberate lie to the Buddha seemed the most normal and straightforward thing to do:– She was glad indeed to be able to help her friends and her namesake!

‘As you say, venerable sirs; it shall be done.’

* * *

The news about the shocking accusation spread quickly through the Jetavana, in no small part because the Buddha had immediately called a community meeting to question Dabba and to establish the facts of the issue in a public forum.

Surama had been encouraging Krishna to spend more time with the Group of Six, not only because he felt they would be a good influence on his younger friend but also he had chided Krishna a few times about his closeness with Khujjuttara and her attractive companion. ‘You know, after getting so much flak for being one of those “disreputable Kitagiri monks” it doesn’t look good for you to be spending so much time around those women.’ He sneered a bit too dismissively as he said this, which hurt Krishna’s feelings, as he had come to respect the pair of wise and kind people. The aged elder laywoman was a motherly presence in his life that he greatly

appreciated and he felt a big-brotherly protectiveness towards Matanga, who continued to blossom in her friendship with Krishna and in the many conversations she had had with him.

Krishna took it in good part, however, that Surama essentially meant well and had his best interests at heart, so he did not argue the point; besides, the Group of Six and their many followers were a lively and interesting crowd and it was always fun to be around them.

Krishna was sitting with them when they heard that the Sangha meeting had been called for that very day. They all moved swiftly to gather their robes and prepare for the meeting, and headed over as a large group to the Dharma Hall, where the investigation was to take place. Krishna was excited by the story of what had happened – how Dabba had insulted them but that now his big secret was about to be revealed, or rather confirmed, and he would be taken down a peg or two. It looked like his claim to have been enlightened as a child would be torn to pieces as well – an added bonus!

Dabba was not someone that Krishna knew well but he was famous as one of the ‘enlightened novices’ and also for his ability, when he was the lodgings monk, to light up one of his fingers, to make a luminous torch, to show the way along the forest paths at night to late arriving bhikkhus. He got into trouble for this when the Buddha found out that monks were deliberately arriving after dark so they could witness Dabba the Mallian’s glowing finger for themselves.

There was mostly a grim cast to the expressions on the faces of the monks gathered at the hall. It was very quiet as the Master was already seated at the centre of the assembly. Only the male monastic community were there, with the nuns and the lay people not being a part of this legal procedure for the bhikkhus.

It did not take long for everyone to gather. When the community was all present the Buddha called Dabba to the front and questioned him:

‘Do you remember doing as the nun Mettiya said you have done, that you raped her?’

To this Dabba replied, ‘Venerable Sir, you know the reality with regard to me.’

This was not a very helpful way to respond so the Master asked again, to which Dabba answered in the same way. After a third round of this the Buddha changed his line of questioning.

Dabba was not very wise to the ways of the world and, somewhat naively, assumed that the Buddha’s previous acquaintance with and knowledge about Dabba’s spiritual state would be enough to settle the issue; he was missing the fact that the Buddha had convened a full-scale meeting so that the facts could be aired publicly, rather than a case being decided solely upon the Master’s accurate knowledge of the thoughts, states of realization and memories of others, as well as his awareness of the reliability (or not) of people’s words.

‘Dabba,’ the Buddha began, ‘people of your clan, the Mallians, are wise and do not give evasive answers like that. If what was said to be done by you was done by you, say so; if it was not done by you, say it was not.’

‘Venerable Sir, since I was born, I cannot call to mind ever indulging in sexual intercourse even in a dream, much less so when I was awake.’

The Buddha was aware of the truth of Dabba’s statement and, now that it had been declared publicly, it was sufficient for him to close the case. Such was the utter fullness of confidence in the Master’s knowledge and impartiality, that the matter was ended there, or at least it ended with him establishing a new, serious training rule.

On realizing that their ruse had failed completely, the Group of Six did a rapid about-face, aiming to ameliorate the situation by coming clean straightaway. They admitted that they had put the nun Mettiya up to it and asked for her not to be punished. Since there was no training rule on this issue of false accusations at that time, they thought they could confess with impunity and no repercussions would ensue.

Krishna was shocked and a bit perplexed at the revelation of their deception – he had not been told that the accusation was completely fabricated – as well as by the immediate readiness of Mettiya and Bhummajaka to admit the falsity of the story.

He was still trying to make sense of it all when the Master declared, ‘The nun, Sister Mettiya, was possessed by the Evil One the Lord of Lies, and spoke as she did under his malign influence. Just as was the shepherd boy, who threw a rock and injured the head of Vidhura, the chief disciple of the Blessed One Kakusandha, and just as the member of the Brahma Baka’s assembly was, who addressed me casually and warned me not to disrespect his Brahma lord. Sister Mettiya should be considered as innocent of wrong-doing as she was not in her right mind at the time of making the accusation. She needs kindness, forgiveness and advice as to how to protect her mind from the Evil One, protection best established through mindfulness and wisdom, not by any kind of punishment.’

‘From this time a new training rule is established that: ‘Any monk, malignant, malicious and ill-tempered, who defames a monk with an unfounded charge involving Defeat, then afterwards, whether he is pressed on the issue or not, if the charge turns out to be unfounded, and if the monk confesses his malice, it is an offence entailing a formal meeting of the Sangha.’

‘Since the members of the Group of Six were the instigators of the charge, their conduct deserves to be criticized, however as the “first wrong-doers” in this instance no such formal meeting of the Sangha is needed now.’

* * *

Krishna had been taken aback to learn that Dabba had, in fact, been innocent all along. That had not been clear to him at all in the conversations that had gone on

at the enclave of the Group, before the meeting they had all just attended. He was raising this with Surama and grumbling about the dishonesty involved, as well as how the elders of the Group of Six had been shamed so publicly.

Surama did not at first respond to the issue about the deception that the Elders had persuaded the nun Mettiya to carry out but, taking an oblique tack, he had a very interesting take on the Group of Six, as well as monks like Udayin and Arittha, who had been the cause of many rules being established.

‘These good bhikkhus receive a lot of negative comments and are looked upon by some as “disreputable, unworthy, sham monks” and so forth but, to me, those who have been the cause for these precepts being established are true bodhisattvas – sacrificing their good name and any pride for the sake of others.’

Krishna was perplexed and a bit confused, ‘I admire them for their liberality and the freedom of spirit they all have, and that’s inspiring to me but, as happened today, the Master really scolded them. He might have to do that as part of his “public performance” but surely, if they were the cause of something he approved of, why give those liver-withering rebukes and public harangues? Is that harsh treatment just a smoke screen? The ones who are the cause of the rules get the “mogha-purisa!” treatment “Oh, foolish man!” How is it that they are being self-sacrificial, for the good of others? I don’t quite get it.’

‘Isn’t it obvious?’ Surama gave him one of his by-now-familiar sideways glances, pausing to see if Krishna could indeed join up the dots. ‘I’ll give you a clue. Did the Master not often say “Vinaya is the life of the religion” and how the teachings of the Buddhas who established the patimokkha training rules lasted long while those who didn’t had but a short-lived influence in the world?’ He smirked more openly, raising an eyebrow for emphasis. Krishna still didn’t quite get the point.

Surama was enjoying putting him to the test. ‘And how do the rules all get established, every single one of them, whether major or minor?’

‘By the “wrong-doings” of the various monks and nuns,’ it was now dawning on Krishna, ‘So, if no wrong-doings (so-called), no Vinaya, and thus a short life-span of the dispensation.’

‘Ergo...’

‘Ergo the Group of Six, Udayin, Arittha, Sudinna, Thullananda, Sundarinanda and all the others like them are great bodhisattvas, willing, no eager, to give up their reputations as “good monks and nuns” so that the Vinaya gets fully established and the words and influence of the Master Gotama, our great teacher, last for a very long time! I get it!’

Surama smiled appreciatively. ‘This boy really is a sucker,’ he thought but did not say.

* * *

Inspired and, consequently, aspiring to these dizzying spiritual heights, Krishna had had a brilliant idea, at least it seemed to be so when it formed in his mind the following day, as a complete and neat conceptual package when on alms-round in Katara, one of the villages close to Savatthi. Just out beyond the edge of the houses one of the farmers had a goat pen. He had put the billy in with the nanny goats and the billy was joined with one of the nannies, busily engaged in endeavouring to increase the herd.

Krishna caught up with Bhummajaka, who was on the same alms-round and pointed out the two goats to him.

‘Look – if we name the billy goat “Dabba the Mallian” and the nanny “Sister Mettiya”, then we can validly declare, “Formerly we accused Dabba the Mallian about what was hearsay but now we have ourselves seen Dabba engaging in sexual intercourse with Sister Mettiya,” don’t you think this is an excellent idea?’

The Elders, Bhummajaka and Mettiya, heartily approved of this wheeze and prompted Krishna to bring the matter to the Master as soon as possible. He, full of the great notion that he was doing something very useful, approached the Buddha after the mealtime that very day and, as expected, another meeting was convened and Dabba was questioned as before.

The flow of the examination went as previously but this time, after Dabba had declared his innocence, the Master required that the monk who had made the accusation, in this case Krishna, be questioned as to more details on what he had seen. The story of the goats came out, to the dismay and disgust of most of the well-behaved monks, they wondering, ‘How could you think of defaming Dabba with this flimsy legal pretext? And how on earth did you assume that the Master would not see that it was a total falsehood?’

Heads were shaken in dismay at the degree of delusion apparent in Krishna but there was surprise at how well he seemed to take the rebukes. He actually appeared to be smiling, which indeed he was. Krishna himself was feeling ‘mission accomplished’ and when another new rule was formalized – to deal with accusations made on a legal pretext – he even glowed with pride that:– This is one that I have done by myself!

Surama, meanwhile, observing this latest episode unfolding, reflected:– I chose the name ‘Surama’ since it means ‘good sport’, ‘fine amusement’, ‘great pleasure’ and this fool is providing worthy sport indeed. He has foiled me in the past, but he’s well and truly under my influence now – I rule him completely – he hasn’t even guessed the clue of my name ‘Surama’. Mix the few letters and one finds: ‘Mara? Us?’ He really is an idiot. Perhaps I should come up with an anagram for ‘Surely not?!’

* * *

Queen Vasabha’s friendship with Khujjuttara and Matanga ripened over the years. She would come and spend time with them at the Jetavana when she could

and, sometimes, she invited them to her chambers at the palace. At first Matanga was somewhat overawed by the surroundings of the royalty, this being an environment she had never set foot in before but, after a few such visits, and on account of the Queen's warm and easy company, and her sharp-witted humour, Matanga began to feel fully at ease.

Five Rains had passed since Matanga had arrived at the Jetavana and she was by now very much a part of Khujjuttara's life. They spoke freely with each other, as they did with Queen Vasabha, and on this morning of the cold season they were ensconced in a cosy room with some charcoal braziers in the Queen's quarters, and with her maid Kesini. The birds in the garden were warming up on the wall-top, soaking up the blessing of the sun's rays as the rising light dispersed the dew of the early hours. Their calls became stronger as their feathers eased and were less fluffed, no longer needing to ward against the night chills. The subject of Krishna had come up and they were airing their feelings about his recent choice of friends.

'That Group of Six are a bunch of shameless rogues, no more, no less,' Khujjuttara declared. 'Mettiya and his friend Bhummajaka, they'd sell you a cart with no wheels and a two-legged ox to pull it!' She scowled and made it clear she was deadly serious in her assessment. 'And those Sakyans are a disgrace to your clan, Your Serene Highness, if you don't mind me saying so; that Panduka, and Lohitaka, he's even worse. They think they're above the law, their own discipline too, just because they come from Kapilavatthu and are kshatriyan nobs. As for Assaji and Basuka – any excuse for a party, those two; the stories out of Kitagiri are shocking, even to an old hag like me, who's seen a lot!'

The Queen, Matanga and Kesini nodded in agreement, the two younger women settled comfortably beside each other on the bank of cushions, both of them choosing to sit away from the pans with the warming coals. The Queen then invited Matanga to ignore protocols and to sit with her. Matanga was touched by this gesture of friendship and she enjoyed the warmth of Vasabha's presence, as well as the beautiful perfume that she always wore, which reminded her of some childhood memories she could never quite pin down.

'I wish my Royal Husband would do something – I'm sure he would if he could – but their behaviour seems to be beyond the scope of his law, since they are monks and, at least on the surface, disciples of the Master.'

'They are sham monks,' Matanga spoke up, 'living the holy life only in name and costume. They pretend to be one thing but all the time they are something else altogether,' she was prone to keeping quiet and letting Khujjuttara, as the elder, and Vasabha, as the Queen, do most of the talking but she felt strongly about this. At the words 'sham' and 'pretend' however, Vasabha felt herself to be blushing and was embarrassed to add anything to the conversation.

Matanga continued, 'Krishna is a fine person and he was very kind to me. He treated me, a candala, as a complete equal from the time we first met, after he left Kitagiri. Now he's mixed up with these ne'er-do-wells and doesn't want to spend time with us. Well, I'm disappointed in him and I'm sure it's the Group of Six, and

that shady friend of his, Surama, who are persuading him to ignore us and to spend time only with them.'

'You know,' Vasabha smiled at her, 'you have quite the voice of authority when you speak up like this – and your accent's changed too. When I first met you you had a distinct country burr; you talk like a Savatthi city girl now.'

'Do I?' Matanga blushed, her golden colouring flushed with a sudden redness. 'It's not intentional. I grew up with a different accent altogether, from the north, and I only acquired the local country twang when I was doing all those rough jobs in the villages between the Gomati and Sarayu Rivers, north of Kitagiri.'

'I don't know why I pretended to be a local when I met Ananda – I mean the Sangha – I could just as easily have told them I was a mountain girl,' she blushed. 'Something made me want to be sure to be accepted so it made me tell a story I didn't really need to. Funny how the mind does that.' She looked at the mat pensively.

'You even sound quite posh now, young lady,' Khujjuttara chuckled, making nothing of Matanga's admission of deception, 'much more 'n me. You might even pass for a high-up, if you dressed a bit more fancily that is.'

'Funny you should say that,' Matanga replied, 'my mother used to have some delusions of grandeur – she fancied she was really the Lost Princess of Taxila – and she would put on a high-class accent as a joke sometimes – very convincing too. I don't know where she'd heard it because there were never any nobles coming through Kulluta where we lived. But she had it down perfectly. She was only playing around, mostly, but part of her still believed, despite what my grandparents said, that she was secretly a princess that had been hidden away in the hills to protect her from evil plots in the palace of Taxila. She even called me a princess too – if you can believe it – my given name is Harittaca-Kumari, "Princess Golden-skin", but I prefer "Matanga", it's a bit less grand and it keeps me down to earth.'

* * *

One of the most frequent visitors to the Jetavana was the Royal Garland-maker's daughter Pujika. She had been bringing flowers, woven into colourful and fragrant garlands and threaded together in intricate displays, since she was a small child.

She came again on this day, not only bearing floral gifts but carrying her child of nine Moons too. Krishna was at the main hall, enjoying a nowadays rare conversation with Ananda, when Pujika and her child approached, accompanied by her older sister and her young husband. They had been married when they reached sixteen Rains and their son had arrived nine Moons after. They had come to request a blessing for their first child and one for the next child too, who was clearly on the way.

The young family settled on some mats in front of the two monks while they chanted blessings for the children. Pujika had prepared a bright array of red kanavera flowers to offer and she presented these to the monks with great devotion.

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CHAPTER 14:

‘AVOIDING THE MASTER!?’



Most of the Sangha were surprised when, one morning, the Master simply announced to the community that an evening meal, indeed any food after the passing of noon, was no longer to be permitted. He did not base his establishment of this new rule on any one person's wrongdoing, or behaviour that had been criticized by others, he merely stated, 'Bhikkhus, I eat at a single session. By so doing, I am free from illness and affliction, and I enjoy health, strength and a comfortable abiding. Come friends, do the same and you will enjoy the same benefits too.'

On hearing this, Krishna immediately thought, 'I can't do that!' And he said it out loud, to his own surprise, adding, 'I can't eat all the food for one day at a single session; I'd be worried that I wouldn't be getting enough and that I'd be hungry later.' The words burst out of him in the midst of the gathering, even though he was back in the middle ranks of the monks. The Master, hearing his words, and appreciating that Krishna was not the only one with such worries and anxieties about the new standard, offered a more relaxed possibility.

'If it is preferred, members of the Sangha can eat one part of the day's food early in the morning, after the alms-round, and can keep some back to partake of later in the morning, thus eating at more than just the one session.' He paused for a moment, then added, 'However, from now on no food at all is to be taken between noon and dawn of the next day.'

Again, Krishna found himself objecting.

'Venerable Master,' I'm not willing to eat in that way either; for if I were to do so I would still be worried and anxious about being hungry in the evening.'

Even as he was saying this Krishna realized he was publicly declaring that he, as a disciple of the Enlightened One, was not willing to undertake the training that the Master was describing. He could see that he sounded like a petulant child, and that behind his words were the feelings of a three-year-old, 'It's not fair! I don't want to! You can't make me!' Surama sat not far away, a visible smirk decorating his visage.

Krishna's words met with a studied silence from the Master and the rest of the monks gathered there in the hall and it was left to him as to how he was going to now act in relation to his stated disagreement with the guidance of the Buddha. His solution was to slip away after the assembly was over and then to find Assaji and Punabbasuka who had somehow contrived not to be at the meeting.

Krishna soon found them at the cluster of dwellings occupied by the Group of Six and related to them the new ruling that the Master had established that day. To Krishna's delight, the two elders chuckled and, plainly being of the same mind, said, 'Friend, we eat in the morning, the afternoon and the evening. By so doing, we are

free from illness and affliction, and we enjoy health, strength and a comfortable abiding. Why should we abandon a benefit visible here and now to pursue some kind of possible benefit, way off in the future? We shall eat in the morning the afternoon and the evening, just as we have done up until now!’

This affirmation and commitment to stick by the old standard was just what Krishna had wanted to hear. Basuka continued, ‘Why make such a to-do out of a mere trifle, such a little thing as this? It seems really beneath the Master’s concern – I’m sure he’s been persuaded into creating this supposedly beneficial limitation by one of those overzealous fanatics, like Devadatta. Personally, I feel it would be more discourteous to take up this standard, rather than to politely ignore it, as it would only affirm the views of those extremists who don’t take the Middle Way to heart.’

This reasoning was music to Krishna’s ears so he left the conversation feeling more comfortable with the public objection he had made at the time of the announcement. His joy was short-lived, however, for when he went to chat with Udayin, who had been at the morning gathering, he was shocked to learn that Udayin – usually one of his more sympathetic companions in the holy life with regard to sensuality – was enthusiastic about this new renunciation.

‘How many painful states has the Blessèd One rid us of! How many pleasant states has he brought us! When he said, “Please abandon the evening meal” I was upset and sad, thinking, “The Blessèd One tells us to abandon the more sumptuous of our two meals, for nearly all cooking is done at night, only little by day.” But out of love and respect for the Blessèd One, and out of fear of wrong-doing, I see that this is greatly for our benefit and well-being. What a wonderful and consummately skilful teacher we have!’

Krishna wondered whether Udayin’s enthusiasm had been influenced by the outburst of Krishna’s words at the meeting, and that Udayin felt the need to set him straight for some reason, but, whether it was or not, it was vividly clear that Udayin thought that these new restrictions were a fine idea.

His heart sank further, a few days later, when it turned out that Assaji and Basuka had been summoned for a conversation with the Master and that, following a talk about faith, and the various kinds of disciples and their readiness to listen and learn, the two Elders had come around to the Master’s way of thinking and had agreed that they had lost their way. They now said that they would follow the new rules about only eating in the morning. So, Krishna was left completely on his own in this:– How was he supposed to handle his own convictions in the face of such opposition? What was he supposed to do?

* * *

‘You don’t look as though you have aged a day,’ Khujjuttara was delighted to see her old friend Dusaka once again, ‘and Tingri too! She’s just the same as she always was.’

‘You mean I still look a hundred and fifty,’ he chuckled.

‘I mean look at all the snow on my roof,’ she smiled in turn, ‘and my back is killing me on a daily basis. Still nothing to complain about, in truth, I’m here at the Jetavana, close to the Master and, as he says, “Better to be afflicted in body, not in mind than it is to be afflicted in mind but not in body.”’

They were strolling along together – their rolling, halting gaits matching each other – under the deep shade of the trees, approaching the small throw of mats that Kesini had laid out for Queen Vasabha and her now arriving friends. ‘Your Serene Highness,’ Khujjuttara began, ‘May I please introduce you to a dear, old and respected friend of mine, the Samana Dusaka.’

Vasabha looked a little surprised, ‘Doesn’t that mean...?’

“‘Bad monk’, yes it does,’ Dusaka grinned through his forest of wrinkles, ‘it’s an old, very old nickname. Like young Matanga here, who you introduced me to this morning, my “real” name is a lot more fancy and auspicious but I happily go by the well-intended insult instead. To have everyone call me “Impervioso-Mysterioso” every time they wanted to say hello would be a bit of a chore, don’t you think?’

Matanga took this as a cue to chime in, she having been greatly charmed and delighted to meet this haggard and ragged sage. He was clearly some kind of wise holy man but the exact variety, and where he might have come from, were indeed impervious to her scrying and mysterious.

“‘Matanga’ suits me fine. Even to go by “Harita” – Golden – on its own seems a bit inflated, to be honest.’ They gathered around the mats and cushions that Kesini had spread out and the Queen invited them to sit. She then noticed that, along with Khujjuttara and the old sage, there was not just Matanga but a small black and white, shaggy-coated dog at the old monk’s heel as well.

‘May she join us, Your Serene Highness?’ Dusaka indicated his small furry companion.

‘Of course, she is most welcome. I am delighted to meet you both,’ Vasabha smiled warmly and genuinely. As Dusaka and Tingri, as well as Khujjuttara and Matanga got settled, he exchanged a questioning look with his canine partner. Tingri cocked her head to one side and yipped, as if agreeing to an unspoken question from the Elder. Dusaka turned to the Queen and smiled, with a curious penetrating twinkle in his eye as well. He let a moment pass before he spoke.

‘You won’t remember, but we have met before milady.’ Vasabha was indeed drawing a blank on this, pretty sure that she would have recalled meeting such a distinctive looking figure, with his big bone earrings, his stack of dreadlocks held in place with a twig and the varicoloured robes he was covered in.

‘You are quite correct, I don’t recall ever meeting you before; when was that?’ She was making polite conversation and in her poshest accent or so she thought, but Kesini was beginning to get anxious:– Where was this conversation headed? She had met Dusaka before, in Kosambi, and she knew he habitually carried with him a bag full of surprises.

‘You were a baby when I last saw you. In fact I met you after your first birth as well as after your second.’

Kesini was increasingly disturbed by this weird turn of their talk and Vasabha was puzzled too. She was skilled at improvising at the lying game however, so she decided to keep on with the subject and find out more. 'My "second birth", that's an odd assertion. Only brahmin boys are "twice born", the second one being when they receive the sacred thread, the *yajña pavita* at their upanayana ceremony.' She sustained the use of her most elevated accent as she aired this knowledge of brahmin traditions. 'I am neither a boy nor a brahmin so how could I be "twice born"? Your assertion is quite intriguing.' She raised an eyebrow and gave him half a smile.

'Kshatriyan girls do not receive the sacred thread – my father is Lord Mahanama, ruler of the Sakyans, and my mother the Lady Maddarupi, a Sakyan noble-woman.' Kesini was soothed by the marvellous matter-of-factness in the tone of Vasabha's voice:– She really was very good at this.

Dusaka paused again before he spoke. Tingri barked and gave him a sideways glance. The exchange seemed loaded and caused Kesini to press her fingernails into the palm of her one hand. Vasabha fixed her mask more securely.

'Those good people,' Dusaka carefully stated, 'may be your adoptive parents but as soon as I met you here I recognized your fragrance; it's unmistakable.'

'Yes, what is that?' Matanga could not resist asking. 'It always reminds me of my childhood, of mountain flowers in Kullu, or something way in the past, but I can never pin it down.' She then realized she was interrupting the flow of an important exchange. Dusaka looked at Vasabha and she stared back, not sure how to play this move. Dusaka saved her the trouble.

'It's not a perfume she wears; it's her essence; her breath itself carries the fragrance of flowers, the blossoms of the Jambu tree, to be precise.'

'What on earth are you talking about?!' Vasabha opted for a haughty dismissal of the ramblings of a senile wanderer as the best angle of approach, 'I think you're...' and her words ran out. Dusaka's face was filled with such love and honesty, such sincere, earthy goodness, that she found it impossible to keep dissembling. She decided to acknowledge the truth of the situation since it was clear that Dusaka knew more about her than she knew herself:– What would be the point of trying to brazen it out, like ice endeavouring to resist melting in the sun?

'Yes, it's true. My breath has always had this scent of flowers – I've always been this way and I have no idea why – another strange thing is that my skin seems to glow in the dark, I can't explain that either.'

'It's also true that Prince Mahanama and Princess Maddarupi are not my parents.' Kesini flashed her a sharp look, alarmed at where this was now going, what Vasabha was risking by saying that. The Queen stilled her with a gentle raising of her hand.

'Even when I was a slave-girl in the royal kitchens at Kapilavatthu, there was the scent of flowers around me, although it was usually masked by all the cooking smells, which can get pretty ripe. I am not of royal blood at all but I was sent here to marry King Pasenadi as a fake princess because the Sakyan nobles were too proud to allow one of their real royal family to wed a mere Kosalan low-lander.'

'My true mother is Nagamunda and my father was probably Yasa, another slave who was married to my mother, although Prince Mahanama claimed I was his, from one of their... encounters. Papa Yasa died a few years ago and my mother, and my brothers and sisters, were given their freedom when I took on this royal masquerade. We were all slaves in the palace at Kapilavatthu.

'I enjoy playing the part of a proud Sakyan princess, I admit that I get a thrill from the power of it, but it is all a pretence. I share this truth with you as I trust you all as genuine friends. I leave it to you to keep silent or to tell others as you see fit.'

Kesini now began to shed some tears, afraid that her mistress, and she as well, would be exposed and thus be severely punished – probably executed violently. No one spoke for a while but glances between Khujjuttara, a former slave, young Matanga, of the lowest candala caste, and Dusaka, all confirmed that none of them had any issue with Vasabha's predicament. Tingri moved over to Kesini and climbed onto her lap, then licked her hand by way of reassurance.

Tingri then gave Dusaka another side-glance and cocked her head once more. A lengthy conversation then ensued between the dog and her human, consisting of many snuffles, yips and raised eyebrows, pursings of lips and other semi-verbal expressions. They looked back and forth between each other, and at Vasabha and Matanga. At last Dusaka turned to face the Queen and spoke again.

'Milady, your real mother is not Nagamunda in Kapilavatthu, but is a kinnari from Kosambi. That's why you were twice-born. Kinnaris lay eggs – that's the first birth – then when the egg hatches, that's the second one. You are a true *dvija*, by your birth not just by a ceremony. I knew you when you were still in your shell, and then when you had broken out and were an infant in the nest.'

Vasabha was stunned to silence by this revelation. Everyone was on tenterhooks, waiting to hear more. Tingri snuffled and barked again, as if to say, 'Well, go on!'

'Your true mother, Jambu-sirivanna, has been desperately looking for you for most of your life. Your father, your real father, is not far from here, from what I gather.'

'What do you mean?' Vasabha was ready for almost anything by now.

'Well, with respect to your mother, the kinnari, you went missing from the nest in Kosambi and she never found out where you'd gone. I don't know how you ended up in Kapilavatthu but she will be overjoyed to find you now.'

'What about my father? If it wasn't Yasa or the Prince in Kapilavatthu, who was he? Another kinnari?'

Dusaka looked at Tingri again – she sniffed and cocked her head once more. 'Your father is Krishna, the dark-skinned monk whom I believe you have met here a few times.'

'Krishna!? Really? You're sure? I saw a lot of him, with Khujjuttara and Matanga, a few years ago but in recent times he's been avoiding us, it seems.' Khujjuttara jumped in then, saying, 'Hanging around with the Group of Six you'll not be surprised to hear.'

Tingri snorted and yipped; Dusaka smiled wryly at what was apparently her comment on this situation. Once again, there was a rapid and extended exchange of snorts and barklets, mumbles and growls, and a waggling of brows. Dusaka looked Tingri in the eye, she then glanced at Matanga and wagged her chin. Dusaka then took a breath and turned to Matanga himself. He raised his own shaggy eyebrows.

'I assume you don't yet know that he's your father too. You were born a few months before Queen Vasabha here – or Tambaka as was your name given by your parents,' he said, turning back to the wide-eyed Queen, who had thought she couldn't be more surprised than she already was.

'Well, you're wrong there, sir.' Matanga retorted. 'I know very well that my dad is Jayanta, from the Headman's family in Kulluta. I was there with him and my mother Sugandhi until I was in my teens. I grew up in his house.'

Dusaka and Tingri exchanged another look. 'How can I put this? Your mother knew Krishna before she married your dad and before he became a monk with the Master. He was a wanderer of sorts and went to work in their knacker's yard in Kullata. He spent a year there and, let's say, you were born on account of the affection that your mother and Krishna had for each other. He had left the place long before there was any sign that you were on the way.' He paused and let his account sink in.

'You don't have any brothers or sisters do you – or half ones either – isn't that so?'

'That's true.'

'That's because I happen to know (don't ask me how) that Jayanta wasn't able to have children but your mother, Sugandhi could.'

'But Krishna – he's a very nice person and has been so kind to me from when we first met but he can't be my dad,' she was embarrassed to say why she thought this and blushed, 'I mean he's so dark. If I'm his daughter – if we...' she corrected herself '... are his daughters – why are the Queen and I not dark like him? Her skin is more coppery than mine but still, neither of us are anything like him that way.' Even as she was saying this she realized she was speaking more out of surprise than an appreciation of how life works.

'Sometimes it's like that,' Dusaka shrugged as if she should indeed be aware of how unpredictable things are in the world. 'Krishna's own parents – both Kamanita and Savitri – were golden-skinned like you. These things happen all the time. Besides did you ever look closely at his eyes? They are the exact same dark purple as your own, if I might say; looking at you both now, the cast of your features is just like his – the both of you. Skin-colour aside you are both the spitting image of your father.'

He went quiet again, leaving space for Matanga and Vasabha to take this all in. Tingri snorted once more, to indicate that there was a bit more that her human companion should add.

'So,' Dusaka picked up the hint, 'Krishna has no idea you are his daughter, unless of course he's noticed the family resemblance, but I haven't seen him recently

either so I couldn't say for sure. Let's say it's likely that he just thinks of you as the nice young girl he befriended at the well on the way from Kitagiri, and who is the faithful friend and helper of the sage Khujjuttara. So I'll leave it to you to tell him how you all are related – if he ever comes to visit you again that is.' He grinned.

Vasabha asked, 'Does he know about me or at least who I was?'

'Oh yes! He loved his little copper-coloured daughter very much but it was his negligence that caused you to get lost, or stolen, or whatever happened. He left you alone in the nest when you were tiny. He got distracted and by the time he got back to the nest, you were gone.

'I have no idea how you got from Kosambi to Kapilavatthu – there are things I know and things I don't know – but it was his fault that you went missing so, once you were gone, a big rift opened up between your mother, the kinnari Jambu-sirivanna, known as Maggot, and your father, Krishna, who was by then a monk. She kicked him out and said she didn't want to have anything more to do with him and she took off with a group of her close friends to try and find you. As I said, she's been searching ever since, but now, if I can find her, I'll let her know the search is over – if that's alright with you.'

'Of course!' Vasabha had no hesitation. She and Matanga looked at each other, seeing 'sister' for the first time.

'This is all a lot to take in,' Matanga said quietly.

'Indeed!' Khujjuttara added, 'Any other boulders to politely drop into our pond? I was looking forward to a nice simple chat, and to introduce you to the Queen as an old friend of Kesini and myself. Are you sure that I'm not the Lost Princess of Taxila or that Tingri is not the Buddha-to-be, the Bodhisattva Sri Ariya Maitreya!?' Tingri herself seemed to be highly amused by this idea and snuffled raucously, showing most of her teeth in her attempt at a cheeky grin.

* * *

Meanwhile, the actual Bodhisattva Sri Ariya Maitreya was sitting, deeply absorbed in meditation, in the temple of the Malachite Cave, in the Tusita Heaven.

Muñca had considered, 'We wish to consult the Lord Maitreya so let's make sure we arrive far from his abode. That way I can lead these fools a merry dance while years fly by in the human world.' As soon as he brought them into the Tusita Heaven, however, Rhamba spoke up fiercely, saying, 'I've been here before and we are in the wrong place. Time is of the essence – come with me!'

The three kinnaris, Gumbiya and Salassa were all new to this realm and so were still reeling from the impact of their arrival. The air was densely laden with perfumes of startling varieties, the trees around them were jewel-bedecked, if the jewels were not indeed the flowers and fruits of the trees themselves – it was hard to tell. There was an overwhelming mood of ease and peace in the forms of the land and the beings around them, who moved with majesty and splendour, an effortless

grace, and whose raiment was formed as if of coloured song and diaphanous breezes.

‘Quickly!’ Rhamba urged them. ‘With me – we have to travel far to reach the Great Bodhisattva. I don’t know how we ended up here.’ She did not for a moment suspect that their friend Muñca had brought them out to the far marches on purpose. ‘Luckily in Tusita the power of thought is such that we can just will ourselves to the Malachite Cave, where Lord Maitreya dwells, but we must not linger. Every minute here is a day gone by in the coarser realms.’

Rhamba gathered the group close and, by way of explanation, said, ‘I came here as a part of the dancing entourage of Lord Dhatarattha one time. We paid respects to the Lord Maitreya. Come on, here!’ They joined hands and, at the last moment, Muñca let go and went his own way. He intuited that the interview with the Lord Maitreya would not lead to much and, on account of the other Tusita devas being generally disinterested in realms lower than their own place of peace and ease, they would not be of much help to the searching group. They would thus then soon go to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods, where they were very likely indeed to get accurate news of the child, (by now probably a grown woman), and consequently of Muñca’s deceptions. His having led them on a wild goose-chase would become obvious:– Time to depart and leave them to it. He smirked as he saw the shocked face of Ant as he deliberately and pointedly released her hand.

* * *

At the mouth of the Malachite Cave temple there were four Tusita devas seated on either side and one particularly majestic and dread-inducing figure at the centre – standing, holding a flaming sword. As in the part of the Tusita Heaven where they had first appeared, the air here was fragrant with exotic scents that sparkled in the nose like the jewels that twinkled in the trees and grasses. Flower blossoms glowed as they sprouted from the clefts in the rocks that formed the cave-mouth, and in amongst the lawns and moss-gardens that spread beneath their feet. Music was in the air and the jewelled trees that formed the avenue to the Malachite Cave reached so far into the sky it was hard to see if the first branches began to spread before the opalescent clouds wrapped around the noble trunks. The peace and grandeur around them made the beauties of the Heaven of the Four Guardian Deities seem pale and feeble in comparison. Above all, the feeling of profound contentment and easefulness abounded here; as they approached, one of the splendid devas who served as a host spoke their traditional words of greeting, ‘Oh rest ye, fellow travellers, ye need not wander more.’

Since Muñca had clearly abandoned them, for his own reasons, Rhamba took the lead, having been there once before. She bowed before the awesome protective deva at the entrance, then saying, ‘Oh Great One, we lowly seekers humbly request an audience with the Blessed Bodhisattva and Buddha-to-be, Lord Sri Ariya Maitreya. We have travelled far seeking the lost, nay, stolen child of my companion

here, the noble kinnari Jambu-sirivanna. We have searched the Underworld, the Heaven of the Four Guardians and now, as he is a holder of great knowledge and wisdom, we seek the guidance of Lord Maitreya so that this sad mother may be reunited with her child, so rudely taken from her.'

The shape and raiment of the sword-bearing deva shifted and flickered as if responding to the request – one moment muscular and imposing, dreadful, one moment gentle and light-filled – at last the sword transformed into a torch, a blazing brand, and their robes became magenta and purple, pale blue flames licked the edges of the cloth yet did not scorch it.

'Come!' The voice was surprisingly feminine for such a towering and awesome being. 'The Master will see you. Be brief, if you will.'

'Thank you, we are most grateful,' Rhamba chivvied the group forward and they entered the Malachite Cave temple. The walls curved up around them, the dark green swirls of rock seeming to have flowed into place and frozen in a thousand delicate and plant-like forms. Layers of dense and light were interspersed and threaded through each other like a tapestry of rock and verdant, living tissue.

The Lord Maitreya was seated in the heart of the Temple. His robes were magenta and purple – almost the same as the deva at the entrance and also Bee's more humble garments. He radiated kindness as if a field of light was around him. He summoned them close and his gentle smile was enough to put them all at ease at once, even in the presence of so mighty and holy a being.

'I have been informed of your search – why and how and where. In order to help you in the best possible way, I will offer you, Jambu-sirivanna and your worthy companions, this teaching. Please listen carefully:

'Discrimination is consciousness
Whereas non-discrimination is wisdom;
Clinging to consciousness causes defilement
Whereas wisdom ensures purity;
Defilement causes birth and death
Whereas purity leads to where there are no Buddhas.'

* * *

'I confess that I'm not the sharpest axe in the rack,' Gumbiya began, as they exited the Malachite Cave, 'but that woz... wot woz 'e talking' about?' His grizzled face was bent into a knot of puzzlement. 'Did any of you get the poin' of tha'? It woz lost on me.'

'Me too,' confessed Bee, often the quickest on the uptake. Ant, Rhamba and Salassa all wore expressions displaying varying degrees of perplexity.

Maggot was wide-eyed and smiling broadly, which all the others were startled by. 'Isn't it obvious!' She looked back and forth around the group. 'I can't believe none of you understood that. It's plain as day!'

‘What is?!’ snapped Bee.

‘I know where we have to go and who we need to talk to – quick, come with me!’

‘What?’ Several of the friends all retorted at once.

‘What do you mean “what?”? Quick – take my hand! I think I’ve got the hang of moving between planes now. Come on! We’re off to the Tavatimsa.’

* * *

Krishna’s strategy for dealing with his dilemma was superficially effective but, just below the surface, it was deeply unsatisfactory. He was torn; on the one hand he loved and respected the Master, as well as his friends Khujjuttara and Matanga who were so modest and had such few needs; on the other, he was committed to his life-affirming philosophy of ‘Sooner! More!’ and the values of his friends Surama and the Group of Six. The latter had all seemed to capitulate to this new standard of not eating anything in the afternoon or evening so he was now quite alone in his resistance.

His solution was to determinedly stick to his resolve to eat when he felt like it so he would keep some of the alms-food he received in the morning and eat it alone at his kuti in the later parts of the day. To be guarded against any embarrassing confrontations, as he saw it, he decided he would avoid seeing or listening to the Master for the whole Rains Retreat. Logistically this was a bit of a challenge but he was quite pleased with his own ingenuity in the various ruses and excuses he used to pull this off but, more difficult to deal with than the practicalities of avoiding contact with the Master, was the inner voice of his own intuitive wisdom.

Krishna was well aware of the teachings that said such as: ‘Rare it is in the world to be born as a human being; rare it is to be born at the time a Buddha is in the world; rare it is to have the good fortune to meet such a fully enlightened one and to hear their teachings; rare it is to have the opportunity to go forth into monastic life under the guidance of such a Teacher and to be able to live in the same place.’ That irritating inner voice kept piping up to remind him of this, ‘Krishna, you are a devoted disciple of the Master and you are living in the same monastery as him yet you are working hard every day NOT to see him and hear his teachings. Avoiding the Master!? You are an idiot!’

When he had been particularly clever in escaping from a formal meeting or a Dharma talk, the inner wise advisor would get particularly loud: ‘Oh, well done! Very smart indeed. Congratulations – tremendous achievement.’ The sarcasm from his own wisdom faculty dripped like vitriol onto his thinly constructed ideology and kept burning fuming holes in it. They stung too. It was painful, unsatisfactory and yet seemingly inescapable, if he was going to abide by his life-affirming principles.

He was very relieved to be able to meet up with his old mentor Dusaka during these months of the Rains so he could at least voice some of his struggles to the wise Elder. He was glad that Dusaka didn’t just find fault with him and tell him

to give up his indulgent ways. However, Dusaka did steadily point out how the new standards around food merely echoed the general encouragement towards simplicity, fewness of needs, and independence of reliance, that were so prevalent in many areas of the Master's teachings. Krishna had to concede that it was draining to be always chasing after more and more sumptuous food, interesting conversations and experiences, and the generally lush life-style that the Group of Six advocated. The cheerful ease that people like Khujjuttara and Matanga displayed – with no possessions to speak of and very simple tastes – it was embarrassing that they were lay people and he was supposed to be the monk yet they put him to shame with their modest habits and preferences.

This embarrassment was one of the reasons he had been glad to spend less time with them in recent years, along with the encouragement of Surama.

Dusaka also made a point of gently reminding Krishna of what good spiritual friends Khujjuttara and Matanga were, as well as Queen Vasabha and her companion Kesini. Somehow, between him and Tingri, Krishna was persuaded to rethink his stance of keeping away from them since, when he looked at it without the screens of 'should' and 'shouldn't' colouring the picture he saw that, as usual, Dusaka was absolutely right and that, in addition, he simply missed the company of these good friends.

Dusaka also seemed to be hinting something, through a certain cast to his glance, that the friendships with Vasabha and Matanga were of a special significance. Krishna was not quite sure what to make of this:– Was he being encouraged to be close but also warned about being not too close as they were both young and pretty? Was there something he had to do for them? Or them for him?

Dusaka and Tingri seemed to have a few exchanges in their sniffing and humming patois, which left Krishna none the wiser. There was something about the two young women that he had to pay attention to but he was clueless as to what, and Dusaka was, apparently, not going to fill him in anytime soon.

* * *

Things came to ahead as the end of the Rains approached. A number of bhikkhus were engaged in sewing a new robe for the Master, so he would be able to use it when he went wandering through the countryside once the retreat season was over. Krishna, on one of his circuitous runs through the forest paths, trying to avoid the central buildings, came across the group of monks under an awning with the strips of robe-cloth stretched on a frame to enable them to be sewn more easily together. They got chatting and, without any preconception of challenging or embarrassing Krishna, one of them simply commented that, 'This robe is being made for the Blessed One so he can go wandering after the Rains. He's going to be off soon. Wouldn't it be a good idea for you to rethink your lack of willingness to go by the new standard about times to eat? If you hang on to that all by yourself, just you alone, isn't that going to make life difficult for you in the future?'

The monk's tone was so friendly and kind, and made such sense, it pierced through Krishna's usual philosophical defences. He was not expecting this kind of comment at that moment and so he was quite unguarded and, what's more, it made perfect sense to him. With his ego-protection down he now realized that, 'I have indeed been an idiot, a complete moron. What on earth was I thinking of?!'

As this thought formed in his mind another monk came down the pathway, between the tall trees of the forest. 'Oh, here you are Krishna, the Master has called for you; please come with me.'

When they arrived at the Gandha-kuti the messenger monk left them and the Master invited Krishna to sit with him. Krishna realized that, even though he had been a novice and a monk for over twenty Rains now, up to this moment he had never had a one-to-one conversation with the Buddha. Part of him felt he should be nervous – especially considering how he had been studiously and stupidly avoiding the Teacher for the last three months – but in his heart he felt instead only a powerful peace and waves of loving-kindness that seemed to radiate visibly from the Great Being. Before the Buddha had a chance to speak, Krishna spontaneously launched into an apology and opened his heart unguardedly.

'Venerable Sir, transgression overcame me, in that like a fool, confused and blundering, when a training precept was made known by the Blessed One, I publicly declared, in the Sangha of bhikkhus, my unwillingness to undertake the training. Venerable Sir, may you forgive my transgression since I now see it as that; and I will use this painful mistake as an encouragement to be more restrained in the future.' Krishna stated this with his heart quite at ease and grateful for the opportunity to begin again.

'Yes, Krishna, surely you lost your way. For even though you knew I was living here, and that I could easily know what was going on, by encompassing your mind with my mind, still you were grimly determined to go your own way. I knew, when I surveyed your mind, "This misguided man does not heed the Teaching, he does not listen." When I knew, however that you had seen your fault, then I invited you to come and see me, for now you are able to listen with full attention, and can hear the Dharma with eager ears.

'You were empty, hollow, a wrong-doer, but now that has changed.'

The Master emanated such a power of kindness and natural ease that Krishna was entirely taken up with the beauty and wisdom of his presence and his words. He spoke to Krishna of how he had met his father, Kamanita the Wanderer, and of their dialogue in the potter's shed. He spoke of Kamanita's sensuality and life-affirming convictions and how he took exception to some aspects of the Teaching, even though he professed to have gone forth in the Buddha's name.

'He never realized with whom he shared that humble shelter that night but one day, in the far future, he will know.' The Master then looked warmly at Krishna and said, 'The mango did not fall far from the tree, with respect to your philosophy, I discern.'

He was not accusatory or fault-finding, merely observing. Krishna realized this was the ideal opportunity to ask the Master directly about what he had assumed to be the case with regards to the two levels of the Teaching, over these last twenty Rains.

‘Venerable Master,’ Krishna began, ‘many years ago, just after the tragic fire in Kosambi that consumed Queen Samavati, who was my sister, and which had been caused by Queen Magandiya, my other sister, I was able to meet with the wise elder Lady Gavinna who had been a concubine in the court of Kosambi. She was a seer, a visionary and she spoke of a prophecy that seemed to include me, and my sisters. It ran thus, as I have memorized it:

‘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.’

‘She was fading but she said, about this “key”, “This is the genuine way to break through to enlightenment – ‘Sooner! More!’ – this will lead you to the Deathless, to the Eternal, the Other Shore.” I was not fully clear about what she meant by “Sooner! More!” but I understood this to be the path of affirmation of life, of filling the senses to maximum impact. Up to now I have tried to follow this way and when this way of affirmation has seemed to be contradicted by your public stance on renunciation and austerity, I have assumed that you were limited by what the public expects and had to present those provisional lesser teachings while the more esoteric and life affirming teachings – which might be interpreted by the small minded as “indulgent” – were left to be followed somewhat in secret by those on the higher path. Have I interpreted this correctly? Until now I have never been able to ask since there have always been so many others around, of varying attributes and abilities, but since it is just you, Venerable Master, and I, I ask you directly.’ Krishna did not know what to expect – it could be agreement and affirmation, it could be a ‘mogha purisa!’ scolding or anything in between.

The Master looked into him with great compassion and, after a moment, he said, ‘There is no “teacher’s closed fist”. No secret tantras for the select, the elite or the advanced. There are no such expedients that I have ever espoused, taught or agreed to. The kind of “life-affirming” teaching that you supposed I was expounding, which would contravene the very precepts I have established, has never been what I taught – you have misunderstood what the good Gavinna said that day. Your interpretation, and the path you say you have followed these last twenty Rains, has been mistaken. This is neither the Path I have followed nor the Path I teach.’

As the Master spoke, Krishna was filled with a strange flow of emotions: grief that he had got things so wrong; joy for hearing words so trustworthy and kindly, spoken especially for him; confusion as to what it was that Gavinna had really

meant; rapture at feeling the love and compassion that flooded, ocean-like, from the Master, washing through his being like a light-filled, cleansing draught. He now knew he had got things terribly wrong and that he'd need to change his ways. If he could not yet interpret the mysterious words of Gavinna he could at least do his best to follow the Master's way to the fullest extent possible, and use his guidance like the rest of the Sangha and lay community did. Maybe Gavinna did have a special prophecy about the best mangala and him, but he'd need to leave that aside for now. Maybe he could ask Kesini what she had understood, since she was there too when Gavinna had spoken those portentous words.

Regardless of the details, he needed to abandon the indulgent path he had been on and he needed to be much more austere and serious if he was to realize enlightenment in this lifetime.

He resolved to look for guidance in the Sangha that would give him a good direction with regards to renunciation, and he would certainly now attend all the Master's talks.

He felt embarrassed at how he had so deliberately avoided the Master for these last few months and, even though it was vividly clear that the Buddha was the embodiment of forgiveness and held no lasting criticism of Krishna, he was shy to draw too close and to ask for personal instruction from the Master himself.

Krishna pondered who else among the great Elders he might approach, to help him forge a new path. At last he decided that perhaps he should introduce himself to Devadatta, the Master's cousin, one of the most powerful and eminent monks in the community and one who was well known, like Maha-Kassapa, for maintaining a high standard of discipline and rigorous observance of the 'bitter practices', the *dhutangas*.

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CHAPTER 15:

THE AMBITIONS OF DEVADATTA



nawing doubts still pressed hungrily on Krishna's heart although now they had taken a different form. He had sought out Devadatta and had immediately been impressed by his confidence and his demeanour. Like the Buddha he had been a prince of the Sakyan people, and had the commanding presence that came as a natural result of that. He was also brilliantly clever and knowledgeable about his cousin's teaching; coupled with all this he had lived close to the Buddha since they were children and was not just the cousin of the Master but his brother-in-law as well – the princess Yasodhara, the Master's former wife, being Devadatta's sister, made him uncle to the Buddha's son Rahula too.

The source of Krishna's doubts now was that Devadatta – wise and impressive as he was – continually criticized the Buddha for having gone soft and lost his way. The conversation that Krishna had had with the Master had been illuminating and heart-warming, and had greatly strengthened his confidence in the Buddha's teachings. The overwhelming power of the Buddha's kindness and compassion had made an indelible impression on his heart, leaving him with the certainty that, 'The Master cannot be wrong!' in any way. This realization and trust had brought a great ease, a relaxation in him that he had never known before. Now, this trust was being challenged, and so soon after it had dawned.

When he had introduced himself to Devadatta, and had given him a brief rundown on how he had been thinking and acting for the last twenty Rains, to his surprise the Elder, after pausing for a moment, said, 'Your indulgences have certainly been reprehensible, and their philosophical justification dubious, however you were not completely wrong in your intentions, they were merely directed in a faulty way. I am acquainted with the late sage of Kosambi that you had the good fortune to meet – the Lady Gavinna was wise indeed – but I see that you interpreted her guidance in the way opposite to what she had intended. I can assure you,' and here Devadatta leaned his tall frame forward and flared his eyes, 'When she stated "Sooner! More!" is the way to enlightenment' the words unspoken, in her wounded and ailing state, were, "Give it all up sooner, rather than later. Relinquish more than you think you can." Thus you have sincerely followed a mistaken path for the last two decades.' He then went quiet, looking at Krishna intently, as though pondering how, or if, to continue.

'I have seen you in the company of my close students over these last few Moons. You will therefore have heard me explaining my concerns that the Master has become overly lenient in the Discipline and too liberal in his expounding of the

Dharma. The Sangha is losing its focus as the Master ages and so I see a need for substantial reform – coincidentally based around exactly the principles we just spoke of: “Renounce all worldly pursuits sooner rather than later; let go of more than you think you can.”

Krishna felt flattered that so highly esteemed a monk, and the Master’s cousin no less, would not just heed his trials and tribulations, and offer advice about them, but that he would also take the words that had played such a central role in Krishna’s life and hold them up (albeit with a reversed meaning) as a standard for all to follow.

As the moon waxed and waned a few more times Krishna’s confidence in Devadatta’s approach made more and more sense and he ardently undertook the stricter ascetic standards that his new teacher espoused.

He had also gone back to listening to more of the Master’s teachings as well, now that he had returned from his annual wanderings at the end of the Cold Season, but, in the informal discussions with Devadatta and his group after these talks, the Elder always managed to point out clear signs that the Master was going soft in his old age and that the need for reform was becoming more and more obvious.

Matters came to a head when King Pasenadi, and much of the royal court, had come to listen to a Dharma talk that the Master was giving on one of the Lunar Observance Days. Devadatta got up from his seat, raised his hands in *añjali* and stated, for all the assembly to hear, ‘Venerable Sir, the Blessed One is now old, aged, burdened with years and come to the last stage. Let the Blessed One now rest. Let him dwell in bliss in this present life. Let him hand over the governance of the Sangha to me; I will lead the community.’

He turned to Devadatta and calmly responded, ‘Enough, Devadatta, do not aspire to govern the Sangha. I would not hand over the leadership of the Sangha even to Sariputta or Moggallana, how should I do so to such a wastrel, such an unworthy person, such a gob of phlegm as you are?’

The Master spoke this harsh rebuke in a clear and steady voice. It was certain that all in the assembly had heard his words, then everything went quiet – there was a tension in the Hot Season air, no one knowing how Devadatta would react.

Internally Devadatta was seething, angry and indignant, but outwardly he silently bowed three times and left the gathering, a few of his close circle departing at the same time. Soon after, in the quarter of the Jetavana where Devadatta had his dwelling, his full coterie of adherents came together and the Elder spoke, ‘You can see why I have become concerned about my revered brother-in-law, my cousin, the Blessed One.’ His tone was studiously sympathetic. ‘Never before has he used that kind of language – “a gob of phlegm” – for anyone, let alone his own close relative. His faculties are indeed failing, both in terms of ability to govern properly and in terms of his own mental capacities.’ Any hint of resentment or anger at having been publicly disgraced, shamed, was completely absent. He was the picture of the compassionate family member, devoted student who was saddened by the waning abilities of their loved one and noble guide.

‘My friends, since the Master has rejected, by this public statement, any possibility of handing over rulership of the Sangha to me, let us at least try to encourage him to tighten some of the lackadaisical standards that have crept in.’

‘Venerable Sir, what do you have in mind?’ One of the monks asked. The whole group was listening carefully now. Krishna particularly so as he had been keen to adopt all the stricter standards that Devadatta encouraged.

‘As it happens, I have been developing a small collection of reforms, to be standards adopted by the whole Sangha, not just the few who favour living according to the voluntary ascetic practices, the *dhutangas*. There are five changes I wish to propose which I feel will go a long way to reinvigorating the Sangha’s spiritual life and which will conduce to great communal harmony. The five are:

‘1) All monastics should dwell in the forest and any village or city monasteries or dwellings would be prohibited.

‘2) All monastics should live only on the food they receive on alms-round, not accepting any food offered later in the monastery or on invitation to a lay-person’s house.

‘3) All monastics should only make robes from discarded scrap cloth, not from any material specially given by lay people.

‘4) All monastics should not live in any kind of dwelling but only reside at the foot of a tree.

‘5) All monastics should be vegetarians for life and should never eat fish or meat.

‘For the sake of preserving the Master’s precious legacy, we need to intervene somehow and these reforms are the ideal solution!’

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The day came soon enough when Devadatta requested the opportunity to speak with the Master, ‘On an important matter.’ Ananda was anxious about what was intended since the previous exchange between the two had been the public request by Devadatta for the Buddha to hand over the role of leadership, and the Master’s blunt rebuttal of that.

It was not such a big gathering this time and only monks and a few novices were present. Devadatta was the epitome of politeness and proper form and, after having paid respects, and once he and all the Sangha members had settled, he presented his five points to the Master.

Once he had finished his list, and without addressing Devadatta directly, the Buddha asked the assembly a question, ‘What qualities do you see in me because of which my disciples honour, revere, respect and venerate me and live in dependence on my teaching?’

One monk at once spoke up, ‘Venerable Sir, the Blessed One eats little and commends eating little.’

The Buddha responded, 'There are disciples of mine who live on a cupful or half a cupful of food a day, while I sometimes eat the full contents of my alms-bowl or even more. So, if my disciples honoured me on the basis of that "I eat little and commend eating little" then those disciples who live on a cupful of food per day should not honour and revere me, nor live in dependence on me.'

Another monk said, 'The Blessed One is content with any kind of robe...' The Buddha replied in the same vein, how some Sangha members used rags from charnel grounds or rubbish heaps to make their robes, while sometimes he wore robes that were so fine, 'That pumpkin hair is coarse in comparison.'

Another monk said, 'The Blessed One is content with any kind of alms-food...'

Another said, 'The Blessed One is content with any kind of resting place...'

Finally one said, 'The Blessed One delights in seclusion and commends seclusion...' To each of these the Master responded in similar ways, saying how he occasionally, according to time and place, accepted luxurious and abundant offerings. In this he was expressing the sentiment, 'Please do not praise me or follow me just because of these external practices of austerity; they are not the whole story.'

He then turned to his maleficent cousin, 'So, Devadatta, if you can heed these examples of living austerely when appropriate, but adapting to circumstances when appropriate (if offered fine food, a gabled mansion to reside in, new-woven cloth for robes and suchlike), then you will understand why I hereby reject all five of your proposals: let those who wish to, dwell in a forest; let those who wish to, dwell in a village. Let those who wish, live on alms-food; let those who wish, accept invitations. Let those who wish, use only discarded cloth for their robes; let those who wish, wear robes given by householders. Let those who wish live at the root of a tree but not during the Rains, as I have not allowed that. And I have allowed fish and meat to be eaten by the Sangha that is pure in three aspects: when it is not seen, heard or suspected that the creature has been killed to offer to the Sangha.'

The Master paused to let this set of refusals sink in, then he added, 'However, there are attributes my disciples respect and revere me for that are indeed intrinsically worthy of such honouring. These are: the higher virtue, the qualities of knowledge and vision, the higher wisdom, the expounding and elucidating of the Four Noble Truths and, lastly, the explication of the many and various ways to develop wholesome states. These are the qualities for which I am appropriately praised and upon which those who wish to follow me can depend, and which are sure to bring them benefit.'

To the surprise of some gathered there, and to the relief of Ananda and others, Devadatta seemed to take this all in good spirit and he chose not to argue or discuss the issue further. He, instead, rose to his knees and asked leave to pay his respects, thanking the Master for having been granted the chance to offer his proposals.

It was a further surprise, to the few who glanced at Devadatta's face as he rose to leave, that rather than any disappointment showing there, there was a distinct smirk. As if things had gone exactly as he had wanted them to.

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Maggot could not say how she knew but, on hearing the cryptic verse from the Bodhisattva Maitreya, she instantly made the connection, 'Don't go by appearances and discriminate, clinging to sense-consciousness. The beings I know who are most different in their appearance and in their nature are Hiri and Siri, the asura sisters and daughters of Queen Suja and King Indra. They are of the *kalakanja-asura* type and ill-favoured to look upon, yet they are the most pure-hearted and honest, humble devas I have ever met. Find Hiri and Siri and they will know!' She was absolutely sure.

The group appeared in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods close to the capital city, Masakkasara, surrounded as it was by glittering towers and streaming banners. The city walls with their thousand gates and thousand turrets were thickly studded with the seven types of gemstones and shone – now silvery, now golden – in the clear light of the sky.

Ant was very keen to be reunited with Ninka as soon as possible but the first thing that she was aware of in this new realm was that, as she had thought, the gandharva Muñca had released his hand from hers and, since he was at the end of the line that the group made, he had not arrived in the Tavatimsa Heaven with them.

'Was that an accident?' Bee asked.

'How did he lose his grip?' Rhamba wondered, 'It's not as though we were shaken about or anything.'

'He let go on purpose,' Ant assured them, 'it was deliberate and I even saw a nasty look in his eye as he broke away. It was strange – it *is* strange, after he put so much effort into helping us.'

Maggot was getting impatient already, 'Look, whatever his reasons, he was a bit of a stranger to us so who knows what he had on his mind. We need to find Hiri and Siri.'

'And Ninka!' chimed in Ant.

'So maybe that's the best plan. Get to the Nandana Grove to find Ninka then she can let us know how to find the Princesses.'

'Good idea, Bee,' Maggot was keen to move.

'Does anyone of us know the direction of the Nandana Grove from here?'

'No' me,' Gumby shrugged, 'I bin 'ere once or twice but it's not my territ'ry.' Salassa spoke up, 'I'm pretty sure the Grove is east of the city; I've visited before, with the Four Great Protectors' events, and where we are is the Pharusaka Park, to the south. We need to head east and north from here.'

Maggot reached her hands out to either side, in the hope that they could just think themselves in that direction and get there immediately but both Rhamba and Salassa shook their heads.

‘That method works in Tusita and above but I’m afraid that here we have to fly, the ordinary way. Gumbiya – you’re the quickest. Give us all a lift if you can!’ The yakkha expanded to his full height and gathered the five companions in his arms; he rose and tore off towards the Nandana Grove as fast as he could hurtle.

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‘My friends,’ Devadatta began, ‘as you have seen the Master is now aged and burdened with years. He and I might be of equal age by birth but his life has been a continual round of cares and responsibilities so the years have not been kind to him.

‘You all saw how he was reduced to insulting me in public and then pointedly rejecting my very reasonable reforms. He is falling into the rigidity and senility of old age and is refusing the next generation its opportunity to shine. This is not good for the noble religion, the *sasana* that he himself established.

It is a painful truth, when a founder becomes an obstacle to the well-being of their own creation, that the health of the whole can be most completely benefitted by the founder stepping aside or, if they will not or cannot, then by their being removed. Since the Master has declined my generous offer to lead in his place, and he has declined the beneficial reforms I suggested, do any of you have a vision of a way forward? If the Master will not step down or delegate authority, what should we do?’

It was a compelling speech, with Devadatta fully utilizing his height, his battlefield voice, his natural tendency to speak from a place of command, so that all his adherents were drawn into his appeal, his quest for a way forward, all little realizing that his words, guided by Mara’s influence, had been carefully crafted to head in one direction only.

‘We could break away and start our own new order,’ one young bhikkhu offered.

‘Yes indeed, we *could*,’ replied the Elder, ‘but if the Master is still seen to be an authority, a wise and reliable spiritual teacher, our new group would carry little weight in the eyes and hearts of the manyfolk.’

‘Can we point out how old and soft he’s become?’ asked another.

‘We *could*,’ Devadatta responded, leaning on the word, ‘However, we did try that already and, besides, people tend to be very accommodating and sentimental when dealing with their Elders in their dotage. It might just cement the problem of stagnation.’

One by one suggestions were made, each having its flaws being highlighted by Devadatta’s keen intellect. Eventually someone piped up with, ‘Could we just find a way to discredit him, ruin his reputation, or at least show the world that his

best days are done and now the wise and compassionate thing would be to let others take over.'

'Hmmm, what are you suggesting?' Devadatta gently urged.

'Well,' the young bhikkhu continued, 'We could arrange for him to be responsible or at least *seen to be* responsible, for some inappropriate behaviour.'

'Are you suggesting we "frame" him for something?' Devadatta's brow furrowed with very convincing concern, as if he was weighing a serious moral dilemma. 'Hmmm, I'm not sure...', he lingered over the thought.

'It would be for the greater good!' The monk who proposed the idea was warming to the possibility.

'Maybe...', the aura of caution and propriety was palpable in Devadatta's words.

Another voice chimed in with, 'Maybe something involving a woman would do the trick,'

Devadatta feigned the 'slowly coming around to the idea' posture very well, his facial expression modulating to order, giving no sign of the self-satisfied grin he felt within.

'We would need to find a woman who is both young, good-looking and a regular visitor to the Jetavana... hmmm...', Devadatta pondered out loud.

Krishna, who had been following the discussion closely, not quite sure what to contribute, realized he could offer something here. 'I think I know just the person, Venerable Sir. She will be ideal' At this suggestion Surama, sitting at Krishna's side, was sincerely, deeply satisfied; he turned his head away and smiled.

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CHAPTER 16:

MATANGA'S OFFERING



ight where I hoped to find you!'"

Krishna was delighted to see Matanga again, not just because making contact with her was a major part of the plan of Devadatta and his followers but more because it had been a long time since he had seen her and had had a chance to talk.

It was the dark of the moon and the Master had just finished giving a talk to a large gathering of monastics and lay-folk in the sala of the Jetavana. The forest rang with the susurrations of crickets, punctuated by the soft hootings of owls and the occasional chapping of a gecko. Above, in the gaps between the treetops, the bright sparkle of the stars was the only light.

'Krishna! Venerable sir! It's been a long time since we've all seen you.' Matanga was doubly pleased to meet him as she now had the major news of the manner of her birth to share with him, along with the chance to catch up after so long an interval. Her eyes shone with a joy-filled brightness. 'I've been looking forward to seeing you too!'

Both she and Krishna looked about them for a convenient and quiet place to sit for a moment but the crowds were still thick, in and around the sala, with people gathering their things and discussing the themes of the Master's talk that evening. They settled on an outside corner of the building, under the eaves, with Matanga on a mat an arm-span away from Krishna. It was quiet enough and still in public view and earshot, as a more secluded spot would not have been appropriate for a bhikkhu and a lay woman to sit and talk.

'Where's our favourite sage, Khujjuttara?!' Krishna looked around, 'you two are usually inseparable! Who's looking after her?'

'Looking after! I wouldn't say she needs that yet but she has been laid up for the last half-moon on account of her back. Now she's older it goes out of whack more and more easily and so she's been off her feet for a while. She's in good spirits – as ever – I brought her into the Jetavana on a hand-cart for the last of the Master's talks, but it was a big hassle getting her in and out of the forest on wheels. She said to just leave it until she's in better shape so I came here on my own.'

Krishna noticed the vivid beaming look on Matanga's face and her uncharacteristically excited manner. 'You're more than just pleased to see me, what is it?' He enquired.

Matanga looked around and, seeing that people were continually walking close by and chatting, and were gathered under the lanterns around the sala, she felt a little shy. She didn't want to bring up something so personal as revealing that, unbeknownst to him, Krishna was her father, with so many others milling around so

she responded, 'I'll save it for a quieter moment but it's something that I promise you'll be interested to hear. Anyway, what was it that you wanted to talk to me about?'

'Yes, well,' Krishna had been thinking long and hard about how to persuade her to join in with the scheme that Devadatta and his group had hatched. He did not want to lie but it was hard to come up with any half-convincing reason without employing some deception. He began, 'What we need you to do, if you'd be willing, is to spend a week coming to the Jetavana every day, arriving very early – before dawn if possible – and staying for the meal-offering, then coming again every evening and staying as late as possible, before walking home.'

'That's a strange request,' she looked at him quizzically, 'What's the idea behind all that?'

Krishna then had to persuade himself that the reason he had come up with would be convincing to her. When he had tried to prise out of Kokalika and Samudadatta, Devadatta's closest disciples, what was the purpose of this proposed procedure, they had both answered, 'You don't need to know,' with a dismissive tone of voice, a tone he was very used to as a dark-skinned person. Both of them had added, however, as had Devadatta himself when he was asked, 'Rest assured, no harm will come to her and she will not be blamed for anything.'

Krishna was reassured by this and Mara, who was looking on, was profoundly pleased by how these supposed holy men could look Krishna in the eye and tell him a blatant lie.

Krishna had been left to come up with a convincing reason so he explained to Matanga, 'Some of us have become very concerned about the comfort and safety of women visitors to the Jetavana. So, since we were all monks and did not have first-hand knowledge of women's needs – particularly lay-women visitors – we thought to find a regular, trustworthy and competent lay woman to come and go at those times when things are most risky or inconvenient – in the dark of the night or before dawn – and who could report back recommendations about pathways, shelter, places to sit, hazards to easy passage and, er, facilities to make answering the calls of nature more comfortable.'

This speech covered all he could think of, to make sense of the plan of his Elders, and to convince Matanga to go along with it. Even Krishna felt he had not made a very good case and he was prepared for her to say, 'Sorry but I'm unable to help.' Or, more likely, 'That seems a strange way to go about improving things, why not just ask us who have been coming for years, where the trip-hazards are on the paths, where a resting spot would be handy and so forth?'

Matanga was very quiet for some time. There were fewer people around them now and less of a burble of conversation mixing with the sounds of the forest night. She looked at Krishna long and steadily, then said, 'I will happily do this for you. You helped me so much, I feel great gratitude and I would like to aid you and the Sangha in any way I can.'

Krishna was surprised and greatly relieved that Matanga was so amenable. He also noticed that the excited light that had been in her eyes had changed to something like poignancy or compassion, or even sadness.

'I'd better be going as I told Khujj that I'd be back at our home before the end of the first watch. It's getting on for that now. Maybe we'll find time for that chat about my news sometime soon.'

'I hope so! I'm intrigued,' Krishna cheerfully replied, feeling as he spoke that his chirpiness was now strangely out of place.

'I'll start the routine you described before dawn tomorrow, it's always peaceful then and it's lovely to be in the forest as the songbirds begin their day.'

Krishna went on the morning alms-round each day and took his meal with the rest of the Sangha in the communal *dana-sala*. He could thus see Matanga, along with the other lay-folk, helping to offer the food prepared in the monastery and also dividing up what had been received by all the monks and novices in the town of Savatthi and the nearby villages.

He also saw her at the sala when they had communal chanting or meditation, and he noted how she indeed would stay on until all other lay-people had returned to their homes, not departing until it was late in the evening.

Five days went by in this fashion.

* * *

Matanga knew it was coming. She had steeled herself for the moment but her heart raced furiously when she heard the heavy tread of feet behind her on the moonlit path, and the snarls of her attackers as they grabbed her plait and yanked her head back. Strangely she was sure smelled smoke for a moment and heard the crackle of flames as she grew calm and a great peace came over her. She did not resist or call out as the blade crossed her throat – she was alert and surprised that she felt no pain at all. As she crumpled to the forest floor Matanga fell forward in a final bow to the Triple Gem, blood pumping vigorously down her front and mixing with the dust of the path and the leaf-litter beneath the trees around her.

* * *

The next day, Krishna became concerned as she failed to appear in the morning, at the meal offering. She was not there in the evening or on the day after either. He was not sure what to do since he was not able to ask Khujjuttara if there was a problem. After he had let another day go by he went to see Devadatta, assuring him that if Matanga had merely been sick and unable to perform the task, she would have sent a message. 'She's very dutiful and reliable like that. That's why she's such a good support for Khujjuttara.' When Devadatta heard this news, he furrowed his brow and said, 'This could be serious, let us take the matter to the

King.’ This seemed a somewhat extreme measure but, since it was a high-ranking individual making the suggestion, Krishna offered no comment.

In the past Devadatta, lickspittle that he was, had ingratiated himself with Prince Ajatasattu, the son of King Bimbisara in Magadha, and had wielded enough influence to persuade the Prince to get his royal father to abdicate and to assume the throne of Magadha himself. Devadatta therefore had no reservations about requesting an audience with King Pasenadi, the ruler of Kosala where Savatthi was situated, and was confident that this king would give his words credence.

Devadatta, Katamoraka-tissaka, Kokalika and Samudadatta were received by King Pasenadi in one of his reception halls. Queen Mallika and Queen Vasabha, along with Prince Vidudabha and Princess Vajiri were either side of him, each queen with her own child.

‘Great King,’ Devadatta began, ‘we are grateful to be given this opportunity to address you directly but, ahem, since we come with a somewhat distressing concern, perhaps their Serene Highnesses and your Royal Children might wish to depart before we mention our business today.’

The King pondered this for a moment then, glancing to either side and gesturing with his hand, he indicated for the other members of his family to leave. Prince Vidudabha began to protest that he was easily old enough to be included in matters of state and of spiritual concern but the King gave him a redoubled Royal Look, and he left the chamber with the others.

Once solely the King and his hand-servants remained, Devadatta began, ‘Great King, the lay-devotee Matanga, companion and attendant of the Maha-upasika Khujjuttara, has gone missing and cannot be found.

‘Regrettably, Great King, we fear that she has met her end and that her lifeless body is hidden somewhere in our own monastery, the Jetavana.’

Pasenadi immediately responded, ‘Then let the Jetavana be thoroughly searched so that justice may be done,’ he paused for a moment then continued, ‘but why do you bring this matter to me? Surely this is first something you would investigate yourselves, as a community, is it not?’

‘That would normally be the case, Sire, however...’, he looked from side to side, to his fellow monks who nodded in concurrence, as if to say, ‘You must continue’. ‘It is the core of our concern that it is the Master himself who has become embroiled in this issue,’ he paused again. King Pasenadi’s eyebrows were raised to full height.

‘This is why we have brought the matter before you directly, Sire. It is an extremely delicate situation. Many of us,’ he looked from side to side again, by way of affirming his words, ‘are aware that the Master has been losing his faculties as he ages. He has become notably lenient in his propounding of the discipline and he rejected outright the proposals I made for some stricter standards. We are also aware that this devout, er, young lady,’ and here he seemed to stumble a moment over the term of reference, ‘this sincere and devout young *upasika*, has been coming to the Jetavana regularly for years, often as the help-mate of Maha-upasika Khujjuttara,

and that recently she has been seen inside the monastery grounds late at night and before dawn each morning. To put it in a nutshell, we fear that she had become the paramour of the Master and that he, growing weary of the relationship, or having had some argument with the girl, has ended her young life and has had her body secreted somewhere in the monastery grounds.'

The King looked thunderous and aghast in equal measure. 'This is an extremely serious accusation and, therefore, one I am sure you are not making lightly,' the King was plainly disturbed by the story he had just heard. 'It is clear why you suggested that my queens and my children should have left this chamber, in order not to be distressed by even the possibility that their beloved teacher – and mine too, I might add – has fallen from grace and has taken to sensuality and murder. My queen, Mallika, has always had unwavering faith in the Buddha – myself I have had doubts and reservations in the past – so this investigation that you request must be carried out with great discretion. I will order the Jetavana to be searched, high and low, but without any public announcement; this is the only way we can get to the bottom of this issue, as well as being discreet about it.

'If it proves to be the case that the Master is responsible, I will consider if any action is necessary on the part of the Crown, as well as any steps that you all need to take as a community.'

The four monks were sombre in their manner but inwardly delighted with this outcome and, as the King had promised, he despatched with them a number of his agents skilled in detection and undercover activities.

The presence of a group of men, apparently casually looking through the forest and grounds of the Jetavana, was noted immediately by many of the monks but before much could be said or done or asked about, the search party from the palace had uncovered a shallow grave, close to the Gandha-kuti, the Buddha's residence. To the horror of those who had gathered round, the body of Matanga, throat slit, was found buried in a hole in the ditch that formed one of the conduits in the Rainy Season. No kind of accident could explain this; she had plainly been murdered.

* * *

As soon as the body of Matanga was discovered the word – and many accompanying rumours – of her death spread like wildfire in the Hot Season through the Jetavana, Savatthi and the villages round about. Despite coming from a candala background Matanga was well-loved and respected as a dedicated disciple of the Master, and as the faithful companion and helper of the revered Khujjuttara. It was more shocking that the whispered story was that it was the Master himself who had been engaging in misconduct with her and who had snuffed her life out so brutally.

Khujjuttara was deeply sorrowful at the death of her companion and Dharma friend; she shed many tears as waves of grief ran through her but she did not give

rise to anger. She was however bluntly dismissive of the rumours of it being the Buddha who was responsible. Despite the raging uproar in the streets, generated particularly by those who found the Master's refusal to respect the caste system abhorrent, and some who were known to rabble-rouse for almost any cause, the white-haired sage did not get pulled into the maelstrom of emotion. She was one who had seen too much in her long life to jump to conclusions quickly. She also knew with absolute certainty that the Master could never act in the way he was accused of.

Day after day the clamour continued. 'See the work of this brazen son of the Sakyans, this foreigner from the north who thinks so much of himself! He is a shameless, wicked liar and a lecher to boot! He who claims to follow the Path of the Dharma, and in serenity and purity, to speak the Truth, to be virtuous and good – he has nothing of the monk or brahmin in him. The ways of the *samana* and the true brahmin are travestied in him! How can he take advantage of a woman and then kill her?!' These and similar were the words being bandied around the homes and well-heads, the markets and meeting-places of Savatthi and its environs during those days.

When word of all this reached the Buddha he was quite unfazed. He felt great compassion for his disciple Matanga – who had always been so humble and faithful, so kind in her ways and actions – but he did not leap to his own defence, or to that of the Sangha, when they were reviled or abused in the street, in the monastery or in the countryside. He was sanguine and spoke calmly, to comfort and guide the monks and nuns who were disturbed by these accusations.

'This uproar will not last long, friends. It will only last seven days, after that it will subside. When people abuse or criticize me or you in these ways, please respond to them with loving-kindness and these words:

*'The liar goes to hell, like one who did a deed
And afterwards declares, "I did it not."
They, both of them, on dying fare alike,
In life to come, as those whose acts are vile.'*

The nuns and monks all memorized this verse and, when confronted, calmly responded in this way. The consistency of this way of receiving criticism and, moreover how the Sangha and the Master showed they did not have anything to hide; their lack of defensiveness or anger at being attacked by words, steadily wrought its effect on the hearts of the local populace, including the King and the brahmins and the wanderers of other sects. As that turbulent week came to its end the uproar subsided and everyone came to the realization:– The Samana Gotama did not do this, he is innocent. It was not done by him.

The Princess Vajiri and Queen Vasabha with Kesini had come to see Khujjuttara and to offer their condolences, and the latter had proposed to carry her in her arms into the monastery.

‘Thank you very much dear, that’s a bit more dignified than pushin’ me in the cart – which is quite an adequate means of transport I might say – but are you sure you can manage with just the one hand?’

‘I can manage,’ Kesini’s jaw was firmly set; she was a strongly built woman in her forties so the weight of the wise Elder was not daunting. She wanted to bring her friend and mentor into the Jetavana, to see the Buddha herself.

When they had entered the Jetavana it was mid-morning and the Master received them in the sala; Krishna, looking grey and ten years older was at his side.

Despite the brouhaha having died down somewhat, Vasabha still had her suspicions and, being angry and grief-stricken by the loss of her dear friend and half-sister she was keen to blame someone and the Buddha was not out of bowshot yet. She had also heard that Krishna was involved somehow in this plot so Vasabha had not made any efforts to connect with him, and to reveal their relationship just yet. The Queen and the Princess had thus returned directly to the palace so it was just Khujjuttara and Kesini who had a conversation with the Master that day.

Krishna was haggard and distraught; he had been keeping to himself and weeping, often noisily at his kuti. He was heartbroken at his own stupidity and his role in the gruesome death of his young friend. Khujjuttara and Kesini, both still tearful, paid their respects to the Master and the Elder asked, ‘Venerable Sir, am I right in assuming that the death of our dear Matanga was part of a ruse to bring you into disrepute?’

‘You are correct, Khujjuttara,’ the Buddha replied.

‘I only ask by way of checkin’ since Matanga, bright girl that she is... was,’ she choked momentarily and went quiet as more tears came. When the wave had passed, she sniffed and breathed deeply to clear her head, then continued, ‘She gave me a message to give to you, in the event of her death by violence. I didn’t agree with what she was doin’ but she made her own choices. May I recite it to you, Venerable Sir? As you know, my powers of recall are still quite reliable so you can be assured that these are Matanga’s words.’

The Master assented with a gentle inclination of his head. His dark azure eyes rested, fully attentive on this, the female lay disciple he had publicly named as ‘most accomplished in learning’:

‘O Blessèd One, please do not think that I went to my death as an unwitting dupe. Rather, knowing that the power and influence of this clique of deceitful miscreants was such that they would easily wriggle out of a mere accusation of “you are trying to use me” by one considered their social inferior; I allowed myself to be killed as part of a larger and more complex strategy.’

Khujjuttara’s voice became like Matanga’s as she recited.

'By my death a bridge was crossed by them. My trust in the power of truth is such that, that crossing having been made, their fate would be sealed and the good reputation of you, the Master, would remain untainted.

'My only regret is that my dear friend and kalyanamitta, (and, as I have recently learned, my actual father), the bhikkhu Krishna, became an unwilling and indeed unwitting pawn in their scheme. He is without blame but I am not for, as I intuited some destructive and malicious plot had been hatched – even in the very first words that Krishna, my father, spoke to me on this – I chose not to tell him of my suspicions, that I discerned evil in the intentions of those treacherous Elders, those sham recluses with whom he had become aligned.'

Krishna raised his head from its sagging posture, “‘Father’? What? How?!” Khujjuttara glanced at him and indicated she had a bit more to recite, although her tears continued to run freely:

'I am further to blame in that I did not tell the bhikkhu Krishna right away that I am his daughter, through his brief but meaningful relationship with my mother, Sugandhi of Kulluta. I have sacrificed my life but I have also – wisely or not I leave for others to judge – sacrificed the opportunity to greet and be with my real father and I have deprived him of the chance to know in full awareness one of his children. I regret having had to make this choice but, as my revered teachers have taught me, life is not under our personal control and difficult decisions have to be made along the way.

'I trust by my offering up my life in this way that the Sangha may be cleared of corruption and that the poisoning elements will be cast out as a result.

'I am your disciple and I bow three times at your feet, O Blessèd One. My heart is filled with gratitude at having been given the chance to hear your teachings and that I have been able to bask in the radiance of your presence.

'Upasika Matanga, Haritaca-Kumari of Kulluta.'

Krishna was weeping freely, at the Buddha's side. To his amazement the Master reached out and placed his hand upon Krishna's shoulder. It felt as though it was a great weight that was lighter than a feather. A wondrous warming light spread through his body from that touch; he felt great peace even as the tears ran.

Kesini, her tears flowing too, then spoke up. 'Master, given that Krishna knows who asked him to speak to Matanga, and to get her to follow their prescribed routine of coming and going to the Jetavana, is it appropriate for him to pass those names on to the King so that the perpetrators of this great hurt can be brought to book?'

'I see no reason why he should not. I will question them myself, but the King should do with them as he sees fit, according to the law, and according to what facts can be publicly established. My own intuitive powers to know what has passed through a person's mind are not sufficient evidence for the court.'

Maggot and the group of friends skirted the turreted and bejewelled walls of the deva city and were closing in on the Nandana Grove, just outside the great Eastern Gates. A pair of lurching figures were framed in the grand archway, seemingly rapt in conversation with each other.

‘I think that’s them!’ Bee called out, ‘Look, they’re pretty unmistakable.’

‘Dead right, I reckon,’ Gumbiya agreed. ‘Stroke ‘o luck that.’ He swerved mid-air and, released from Gumbiya’s arms, the whole group landed gently before the startled sisters, Hiri and Siri, the three kinnaris, in their pink, magenta and vermilion filmy garb, Rhamba and her brother Salassa, the apsaras, in matching jewels and braids and bangles, and the bulky form of Gumbiya, the warrior yakkha, dressed for battle, as usual, but endeavouring not to knock or squash any of his companions.

‘By all the heavens and our Royal Father – what are you doing here!? You’re all a sight for sore eyes!! Are you having a reunion? Where’s Minti and Ninka?’ Hiri was excited to see them.

‘I think she’s at the party, with Prince Wotsisname,’ Siri replied.

‘Oh yeah, Malabha thingummibob. We’re not invited,’ Hiri grinned, then in unison they recited, ‘We’re the ugly sisters!’ Both of them laughing, guffawing at their familiar in-joke, their long jaws and hefty teeth wagging as they crinkled up with the absurdity of things.

Maggot and the other searchers all smiled in turn, chuckling along with the princesses at the ridiculous nature of appearances and their so-called worth. It was good to see them again.

‘No, it’s not a reunion – we’ve been on a long search,’ started Bee.

‘... for Maggot’s baby...’, Ant continued, ‘Ninka had to leave us and Minti’s back in the Ghositarama forest in Kosambi. She has had enough adventures, for a while at least. Maggot’s little girl, Tambaka, went missing and we’ve been searching high and low for her...’

Salassa chimed in, ‘Everywhere we could think, in the Heaven of the Four Guardian Deities...’

‘...’n the Underworld, that woz a bit ‘airy...’ added Gumby.

‘Then up to Tusita, where we met the Great Bodhisattva Maitreya...’

‘... and now here,’ Maggot joined in, drawing close to the two sisters, fixing them pointedly with her stare. ‘I’ve got a strong feeling – from what Sri Ariya Maitreya told us – that you both might be able to help. We found traces of her passage through the Realm of Gandharvas and Apsaras but they led to nothing – not a sign of her after that.’

‘So, how were you finding your way through all these Realms?’ Siri asked. ‘You went on your own?’

'There was a very kind and helpful gandharva called Muñca who...' Bee began.

'*Muñca!*' Hiri and Siri blurted out in unison, 'That rogue! He's not to be trusted a fingerbreadth – even one of your kinnari fingers, let alone an asura one,' Siri warmed to the subject. '*He* was your guide? He was leading you on a wild goose chase I'm sure. If you found traces of your girl in the Gandharva Realm you can be sure he put them there. He's notorious and unwelcome here!'

'That must be why he let go of my hand when we were about to come here – he knew he'd be recognized and get into trouble. But, if he's got such a bad reputation here, why had Ninka not known of him?' Ant was puzzled.

'She *must* 'ave done!' Hiri retorted, 'How could she...' she went quiet as her sister flashed her a very visible look, silently communicating, 'Shush – sounds like personal stuff – leave it out.' It was a very loud silent message and all went quiet, until Maggot broke the spell.

'So, do you have any clues or ideas as to what happened to Tambaka, where she has gone? Who or what took her?'

The coarse featured princesses looked at each other and, again, a silent conversation seemed to pass between them, they obviously knew each other's minds very well and apparently didn't always need words to communicate.

'Actually we had been wondering...', Siri began.

'But you know how it is – get a bit distracted by things... 'cuz last night, so less than half a day ago, we were at a talk on the full moon in Kosambi. It was, by the earth calendar, er...', Hiri's brow crumpled in concentration.

'Kathika, the full moon that ends the Rainy Season,' Siri remembered. 'The month called Komudi, someone there was talking about it.'

'And?!...!' Maggot pressed them.

'Oh yeah, and after the talk we were just hovering around, unseen by the humans...'

'...as usual...'

'...and there was this group of women from the north...'

'...Sakyans...'

'...yeah, Sakyans, like the Master, they were on some kind of special visit. Anyway, it sounded like they'd gone off into the bushes to do their human relieving of themselves, or just gone for a stroll after the talk to enjoy the moonlight in the forest...'

'And?!' Maggot was losing patience rapidly.

'Sorry, they'd found a baby who had been abandoned in the forest. Beautiful little thing, as far as we could see. Anyway, these women were all over the kid: 'Wot a beautiful child! How could anyone cast aside such a lovely babe? How sweet she smells!'

'She had a sweet smell?'

'Yeah – even we could tell that from where we were. Not like yer usual human – heh heh... Anyway, they all were really taken with the baby and, as far as

we could tell, when they asked around all the locals who were there for the teaching no one recognized her, or had heard of a woman who couldn't look after her baby, or anything – right?' She turned to Siri by way of affirming her impressions.

'Right – no one had a clue. Everyone they asked just shrugged, and then admired the baby too.'

'So, long story short' – Maggot smiled appreciatively, with a little effort – 'one of the Sakyan women, posh Northern accent, says, "We can't possibly just leave her here, and no one seems to be responsible for her so, can we adopt her into our travelling group and take her back to Kapilavatthu? What do you think?"'

'One of the snooty ones, ladyship of some sort, then says, "But, my dear, she's a *foundling*, and certainly not a Sakyan; you know how particular everyone is about ancestry in Sakya. Who would accept her into their family?"'

'Then another one says, "She could be adopted by one of the slave families, ancestry means nothing to any of them." That's not strictly true – if you ask me the lower caste folks can be just as picky as the uppers, not to mention the ranks in the Tavatimsa Heaven... don't get me started! Anyway...,' Hiri risked a glance at Maggot, who was fixed firmly on this story – '... the long and short of it was they decided to take the baby to the north and to find a family in the palace slave halls who would take her in.'

'That's it, that's what we heard 'em say. So, that was just last night, you might catch up with them if you head to the human world right now.'

'Hiri!' her sister scowled at her, 'as far as these folks have experienced it, the baby went north years ago. It was last night to us, and it's mid-morning here now, but one day and one night here in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three is one hundred years in the human realm. If it's a third of a day that's gone by since we returned here...'

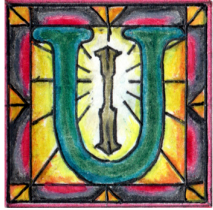
'That's more than thirty sun-turnings in the Realm of Humans,' Maggot completed the thought. Her mind was already racing, 'Ant, if you want to stay here and find Ninka, at that party in the Nandana Grove, please do. I'm going to Kapilavatthu as fast as I can.'

'Us too!' the rest of the group chimed in. Ant meanwhile smiled meekly and made *añjali* as the others vanished. She was still perplexed about Ninka not knowing of Muñca's duplicitous reputation, or, if she had done, why hadn't she mentioned it?

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CHAPTER 17:

SCANDAL IN SAVATTHI



nable to deal with her anger and grief Queen Vasabha needed to lash out. Even though more and more people seemed to be of the opinion that the Buddha was innocent, and was being framed by malicious parties, she still harboured a feeling, deep within her, that he was at fault and that he thought he was above all laws. There was some kind of intuition that he was haughty and dismissive of ordinary human standards, which was enraging her and causing sleepless nights.

Even though Khujjuttara had delivered Matanga's message to the Buddha, explaining that Matanga had willingly given her life and that the actual murderers were Devadatta's faction, and Khujjuttara was a close friend of Queen Vasabha and had told her this in detail – something continued to irk her. It didn't make sense but the Queen could not get beyond the doubt that the Buddha considered himself above all human laws and had indeed been responsible for the murder.

Her frustration and agitation were made all the stronger by her being unable to acknowledge, to all but Kesini and Khujjuttara, that Matanga had been her half-sister as well as a dear friend.

Matters were not helped when her young son, in his worst 'I'm-the-Crown-Prince-and-soon-I-will-be-in-charge' voice, full of the self-righteous pomposity of high privilege, said when she was in tears one day, 'I don't know why you are so upset mother. She was a person to chat to when she met you at the monastery but she was only a candala, the lowest of the low so – by all rights – you should not have even been speaking with her at all. At least only to give orders.' And he was a child of only six Rains! It was infuriating:– If he only knew who his Royal Mother really was, Vasabha ground her teeth, that would wipe the conceited, bigoted look off his little face.

She had to use every pennyweight of resolve to restrain herself while the storms of emotion blew so fiercely. She managed it, through the years of determined effort that she had made, but the outlet was an indignation directed at the Buddha – she was sure that he was guilty of the crime. The many times that she had sat in his presence, and felt the oceanic love and compassion for all that emanated from him, were either pointedly forgotten or she wrote such feelings off as, 'Some sort of psychic trick he plays on people – it's all a mask, a charade!'

King Pasenadi was surprised at the intensity of Vasabha's distress – Queen Mallika and Princess Vajiri had also been fond of the girl who had died – but he shrugged it off as one of life's mysteries and, when Queen Vasabha was appealing, raging at him to bring the Master to justice, he felt her pain but was not drawn into her perspective on the scandal. In his other ear Queen Mallika was full of assurances

that it could not possibly be the Buddha who was responsible. He heard them both and, a half-Moon after the murder had occurred, he declared, 'The rod of justice is not to be used with bias or with prejudgement – the stories of the various parties who have been accused will be heard in court and we shall uncover where the truth lies.'

* * *

Just as he had done when sending men to search the Jetavana, as soon as the crime was heard of, King Pasenadi called on his spies and undercover agents to mingle with the populace of Savatthi: to frequent taverns where the rogues and scoundrels tended to gather; to shop in the markets where the honest commonfolk would ply their trades and meet and talk, and also to join them in hauling water from their wells; he sent them to the camps of wanderers of various sects, with the excuse of coming to hear spiritual teachings; and, dressed in the gaudy finery of the servants of rich merchants in their guild-halls, they mingled with the wealthy traders and their staff – all to find out what the word was on the street and to have ears close by if one responsible for the egregious act dropped an incautious word, or conveyed crucial and incriminating evidence.

The court was convened the next Moon and Ananda, as a representative of the Master, as well as some leaders of other sects of wanderers, and a number of the most eminent brahmin priests, accompanied by their wealthy patrons, were summoned to the palace, as were, at the other end of the scale, a number of notorious thieves and cutthroats. Family and friends were allowed to attend as witnesses, and a number of the bhikkhus and followers of other groups of wanderers were present too. Devadatta was there, with Kokalika and Samudadatta, and Krishna who sat away from them by choice.

Among the witnesses to the event was Khujjuttara and, beside King Pasenadi were Queen Mallika and Queen Vasabha, as well as the King's armed guard and a large group of courtiers.

Vasabha's jaw was rigidly set and her beauty overshadowed by the cloud of grief and aversion that surrounded her. In defiance of the usual norms of dressing modestly when they were receiving visits from religious leaders and teachers, she had made a point of decking herself in as much regal finery as she could. Round her neck was a heavily bejewelled carcanet and on her brow was a diadem that had a massive blood-red ruby at its centre. Her robes and armlets, and gold and silver bangles, were of the finest quality. All of this emanating a statement of Royal Power.

She had to be mindful of not over-dressing and making the King look shoddy in comparison but he, to her relief, was, as the dispenser of justice, arrayed from head to toe in all the appurtenances of the Crown, the head-anointed warrior-noble King of Kosala.

Mallika, meanwhile, had simply followed her usual form of dressing in an unadorned and modest fashion and, by way of contrast, in as simple a garb as she thought she could get away with and not humiliate His Majesty by her being inappropriately *under*-dressed. The choices of the two queens in their modes of apparel didn't pass unnoticed. Neither did their expressions, as Queen Mallika's face displayed a complete freedom from anxiety and a serene radiance, quite unlike that of her junior counterpart.

The King called the court to order by welcoming all who were assembled and by acknowledging his own respect for the young candala woman whom he had met on a few occasions. He reminded the court – and gave the brahmin priests, along with the warrior-noble gentry, a meaningful look, as he did this – that he respected the putting aside of caste and rank when in the company of the samanas of different groups.

'Thus it should be taken to heart that, within the monasteries and encampments of such spiritually committed renunciants, a king or a queen, or anyone of rank, is at liberty to befriend or learn from a monastic or a lay disciple of any caste, any station in life whatsoever.' He made a point of seeking out Khujjuttara in the crowd and smiling to her as he had developed great respect and affection for her over the years. She raised her hands in *añjali* by way of acknowledgement.

'Similarly, the fact that the victim of this cruel murder was a candala by caste, who even went by the name "Matanga", does not diminish the seriousness of the crime. If anyone in this court, when acting as a witness or one being accused, indicates any disrespect for her saying such as, "she was *only* a candala..." or "a person of high rank should not be punished on account of the death of a candala", that person will be held as having insulted the Crown and will be punished accordingly, irrespective of rank or caste.' His brows bristled with icy authority as he said this, 'Am I clear!?' Hands were raised in *añjali* all around with a hearty '*Sadhu*' being heard in some quarters whilst quieter in others.

'To move now to the case at hand – we have a number of people who have been accused, who have graciously agreed to be present for this trial, some well-known and of high rank, some less well-known. We also have a number of witnesses that the Crown wishes to hear speak publicly. I thank those of you who have volunteered to offer what information you can. Are there any witnesses who have been brought to this court *involuntarily*?' The King was using the customary words for this part of the formal procedure but those who were close by could see a sharpening of his look and a suggestion of a smile under his moustache.

'Yes indeed, Sire. We have two... gentlemen... from the Sukhavati Tavern, well, that's where we caught 'em, going by the names Sattuka and Kalidanta,' the Captain of the Guard announced, as properly as he could.

'Just those two?' The King raised his brows – already knowing the answer. 'Well, let's call them in, shall we?'

Out of the great respect for the Master, despite being one of the accused, King Pasenadi had made it clear that he would not be called into a court of this nature.

Queen Vasabha was not at all happy with this but the King had insisted. Even though he used the words 'the chief accused' repeatedly during the proceedings, he was unable to treat the Master as just one other individual and so refused to cause him to be physically present. Ananda was in the court as a representative of the Sangha and to retain the words of the discussions. He was assigned a seat in a place of respect; this too irked Vasabha but she had no choice in the matter. It seemed that, in the unlikely case that the Master was found to be guilty, word would be taken to him at the Jetavana of this conclusion.

* * *

The two men from the tavern were brought in, between two guards each, and the King ushered them to kneel before the throne immediately.

'So, good men, what do you have to say? The King politely asked.

'Nuffink,' the taller one, Sattuka, replied.

'You?' He asked the other one.

'Me neever,' was all Kalidanta would say.

'If I may, Sire,' a non-descript person in somewhat obscuring clothing then stepped up, 'please excuse my wrappings but I am one of your undercover agents and to be unrecognized is one of my tools-of-the-trade.'

'Of course, go on.'

'Sire, whilst I was conducting researches, at the Sukhavati Tavern, these two gentlemen, who were clearly friends or... er... business associates, were deep in their cups and were arguing or debating with each other. Kalidanta seemed to be angry that Sattuka had taken all the money for a task they had both been contracted to fulfil. Kalidanta said, and I quote,' here the witness closed his eyes to recite: "'You killed the girl and then chucked 'er in a ditch, wivaht even telling me you were going ter do the job that night. You took all the money for yourself and now 'ere you are, drinkin' it all away – wha' abou' my share! I was in on this too!'"

King Pasenadi was scrutinizing the faces of the two. They both looked horrified at hearing those words, particularly they were shocked at how precisely the spy had recalled them. They looked at each other, silently trying to see a way forward that might be a means of keeping their heads attached to their bodies.

'Well?' The King pressed them for a response. 'It might go a little easier for you both if you told the court who paid you to do this.'

Before anyone had time to draw a breath Sattuka blurted out, 'It were two of the monks!' The words both condemning themselves but also deflecting the blame, if possible.

'And which kind of monks – the Buddha's disciples or those of another sect? Please be clear on this now.'

'It was them two – sittin' over there!' Sattuka pointed in the direction of Devadatta's group. Devadatta, prepared as he was for any outcome, with no hesitation looked with shocked horror at his two companions.

'Do you know the names of these two *Venerables*?' The King leant into the honorific with a deliberate sarcasm.

'Nah, they woz cagey 'bout that. But it woz them. Kno' 'em anywhere.'

The guards were already moving towards the groups of monastics, gathered on their mats on the north side of the hall. Devadatta had drawn away from the two monks sitting near him, increasing his look of disgust and looking about himself, as if for help. It was a convincing act.

The two Elders were hauled in front of King Pasenadi, with a little respect but more severity and purposefulness on the part of the guards.

'Your names?' The King raised one of his impressive grey brows, going through the formality but knowing full well who they were already.

'My name is Venerable Kokalika.'

'And....'

'I am Venerable Samudadatta.'

'"*Venerables*" eh? Well, we'll see about that, shall we not? Can you refute the statements of these two gentlemen?' He leant forward in his throne, pressing the question upon them.

'Why, Sire, Your Majesty, these are a mere pair of n'er-do-wells, disreputable people. They have probably been hired to put the blame on us innocent Elders.' Kokalika was sweating.

'You do remember what I said about seeming to dismiss the worth and word of the lower castes?'

'Oh, of course Sire.' He was lost for words and looked desperately at his partner Samudadatta.

'So did you, or did you not, hire these two to kill the *upasika* Matanga? In the midst of this court, and before your own mentors and teachers, did you do it?'

Mara, as was his wont, had been listening to and watching the whole proceedings eagerly. He had been especially pleased with Devadatta's feigned surprise and disgust at his accused co-conspirators. Now he waited for more deceit and blaming, relishing the ongoing chaos and division in the society that would come from all this. He was disappointed when, out of the hushed, suspenseful silence Samudatta spoke:

'Yes, I cannot lie any further, it was us but we...', his words seemed to catch in his throat and he looked over to Devadatta who was in turn looking at the matting before him and shaking his head. The words would not come to place the blame with his mentor and master. He kept his silence. Whether it was through his own volition or via a mental manoeuvre on the part of his teacher, it was impossible for ordinary folk to tell.

'Since you admit your guilt the work of this court is almost done. All that remains is the pronouncing of sentence upon you all.'

'The two hired killers acted for pay. Their crime is murder but the motivation for that death came from you. As I most generously promised that things would go a little easier for you two if you were compliant,' he said, turning to the cut-throats,

‘you will not be tortured before your heads are struck from your bodies, which is the approved punishment for murder.

‘As for you two – as you have deliberately caused the death of a human being I believe,’ and here he cast a respectful glance at Ananda, ‘that according to your own discipline you ceased to be monks at the moment that poor Matanga breathed her last. Is that correct?’

Ananda, seated on a platform nearby, made *añjali* and indicated with an inclination of his head that this was a correct understanding.

‘Accordingly, you will go through the city, no longer wearing the ochre robes of the Master’s Sangha but as you are, as lay people, and declare: “We caused this woman, Matanga, Haritacca-Kumari of Kulluta, to be killed because of the desire to cast reproach upon the Samana Gotama, the Lord Buddha; there is no fault in the conduct of the Master or in his other disciples.” After you have passed through the city and declared this at every crossroads, you will, like your partners in crime from the tavern, be taken to a place of execution outside the city walls where your heads also will be struck from your bodies, as is suitable for the heinous criminals that you are.’

Devadatta was relieved to hear the, ‘No fault in... his other disciples’ piece so, thwarted though his scheme had been, he himself had fully evaded blame, as far as he was aware.

Krishna, despite his involvement and the risk that he might be blamed as the one who persuaded Matanga to be putting herself at risk, was so sorrowful and filled with remorse that he had been numb to most of the proceedings.

Khujjuttara was pleased to see justice done but was thoroughly unconvinced by Devadatta’s displays of surprise and horror.

Queen Vasabha was a mixture of feelings – pleased that her sister and friend’s killers had been found and would be punished but confused and regretful that she had been so wrong about the Buddha.

King Pasenadi, meanwhile, surveying the court as the guilty parties were led away, had a satisfied smile on his face. ‘My friends, citizens, Venerable Sirs. I am glad that these matters were able to be dealt with so swiftly and efficiently. Let us all go and see about some lunch.’

* * *

Krishna was devastated; he was uninterested in food and couldn’t sleep. He was visited, however, about three days after the trial, by Dusaka and Tingri who, kindly, didn’t try to chat with him or cheer him up or fix him, but rather simply took up residence under his kuti, on a low cord-strung bed and a small mat, and left him to his misery.

Finally Krishna was not able to sustain the fug of self-hatred and remorse any longer and besides, his belly was growling, so he came unsteadily down the wooden steps and joined with his wizened mentor below.

Dusaka began by asking, 'How are you?' and Tingri came and laid her shaggy head in his lap. For a time Krishna wept and could not speak but then, as the tears dried up he moaned, 'But she didn't have to do that! Why did she not just tell me I was being a fool and get me to wake up to what Devadatta and the others were plotting, if she could see it so quickly and so clearly? And I know he's as much to blame as the others even if he wriggled out of it at the trial.'

'I don't care that I was tricked and was made a dupe myself – that's a familiar story to me – but Matanga, she was such a sweet girl, and then I find out she was my daughter! How long had she known that anyway?'

He was not looking for an answer, rather he was simply howling to the universe by saying this, but Dusaka, with a quick nod from Tingri, chimed in, 'No more than a Moon or so; I gave her the news myself. You were wrapped up in Devadatta's crowd, and we never saw you, so you didn't hear sooner. She was looking for an opportunity to meet you quietly and let you know.'

'But, but how could they *do* that? Kill a good person so brutally just to try to discredit the Master?!'

'Well, sadly, perhaps part of it was that they saw that, as a candala, she didn't really count as a "person". It's strange and sad but some people think that way. It's also likely that because you are so dark, despite coming from a rich merchant family, that they also easily used you and were ready for you to be blamed and cast out. It's ironic, as it's only "virtuous beings in human form" that are classed as "*manussa*" in the Master's scheme of things. You can have a human body – be a "*puggala*" – but not be "dwelling in the Manussa Realm". If you are living a life full of lies and self-centred hates and desires, you're more like an animal, or a hungry ghost, or a hell-demon, rather than a true person.'

Dusaka sat quietly after this, hoping that his words were sinking in and were of some small comfort to his now middle-aged protégé.

'As for why young Matanga was so ready to give her life in order to help exonerate the Master and cause the guilty to be revealed, sometimes there are influences from the past, the distant past, that incline us to make the choices we do,' he looked at Tingri, who responded by cocking her head minutely, as if to say, 'Maybe.'

'Come on, I think there's a few people visiting today that you might want to see – do you feel up to a bit of company? They are people you can cry with too, if you need to.'

* * *

Queen Vasabha, Kesini, Khujjuttara and Ananda were gathered at the sala. It was late afternoon in the Cold Season now and the sun was goldening as it descended. Dust drifted through the sunbeams, rising from the few passers by on the walking paths through the forest.

Dusaka, Krishna and Tingri approached quietly as the group were in deep discussion recounting the details of the crisis and the false accusations, and discussing how they felt about Devadatta and the way he had evaded justice.

They welcomed the three newcomers and Krishna set himself beside the Elder Ananda; Krishna now being aged some forty-five Rains, Ananda was a grey-haired man of over seventy. Krishna was glad to be among friends again; Queen Vasabha was particularly quick to be welcoming and friendly. The events of the trial, and her conversations with these friends, had fully convinced her that Krishna had had no knowledge of what was planned to be done to Matanga. She regretted the amount of bitter words she had spoken and the vengeful, spiteful thoughts she had nursed with respect to him – as the one who drew Matanga into the plot – and to the Buddha whom she felt she had grievously maligned over these past weeks.

‘I hear that Matanga had a very special message for you, informing you that she was your daughter, by her mother Sugandhi of Kulluta...’, she paused and looked over at Dusaka and Khujjuttara anxiously, as if to check that she could not be making life worse for everyone with what she wanted to say.

Before she could continue, Krishna said, ‘Yes! What with everything else,’ here he caught his breath for a moment, hoping not to burst into tears again, ‘I haven’t really had time to digest that.’

‘Well, at the time that our friend Dusaka revealed that to her, he had also just disclosed to me something about my past.’ She took a breath. ‘The fact of it is, I am your child as well – not by Sugandha – but my mother was apparently a kinnari, with the nickname Maggot, who Dusaka has known for many years.’

‘But, you’re a Sakyan, a princess from the north, everyone knows that!’ Krishna was astounded and boggled by her saying something so outlandish, so bizarre and against all that was common knowledge.

‘Everyone *thinks* that, so I am taking a risk by letting you know, and Venerable Ananda here, but I had been hoping to tell you, just as Matanga was, as soon as I could.’

Krishna found his mind now racing. He was filled with questions falling over each other, the first out was, ‘You are my lost child?! How?!?... Does Maggot know you’re here?’ Then, ‘Is she here too!’

‘No, not yet. I only just recently found out myself. Apparently she’s been looking for me for my whole life and I’m twenty-five Rains old now.’ The Queen’s face was lighting up with this new change in her world and the clouds of grief and anger were dispersing. Krishna too, as the conversation unfolded, went from haggard and grey to a brighter and smiling state, the years falling away from him, his eyes shining.

‘But this is amazing! How did you...? What happened? How...? This is wonderful! How can we tell Maggot you’ve been found?’

Dusaka was grinning like a cat with a bowl of cream, while Tingri was yipping and snorting in rapid succession. Khujjuttara and Kesini both dabbed their eyes with their shawls. Amid the laughter and the tears, Dusaka eventually spoke

up, 'I recognized her by her natural scent. Being half-kinnari she is blessed with her mother's fragrance and that goes with her wherever she goes. It's unmistakeable so, since I had known her and held her as an infant, I could not miss it.' As he said this Krishna realized too that he had sensed a weird familiarity about her fragrance, when they had previously met, but he had never put two and two together before.

'All we know, so far, is that she was alone in the forest at the Ghositarama and that somehow she got taken to Kapilavatthu, capital city of the Sakyans, where the Master comes from. How she ended up in the family of Yasa and Nagamunda, a slave family serving the palace, I have not a clue, but we can find out, with a bit of digging.' He glanced meaningfully at Ananda at this point as if to appeal for a hand in this effort.

Ananda, easily picking up the hint, responded, 'I'm sorry my friends, I have no powers to read minds or to delve past ages, unlike the Master and Elders such as Maha-Moggallana. I have a good memory but that does not help much here. I can only recall events I've been present at, or retrieve information I have been told. Beyond that, I'm as in the dark as you are.'

'But,' Krishna, wreathed in smiles and not really caring that much about the details since Tambaka, his baby, had now been found, could not but ask, 'if you were a kitchen slave, how did you get to be a queen, here in Kosala?'

'That's a bit of a story, and at the risk of my life, literally, I will tell you.' Vasabha then recounted the whole tale of her being chosen, and her current deception. She ended by saying, as she had to Khujjuttara and the others, 'I leave it to you to keep silent or to tell others, as you see fit.'

Ananda replied, 'Great Queen, as the attendant of the Master and as a monk, I have been privy to a vast array of people's secrets, things they have mentioned or things that the Blessed One has divined. As he has the ability to read anyone and everyone's mind, you can understand that the Master is knowledgeable about an even greater, immeasurably more vast number of secrets and hidden memories. He chooses not to intervene or cause action to be taken on the basis of his psychic powers alone. He prefers to leave it to the choices of the individual. He does not spy on people's minds and lives and then share that knowledge with others. He teaches the Dharma so that individuals can wake themselves up. That is all. In short the knowledge of your birth is safe with me.'

'And me!' Krishna echoed, 'of course.'

'At the risk of going against this principle of privacy and caution, respecting the details of people's lives,' Dusaka interrupted, 'I feel it will also be useful to you all to understand how far back your connections go. Yes, Matanga and Vasabha are your daughters in this life but you might also wish to consider, "Why? Why them and me?"' He glanced at Tingri who half-cocked her head the other way, as if to indicate, 'Go ahead, it's your choice,' Dusaka then turned to Khujjuttara and said, 'My apologies for dropping another rock into your pond but the fact is that when Krishna was born he was the younger half-brother of Amba and Tamba, the two daughters of the merchant, later the pilgrim Kamanita.'

‘Amba became Queen Samavati and Tamba became Queen Magandiya, both married to King Udena of Vamsa, and both not recognizing or knowing each other until the tragic ending of their lives and, in truth, Amba did not even know it at the close, only Tamba in her final and most distressed moments. These two sisters, Amba and Tamba, Samavati and Magandiya, have now been born as Krishna’s daughters; Amba reappeared as Matanga while you, Your Majesty, were Tamba; this is probably why you recently conceived such an irrational suspicion and hatred of the Master.’ He chose not to mention her stint in the Hell of Molten Copper.

As he had suspected, this particular boulder being dropped into the pond left Krishna, Khujjuttara, Kesini and Queen Vasabha momentarily open-mouthed in astonishment but soon eager for more details.

* * *

Ant had decided to remain behind in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods in order to find Ninka, so the searching party was again reduced and only five of them remained. They arrived in Kapilavatthu and found it to be a quiet, smallish city beneath the foothills of the Himalaya.

‘How long have we been gone from the human world?’ asked Bee, to no one in particular. ‘How do we find out what year this is? What would people here measure things by?’

The rest of the group were stumped by this until Gumbiya offered, ‘The Master leavin’ ’ome and then comin’ back as the fully enlightened Buddha, that has ’as to ’ave left a mark. Folk’d remember that.’

‘Great idea!’ Bee and Rhamba both clapped him on his back, at least the lower part that they could reach. Gumbiya glowed a little at the appreciation, but was a tad peeved by how surprised they all looked at him having had a bright idea.

‘If Tambaka is here, living or working in the palace we should be able to find some traces of her and then we just follow them up. We don’t know how old she will be but, if we can get a reckoning from one of the local tree devas or kinnari of how long since the Master first came back to visit that should give us a lead. We got stuck in the Underworld and time was doing all sorts of strange things there so Tam could be a baby, a child, a young woman, a mother of ten or in her old age – we just don’t know yet.’ Maggot’s brain was now getting into mode.

‘We should split up,’ suggested Salassa, ‘go our separate ways and see what we can find. The best bet is if Rhamba and I start on the tree-spirits and Gumby sees if he can find any local yakkhas, while you two comb the palace. We all need to see if we can figure out her age and, then, if there are recent sights or smells or signs that she’s here. She might be able to see us,’ he added, realizing then he might be setting Maggot up for disappointment, ‘... or she might not.’

‘She could when she was a baby!’ Maggot interjected.

‘But those things can change – remember, Krishna lost his ability to see us for those years he was caught in worldly things,’ Bee added, being suddenly aware that

she had mentioned Krishna for the first time in a long while. Maggot looked at the paving slabs of the square where they were gathered and said nothing.

* * *

The five split up and went their separate ways as the sun moved a few spans across the sky. When they came together again at their landing spot in the square they compared notes and their discoveries.

Gumbiya found that, even though this was the place where the Master grew up, he very rarely came here so there were not the great numbers of yakkhas, devas and various earth-spirits that you found in the big monasteries, like the Jetavana, the Veluvana in Rajagaha or the Ghositarama in Kosambi. In the landscape around the city in the various clefts and woods, mountain gullies where he had checked, none of the beings he had spoken with had a precise idea of how long ago the Master had first returned.

‘They wozn’t very ‘elpful. I got “No more than five or six sun turnin’s ago” up to “Could’ve been forty, if y’ask me”. Not much use – sorry – and no smell of her to be sure.’

Bee and Maggot scoured the palace rooms and halls, especially the shanties and annexes where the slave families lived but no signs showed themselves and no one who was known as being half-kinnari and naturally sweet smelling.

Rhamba and Salassa came in last. ‘We think we’ve got a date. One of the aged rukkha-devas, of a grand banyan tree, assured us that she remembered the first return of the Master as the Buddha, being exactly forty-one sun-turnings ago. The Master came here two sun-turnings after the enlightenment, so he was thirty-seven at that time. Add those two together and it tells us the Master must be seventy-eight right now, in human years.’

‘He was fifty-three when Tambaka was hatched,’ said Maggot, thoughtfully, ‘so that makes her...’

‘Seventy-eight less fifty-three is twenty-five,’ Salassa calculated quickly, noticing how the others all looked surprised at his command of numbers. ‘I know I can easily be focussed on my clothes and making beautiful music and dance-moves but, if you want to make that music, you need to know your numbers.’

‘Anyways, she is twenty-five Rains now, by their human calculations, that much at least we know. So, how do we widen the search?’ Maggot’s mind was again racing, seeking for solutions.

* * *

Queen Vasabha had requested the opportunity to speak with the Master, as privately as possible. She came to the Jetavana just with Kesini, and very modestly clad with a white shawl and without any jewellery this time. The Buddha just had Ananda sitting with him. He gave the Queen the rare privilege of receiving her on

the veranda of the Gandha-kuti. She was able to speak freely, without concern that they would be overheard or interrupted.

‘Venerable Sir, I would humbly like to ask for forgiveness from you. During the days following the death of Matanga I was confused, sad, enraged, grief-stricken and I struck out at many people and things around me, to blame and to vent my heated, agitated feelings upon. You, I regret were chief among my targets and I spoke ill of the Blessed One in many and various ways. Please forgive me for all I have done, by body, speech and mind that was injurious or disturbing for you.’

‘I forgive you, Great Queen.’

The unqualified and immediate acceptance by the Master of her and her shortcomings was utterly disarming and liberating to her.

Also, since not only was she no Sakyan princess but a sham kshatriya, and furthermore that she had been the notorious and murderous Queen Magandiya in a recent life, was something she knew that he knew and yet there was not a shred of ill-will in his gaze upon her. There was only kindness and compassion. She bowed, and wept freely at the weight removed from her heart.

‘Venerable Master,’ Kesini raised her one hand in *añjali*, ‘forgive me for being so bold as I’m just a servant here but can I ask about Devadatta?’ She very deliberately granted him no ‘venerable’ honorific.

‘You may, of course,’ he replied.

‘Since you have great psychic powers, and, one assumes, are able to read the minds and to know the actions and intentions of others, why did you not obstruct Devadatta in carrying out his plan of having our dear Matanga killed? And, further – please forgive me Venerable Sir but I’m blunt by nature – why in the court did Ananda not speak up and tell the court, and Devadatta himself, that you were fully conscious of his guilt?’

‘These are good questions, Kesini. As I believe that Ananda has explained before but which I can state for myself now, the Tathagata works by allowing people to be the makers of their own salvation and their own mistakes. On occasion I will offer advice or guidance, up to the third time but, if the individual chooses to ignore that advice, then the Tathagata must necessarily step aside and let the person act according to their will. This is how all the Buddhas of past ages have given guidance and taken action, or stepped aside. Sometimes such allowance of action ends with great anguish and bloodshed amongst the consequences. This is the way it is.

‘In these present circumstances, and according to this method, it is up to Devadatta to see the error of his ways and to endeavour to do better in the future. He knows the truth of the matter. It is up to him to acknowledge that; otherwise if only force or threat is used to make his behaviour change, the heart will still remain stuck to its views and habits. It is up to Devadatta to tell the truth, if he can bear to.

‘He has wedded his heart to fame, honour and renown, to riches gained from spiritual prowess. Only when he sees in his heart that these are superficial, worldly qualities, not worth pursuing, let alone lying for, only then will he learn and be free. As I have said, “The liar goes to hell...” but when we see our transgressions as such,

and make efforts to do better, this is called “development” in my teaching and discipline.’

* * *

The executions – of Sattuka and Kalidanta, Kokalika and Samudadatta – were as grim an affair as one would imagine. One part of the ritual of execution, however, was that the condemned would go to the block with a thick garland of *kanavera* flowers around their necks. The blood-redness of the blossoms mimicking and symbolically sanctifying the act of beheading and the blood that would surely flow forth.

Pujika was a devout regular at the Jetavana and also had the task, after her father, of preparing the garlands of *kanavera* for the prisoners going to meet their final punishment. It was a strange task to be entrusted with; on the one hand these were people who had committed the worst crime, that of murder, but she was duty-bound to weave the garlands in the most careful and beautiful way and to use the freshest blooms available, just as she would for an offering to the Master.

She had three young sons now and another child on the way. The boys were not very disciplined in the flower room at their workshop, making an incessant racket, and her belly felt like that of an elephant as she waddled from her mat to get another basket of florets. She heaved herself up, with an ‘oof’, and gave out another as she sat down again.

‘In my next life I want to be a kinnari, for sure! I would get to live with flowers for a thousand years and I wouldn’t have to deal with all this noise and, hopefully, without such a swollen girth.’ She wasn’t sure about that last part – kinnaris were supposed to lay eggs and the babies would hatch from those but she wasn’t quite sure how big the eggs were. Still, she reflected, ‘A thousand years as a flower deva would be much more comfortable, and far more delightful than this.’

* * *

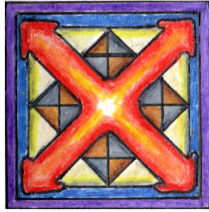
At the killing ground the four condemned men were gathered, their *kanavera* garlands making them a matching group and levelling the social status between them – equal in death with each other as they had not been, in the eyes of society, in their lives before.

Devadatta had risked staying to see things through to the end, even as he began his next round of scheming. He reflected, as if to tell the world:– Don’t worry, I will leave. I’ll leave and go my own way, to my own place, to save my esteemed cousin the embarrassment of any suspicions about me. Gayasisa, that is where I shall reside, and perhaps there will be some who will choose to come with me. My time is not yet done.

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CHAPTER 18:

KRISHNA'S CHANGE OF HEART



anthic instead of bright, the whites of Krishna's eyes matched his heart which now felt sallow and wan. He had indeed been greatly cheered by the astonishing surprise that Queen Vasabha was not only his long-lost half-kinnari daughter but also that she had been Tamba, Queen Magandiya and the killer of Amba, in the near past.

Nevertheless, a layer further down, he felt lost and confused, heartsick and filled with doubts about his spiritual life. 'Wrong, wrong, wrong... how could I get it so wrong, and for so many years?'

He was sitting under his kuti with Dusaka and Tingri. It was early morning and the day was warming up. Dusaka leant against the *charpai* with Tingri on his lap, dappled sunlight occasionally glinting on his bone earrings or on one of the amulets and malas tangled about his neck. His gammy leg was half-propped on his walking staff as he had settled himself in for another lengthy session of hearing Krishna's woes.

'First I thought that Gavinna's advice meant 'live life to the full – enjoy everything' and I made good friends with Udayin and Surama, Arittha and the Group of Six – those were good times, or at least I took them to be so then. Then,' Krishna had well-warmed to his subject by now, 'as you know.'

'I do,' Dusaka rather pointlessly responded.

'As you know I saw the negative side of all that and the Master himself gave me really good advice – made me see that the idea of a "hidden teaching", a special tantra for the advanced, was not what he had ever had in mind. I really got that!'

'Tremendous,' Dusaka chimed in, with the tone of voice being more languid than excited; Tingri offered a snort which Krishna took to mean, 'And how many years was it before you figured that out?'

Embarrassedly, he carried on, 'Anyway, you know I'm a slow learner.'

'Indubitably.'

'But I *do* learn and I took the Master's words to heart: "OK! Tighten up!" I thought, "That's the way". So I turned around my understanding of what Gavinna had said and decided to follow the path of austerity instead. I knew Devadatta and Maha-Kassapa were both famous for their personal standards of renunciation – despite Devadatta having received great amounts of royal patronage in the past – but since Maha-Kassapa was away in foreign parts, and since Devadatta was close by, I went to him for guidance.

'You didn't think to ask around and see what the general impression was of his views and ways?' Dusaka narrowed his eyes which got lost in wrinkles for a moment.

'To be honest,' Krishna winced at the acknowledgement, 'it never crossed my mind. I have a tendency to be credulous and naïve.'

'To be sure.'

'So then I get myself into this terrible mess that ends up with Matanga – my own unknown daughter – dying, before I could even appreciate who she really was and make a proper bond of father to daughter with her. I thought Devadatta's reforms were a great way to get things back on track, both for the Sangha and for me.'

Dusaka's pronouncedly shaggy eyebrows both rose at this, 'Didn't you realize, didn't it ever occur to you that Devadatta only raised those points in order to split the Sangha? That's why he did it. It was not out of any altruistic or spiritual intention. He made those proposals knowing that "people admire self-denial" and, more importantly, he was pretty sure that the Master would reject all of them. *The rejection was what he wanted.* If the Master had agreed to those changes his plan would not have worked.' One eyebrow lowered whilst the other, over his right eye, remained raised.

'And he has not dropped those five suggestions either. He wriggled out of getting the blame for your daughter's death, so now just wait and see what he does to keep sowing seeds of dissention and division.'

'By the way,' Dusaka gave a wry smile, I would say *you* needed to get back on track but the Sangha itself was and is in fine shape. Like a shady politician, Devadatta and his cronies kept promoting the big lie of "the problem of the Master getting old" – by saying it enough times they were hoping it would be taken as an acknowledged fact. However – look closely – is it really the case that the Master's light is dimming? Yes, he has a back that pains him most of the time, but how is his mind? How stress-free is his manner? How easily does he handle thorny issues in the community?'

A light was dawning in Krishna's mind, a realization of the degree to which he had been hoodwinked. It was sobering, embarrassing and relieving all at the same time.

He still, nevertheless, had the biggest of his doubts and debilitating frustrations to deal with. Underneath the sadness of having lost Matanga, and the joy of finding Vasabha, who was Tambaka, he was now at a loss for the direction of his spiritual life. 'So, if it's not the "Way of Indulgence" seeking happiness by satiating the senses; and it's not the "Way of Suppression" seeking happiness by negating and annihilating all desires, what *did* Gavinna mean?'

Dusaka smiled warmly as Tingri clambered off his lap and came to snuffle Krishna's hand instead. 'The words she spoke certainly were describing the superior mangala. Although it seems as though you were not listening closely enough at the time. Twenty-seven Rains have passed since she gave the prophecy to you but, if

your mind grows less obstructed, and less prone to believing in deceptions, then things might still become clear to you.'

'Couldn't you just tell me?!' Krishna whimpered.

'Now where would be the fun in that?' He compassionately grinned.

Krishna lingered expectantly hoping, almost certainly vainly, that Dusaka would shake his head, say, 'Alright, let me spell it out for you,' and then his troubles would be over. Even as this thought formed another took shape, saying, 'Ha ha – very likely!'

'So what are the obstructions that are preventing me from recollecting and understanding clearly?'

'You want a list?' Dusaka was apparently serious. 'Alright – the general headings, as far as I can tell, are: sense-desire, grudges and ill-will, views and opinions, believing in your doubts, the conceit of identity – that you're "this" or "that" – and its partner, the desire for defined being, lastly, and generally, ignorance – not being awake to the way things are. That about covers it.'

Krishna felt more drained and despondent at hearing such a catalogue of his painfully familiar mind-states. Dusaka saw his eyes dimming, becoming more jaundiced than ever, and his posture slumping. Tingri climbed onto Krishna's lap and began, affectionately, to chew his fingers.

'The main problem, at the heart of all these, is that we so easily believe our desires, our hatreds, our opinions, our doubts, and our impressions of who we are and who we want to be. If we can stop believing in the lies the mind tells – "If I get this it will make me happy", "This isn't an opinion, it's a *fact*" – if we can recognize the lie, the mind is well on its way to happiness and freedom.' The voice in which Dusaka spoke this had a different tone to the jokey, wry comments he had mostly been dropping up until now – his words were heartfelt, kindly and serious.

'Do you want to hear about the first lie that was ever told?' It was a rhetorical question as Dusaka was already moving his body into its 'leaning on my staff and reciting a tale' posture.

Krishna straightened up and Tingri perked her ears.

* * *

*'Sing devas! Weep and learn this Gatha's words,
True they tell of the lie, the very first,
That burst upon the world, the awful stain
That led the way, all untruth in its train.*

* * *

*'Upon a time, in the First Age, a king
Once lived, Mahasammata was his name.
His span of life an Incalculable
Aeon long – in lives past such was the norm.*

*'He was the founder of the House; his sons –
Nine generations – cascaded down to
Apacara, King of Ceti, his home
Fair Sotthivati, wide-famed noble town.*

*'The King was blessed with powers, awesome strengths,
Four were these: the first being he could walk
Aloft, pass through the air as if on earth;
Second, four deva guardians, blades unsheathed*

*'Warded him, each standing in their quarter;
Third, the sweet scent of sandalwood his body
Exuded at all times; the fourth, his mouth
Diffused the fragrance divine of lotus.*

*'How did the lie, the first, then come about?
The tale is complex so take careful heed.
When Apacara was a prince the royal priest
Was named Kapila. He had a brother,*

*'A younger lad, friend of Apacara,
Blessed with the name of Korakalamba.
One day the Prince gave promise that, when king,
His playmate Koraka would be the Priest.*

*'The old king died and Apacara then
Ascended the throne of ancient Ceti.
The Royal Priest, Kapila, did not choose
To step aside but then – oh, blighted day! –*

*'He gave up his post, took the pilgrim's staff
And, retiring to the forest, instead of brother,
He named his son as his successor. The
Brother Koraka was thus passed over.*

*'The King, Apacara, was not informed.
He found this out talking with Koraka,
"Are you not the Royal Priest, now Kapila's
To the forest gone?" "Nay Sire," he replied,*

*"He made his son the Priest; I'm set aside"
"I won't have that! The post was long promised*

*To you." "But Sire, how can you make that so?
It is impossible, O King, for me*

*'To go against my elder brother's choice."
"I see no block that can't be moved, I will
From my Royal Seat, simply declare that
You are the elder and that your brother*

*'Is the younger." "But, Sire, how can you make
What is not the case into what is true?"
"I shall tell a lie," the proud king proclaimed.
Koraka knew not what this word should mean.*

*'He hedged, "When will you do this, O Great King?"
"On the seventh day from this I'll pronounce
This lie of mine unto the city folk."
Word spread like wildfire, though full many asked,*

*"What kind of thing's a 'lie'? Is it yellow?
Or blue? Or some other colour?" No one
Seemed to know for it was a time when the truth
Was told by all. None kenned what a "lie" might be.*

*'The many folk gathered
What would this day hold?
What rash and reckless spirit
Had made their king so bold?*

** * **

*'A madding crowd had clustered to see what
This mysterious thing could be, the King
Would now unleash upon the world. They hoped
To see the "lie" as if it were a beast*

*'Of distant provenance, or hap a spell
To dazzle and impress. The King, as was
His wont, clad in full regalia, stood
High in the air above the multitude.*

*'To his great surprise, and anxious wonder,
The sage Kapila, airborne, joined him there.*

*His hide of antelope he spread, quite sure
His Majesty's attention was with him.*

*'Seated on the hide he asked, "Is it true,
O King, that, by a lie, you plan to make
The junior the senior like that!"
He snapped his fingers, looked him in the eye.*

*"That I will shortly do, as I've declared,"
The brazen youthful king glared in return.
"Great King," the sage replied, "grievous indeed
Is the destruction of good qualities*

*'That such a lie will cause. A King who speaks
A lie destroys right and, by right so
Destroyed, that king is destroyed too, I say."
The King, undaunted by the sage's words,*

*'Shamelessly made his statement thus, he said,
"Sir, O Sage Kapila, you are the younger
And Korakalambaka the elder."
At that very moment the lie was spoke*

*'The devas four said they would no longer guard
One such as this. Swords cast they at his feet.
They turned their backs to him and disappeared.
His breath turned foul, fume of a rotten egg.*

*'His body smelled not like sandalwood but
Like an open drain. He fell, ungainly
From the air and landed amid the crowd,
All his powers supernatural gone.*

*'The kindly Sage Kapila,
Seeing this great fall
Said, "If you recant this lie
Return will your powers all."*

** * **

*'Aggrieved and shamed so publicly the King
Replied, "You wish only to deceive me!"
Which was untrue and, so, a second lie.
Then, strange as it may sound but this era*

*'Was the First Age itself when much magic
Filled the air, and fell and wondrous effects
Of earth and sky and water, were not rare,
More common than today. What then occurred,*

*'With the second lie, the fallen king was
Pulled into the earth, up to his ankles.
He restated his first lie once again,
Again and again; each time he was pulled*

*'Deeper and deeper – to his knees and then
To his hips; to his navel and then, yes,
He repeated the heinous lie again
For the sixth time and was swallowed up to*

*'The breast. He paid no heed to this, a clear
Message of where his lie would surely go.
One last time the Sage Kapila cried out,
"One word of truth, O King and all's restored."*

*'The haughty King was strangely undeterred,
Pronouncing his bold-faced lie he stated,
"You are the junior and Koraka
Is the elder." This was the seventh time.*

*'And lo! His head slipped below the earth and
He was never seen again. In that life
King Apacara was the liar; he
Reappeared this life as Devadatta.*

*'All this goes to show that lies
Unless retracted, recognized,
Lead to misery, but pain
Ends when truth is realized.'*

* * *

The search in Kapilavatthu continued, Maggot and her friends focused on the palace, but since virtually every human could not see them, and since most of the devas, yakkhas, and various sprites did not apparently pay much attention to the humans, it seemed to be turning into a bit of a lost cause. They knew what Hiri and Siri had heard, and they were getting to know the areas of the palace and its grounds

where the slave families lived, so the field of possibilities was not too wide. One of the problems, however, was that many of the slaves had to work at the more rank tasks – emptying outhouses of their night-soil, mucking out stables, tending the cooking pots and fires in the kitchen, carrying fuel for the smiths, which often included dried cow-dung along with wood and charcoal – and the intense smells could easily mask any natural fragrance that Tambaka might have had.

Maggot's eye, and all the others' too, became acutely tuned to looking for a woman with a coppery skin and of about twenty-five sun-turnings or so – she was starting to see them everywhere, only to be disappointed again and again – the person, on a closer look, turned out to be too young or too old, or it was a long-haired boy, not a woman... it was hard to bear.

Finally, a breakthrough came when Bee was frustratedly endeavouring to delve into the dark corners of the kitchen. Jammed into an unswept nook, beside one of the low shelves in a store-room, Bee found a long hair, just one, but when she held it up to the light it was auburn, and the smell... 'I think it's hers... Am I fooling myself again?' she wondered. She went out into the courtyard where there was fresh air and no breeze, she held it close up to her nose and inhaled.

'Yes! It's hers but where is she?'

Bee raced to summon Maggot and the others and explained where she had found this special strand.

'So, kitchen, kitchen... do any celestials hang around here at all?' Maggot wondered. 'Well,' Rhamba offered, 'it's not likely – it's noisy and smelly and the virtue of the kitchen folk is not so lofty as to attract too many refined ones.'

'I saw a sprite or two round there,' Gumbiya mentioned, 'there's some, deffo... er, definitely.' The whole group raced to crowd into the halls and store-rooms of the kitchen. It took a little hunting but, eventually, they found a couple of kitchen-sprites nestled among the sacks of rice in one of the store sheds. They were tiny and, unsurprisingly, were both a bit overawed by these larger spirits and annoyed to be interrupted – they lived on the subtle fragrance given off by rice-grains and their repast had been disturbed.

Maggot tried to be as unintimidating as possible to these small and slightly shy, fellow bhumma-devas. They wore what looked like homespun garments woven from spider-webs or cornsilk, or perhaps (more likely) threads drawn from rice plants in their ripened season. She knelt down before them and held up the precious hair that Bee had found.

'Excuse us please for intruding upon you,' she politely began, 'but I lost my child many sun-turnings ago and, when I heard she might be here in the palace, I came straight to this place, with my friends, to see if we could find her. She was hatched perhaps some twenty-five sun-turnings ago. This is a hair from her head, so we are sure she *was* here, but can you tell us if you recognize her fragrance? She is half-human, half-kinnari, but when she was a babe, she had a flower aroma like mine, of the Jambu.'

The two little sprites seemed to get interested quickly – it was certainly the most exciting thing that had happened all day – and they gave the hair a good sniffing. It was rope-like in their tiny hands. After mumbling to each other in their own dialect for a bit, one of them spoke up.

‘Know ‘er – sure we do. That’s from the girl Vasabha but we didn’t know she was half-kinnari – that’s a first ‘ere – as far as I know... did yoo ever ‘ear o’ that?’ The other shook her head, with her minute cap of rice-papery material wagging vigorously.

‘She’s gone now, been gone about ten sun-turnings, maybe nine...’

Maggot took a sharp breath, ‘Gone as in...?’

‘Nah! She in’t dead, not as far as I know, but she was part of the crowd of kids that Yasa and Nagamunda had – they’ve got a pile of gran’ kids now. Ain’t seen ‘er since that big king from the sarf came ‘ere, back ven, ‘baht ten, maybe fifteen or more sun-turns ago. I ain’t seen ‘er since they all left so she prob’ly went wiv ‘em. Don’ know any more – I don’t mind the comin’s ‘n’ goin’s of the big folk very much – but she in’t bin arahnd the kitchen or the sheds since then.’ The little being was enjoying being useful and having some real information to give them all.

‘F’r a human she was nice – she did always smell good, come ter fink of it – not like *rice*,’ as if that was plainly the best scent in the world, ‘but pretty. Under all the reeks o’ the kitchen, ‘n’ the ‘eat and smoke, you c’ld tell when she was abaht, come ter fink of it. She couldn’t see the likes of us, though,’ he turned to his rice-capped partner, again she shook her head, ‘Nah, no sign that she or any of the kitchen folk could see us. They have an eye for rats and mice, no’ us!’

Salassa stepped closer, ‘This “big king” who came to visit, any chance you can recall a name, or some of the things they wore? There’s a lot of kings and queens south of here.’

The two sprites went into a huddle once more. The female one then spoke, ‘It were Kosala – I ‘member vat. Kept goin’ on abaht how big and rich it was – Kosala deffo.’

Gumbiya was pleased to hear his own accent; the fact it was coming from a being about one hundredth of his size was even more endearing. He liked these kitchen-sprites.

‘So! Savatthi! That’s where we need to go.’ Maggot was excited and the whole group were grinning. ‘We’re closing in... and we know her adoptive parents are Yasa and Nagamunda.’

‘Well, ‘e’s gone, the dad, died a few years back, but Naga’s ‘ere, plus ‘er brood, but y’ won’t be able to ask ‘em any fink, she won’t be able to see or hear y’. Best off you head to Savatthi, dahn sarf, and see if y’ can find y’ girl in the kitchens there, or doin’ summat else. That’s my bes’ guess.’

‘Thank you! Thank you so much! This is all wonderful news! Is there anything we can do for you by way of a favour, to express our gratitude?’ Maggot was amazed and delighted by all the help they’d given.

‘Not really,’ the male started, then his partner whispered something to him. ‘Oh yeah. We live on plant smells, ‘n we don’ see many kinnari ‘ere indoors so, ‘ow would you two,’ indicating Bee and Maggot, ‘like to breathe on us. That’ll be a nice addition to our rice – which is course our main – but please, give us a blast.’

Both Bee and Maggot were happy to do this for them for they knew that their breath had natural invigorating, curative powers. Where Maggot’s breath had the fragrance of fruity Jambu, rose-apples, that of Bee had the scent of the red or purple lotus. The two kinnaris leaned forward and gently exhaled in the faces of the sprites.

‘Whoah! That’s the stuff! Eh?!’ The two drank in the fragrant airs, blown into their faces like a warm wind from the south. ‘Fank you!’ They were both a bit giddy from the blasts, ‘T’riffick – jes’ the ticket. By the way, me name’s Cob and ‘er’s Green-Blossom.’

They then made their farewells and the group gathered in their now-familiar courtyard – ‘So – Savatthi and the royal palace. Let’s go!’

* * *

Krishna was sitting at the Master’s feet. It was an informal time, late in the morning after most of the Sangha had dispersed following the communal meal. Ananda was there, as were a few junior monks and novices. Devadatta and his group were keeping to themselves and rumour had it that he would soon depart, if he had not done so already. Surama had been drawing ever closer to Devadatta and, seemingly now that Krishna was so deeply buried in a funk, the Elder had forgotten his erstwhile friendship with him. Little did Krishna know that Mara considered his work done there – at least for a while.

To the degree that he noticed at all, Krishna was surprised that Surama was still firmly with that group despite the dire rumours that circulated following Matanga’s death and the trial. One might have thought that anyone in their right mind would give Devadatta a wide berth by now however, that right-mindedness was, apparently, still rare in the world and the miscreant Elder continued to draw a substantial coterie of sycophantic followers into his sphere of influence.

The Buddha was now speaking and Krishna was paying close attention.

‘There are these two extremes that should not be followed, by one who has gone forth and who seeks the good: the Way of Indulgence – which is low, coarse, vulgar, ignoble and unprofitable – and the Way of Self-Torture, Suppression, which is painful, ignoble, and unprofitable.

‘In the former Way an individual seeks happiness and fulfilment through trying to satiate the senses and maximise sense-pleasure; in the latter Way an individual seeks happiness and fulfilment through trying to negate the senses and to get beyond all feeling; or they follow the mistaken belief that painful, racking, piercing feelings on their own are intrinsically liberating; or they hold that the more pain that is endured, the closer to enlightenment and liberation they are drawing.

‘Both of these are wrong, deluded views. By avoiding these two extremes, the Tathagata realized the Middle Way, which gives vision and understanding, which leads to calm, penetrative insight and enlightenment, to Nirvana.’

Krishna was enraptured, he could not restrain himself from blurting out, ‘This is exactly it! Those are precisely the two paths I got stuck on – the first one for much longer than the second – amazing, Venerable Sir! This is the first time I have heard this expressed so clearly!’

The small group which sat clustered around the Buddha went quiet. The Master himself pausing before continuing. The pause became more pregnant and was drifting into being an uncomfortable silence when one of the younger bhikkhus spoke up.

‘Venerable Krishna, you do realize that what the Blessed One just said was the words with which he began his first discourse, that which set in motion the Wheel of Dharma over thirty-five Rains ago. We recite those words often.’

Once more Krishna experienced a mixture of both embarrassment at his folly and inattentiveness, and delight that this marvellous teaching – so tailor-made to his own condition, was at last sinking in.

‘I am shy to admit,’ Krishna replied, ‘that it has taken me twenty-five Rains to put two-and-two together. Please accept my apologies for being a student so slowly wise, Venerable Sir.’

The Master accepted the apology in silence, with a slight inclination of his head.

‘If I might ask,’ Krishna continued, ‘with respect to the Middle Way – that does not just mean being indulgent half the time and suppressive the other half, that much I can understand straight away, but what exactly is this Middle-ness and how is it found and embodied?’

‘You are not so slow to learn, Krishna,’ the Master smiled wryly, ‘there are those among my disciples who for years have held to the “indulge half the time and austerity the other half” understanding, or *mis*-understanding of these words. Let me demonstrate.’

Near Ananda there were some offerings that had been made earlier. In amongst these were a few balls of twine. Ananda, being quick on the uptake, had already drawn out a length about a forearm long and had cut it, being familiar with the example that he was sure the Master was about to give. There was a small dried and hollowed gourd that held balm, which had a tight lid, sitting by the Master’s seat. Ananda tied the string around the neck of the gourd so that it made a neat little pendulum. He offered it in both hands to the Master.

In his left hand the Buddha held up the end of the string and in his right, he held the gourd below it. He moved the gourd to the left, holding his upper hand still.

‘This represents the extreme of Indulgence in Sense-pleasure’; he then moved the pendulum to the right, ‘this represents the extreme of Indulgence in Self-Mortification, Suppression. The Middle Way is not just half-way between the two

extremes'; he now moved the gourd to the nadir of the arc, 'rather, the Middle Way is represented by the point at the centre, the hub where the pendulum pivots from. He juggled his left hand. 'This is the mysterious Middle that those who have gone forth are tasked to find.'

Saying nothing further, the Buddha neatly rolled up the twine and gourd and handed them to Ananda. It was plainly the end of this informal gathering so the assembled monks and novices bowed three times and the Master returned to the Gandha-kuti.

* * *

Krishna's heart was greatly refreshed by this teaching and he resolved to make the realization of this Middle Way his new goal. Still, however, there was a niggle, like a name that he just could not remember, or a verse of the teachings that he knew was getting wrong. 'This is a clear and wonderful new direction but... what *did* Gavinna mean? Well, it seems I'm never going to be able to get Dusaka or the Master to explain it and, if I haven't figured it out after twenty-five Rains, I suppose I should just forget it, or at least leave it aside. Oh well, never mind – begin again!'

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CHAPTER 19:

PUJIKA'S DELIGHT



ujika had moved to a small village, called Katara, to the south of Savatthi, on the occasion of her marriage. She had been very happy about this for, even though she was leaving her family home, this village of her husband was even closer to the Jetavana than the city of Savatthi. It was a fine little place to raise their growing family and it meant that she could easily visit the Jetavana every day, even with her three little boys and her expanded belly.

One of her delights was, in the hour before dawn, to rise before the rest of the family, sometimes with her third boy on her hip, and go to the village Assembly Hall to tidy it up and to prepare for possible visitors. Katara was of modest size but, because so many folk would come from far and wide to visit the Jetavana, and would need a place to find and purchase offerings to take to the Master and the Sangha, they were quite prosperous there. The Hall was a finely built shelter where the village council would meet but – and more importantly for Pujika – it was also the place where Elders from the Sangha, (usually the monks rather than the nuns since the monastery of the female community was close to the walls of Savatthi) would sometimes come to sit and receive alms.

Katara was only three or four bow-shots from the gates of the Jetavana so, when any of the aged or infirm Sangha members wanted to go on the alms-round, or if there was a special occasion in the village such as a marriage or a baby blessing, they would use the Hall of Assembly as a place to gather. On very rare and wonderful days the Master would take this shorter route and come to Katara village himself and stop a while at the Hall.

Pujika had made it her daily custom to sweep the Hall as the light came back into the world, to shake out the mats and set them straight, and to fill the jugs with fresh water. The place was close to her home and the garland workshop, and it would put her heart at ease to know that, should any of the Sangha, on their early morning alms-round, need to stop and rest, the place was always ready. She would customarily bring some flowers to deck the seats and shrine as votive offerings, often draping these around the neck of her snoozing child as she made her way there. On the special days when an event was planned, if they knew the Elders were going to receive an offering there or if the nuns or monks were going to perform a blessing, she would be extra diligent and make abundant flower offerings, to add to those of other devotees.

As time had gone by images had appeared in her mind of celestial beings, wreathed in flowers and smiling at her, most often one bright round face clad all in the reds of the *kanavera*.

What had begun as a joke to herself that, 'In my next life I'd like to be kinnari' was transformed into a powerful feeling of, 'I know her! She's my real beloved! I want to be with *her*!' She was married to a good man named Khumbha, after his pot belly, who had given her these three fine children – soon to be four – but she could not say that her heart sang in his company. He was a good garlandier. He knew his trade but he had little faith in the Master, or at least a lack of interest in things beyond food, the family and his business, and he would hit the palm-toddy regularly too. With each additional child his consumption of this liquor had seemed to increase.

She loved her children, as any mother would and should, but somehow she felt that she didn't really *know* them, at least not in the way she seemed to know and long for this ruddy being that she experienced in these momentary flashes. She sometimes thought that these visions were a complete delusion, that she was merely caught up in a fantasy on account of the unsatisfactory nature of the world, just as the Master had spoken of so frequently. But then... then... these were so clear! These intuitions had a wholly different tone to other everyday longings, like waiting for the green rice to come in the Rainy season, to make sweet desserts, or the wait for certain blossoms to open up to make a special offering of some kind. This longing, this connection, was of a whole other order – as if her ordinary life was like the greys and sepias of the hour before dawn and her imagined life with this red-clad kinnari was like the full bright array of the colours of broad day.

All this had led her to make the resolution, whenever she made a flower offering or swept the Hall and prepared the seats, that she would declare, 'May this offering assist me in being reborn with my beloved.' The folk from the village and the nuns and monks who came to the Hall, or whom she met in the Jetavana, were impressed by such a devoted wife, as they took it, 'She's a veritable Sita, so devoted to her husband! Although so busy and hard-working, still she thinks only of him.'

'You should be called Pati-pujika – 'Husband-honourer' – not just Pujika!'

'If only they knew,' she reflected, however she never corrected them and sometimes she even affirmed their misunderstanding, saying, 'Yes! I love him very much,' to account for her blushes. She didn't like to be deceitful but somehow, despite the dishonesty, it seemed to be worth it. At first she had conflicted thoughts, doubting whether she was being really fair, or kind, or if it made her a bad mother but, in each moment when making such offerings nothing could quell her heart's desire: 'May I be reborn with my beloved!'

* * *

Devadatta had not yet departed from the Jetavana and his scheming to bring down the Buddha was not over, by any means. As the New Moon day approached, following the trial and execution of his confrères, Devadatta made his way among as many of the monks and novices as he could manage. Despite usually having a

powerful presence that no one could ignore he was able, somehow, to draw himself in and move through the community with great subtlety, like a shadow.

Customarily the rumour of his tread rode ahead of him – people knew that he was arriving – but he, at this time, traversed the forest and appeared in the different groups of the monks' dwellings like a soft, hardly perceptible drift of air.

As he came upon each separate section of the Sangha he told them, 'Friends, I went to the Blessed One and requested that he institute five reforms that I and my close advisors had compiled. He refused. I and my associates now undertake to live by these five standards. Let anyone among you who agrees, who is in favour of these five reforms, take a voting ticket.' These tickets had been made from sections of dry ola leaf. Devadatta carried a bagful with him.

Again and again Devadatta endeavoured to use his powers of persuasion on the various assemblies dwelling in the environs of the Jetavana – there were the monks who were expert reciters of the teachings, ones who sat together in meditation, ones who were experts in the discipline; then there were ones who gathered on account of a shared language, a group from Uttarakuru, another from Vamsa, a few from Kamboja in the east, as well as from Sunaparanta; there were many Magadhans and Kosalans, as one would expect, and a large group of Vajjians, from Vesali. Of all these monks it was only those from the Vajjian Confederacy that gave him any attention at all, the rest turned away as one, uninterested or wary of Devadatta's by now egregious reputation.

The Vajjians were a young crowd and had all gone forth together, more than a hundred of them, and so far had had little instruction or introduction to the discipline. They listened to Devadatta and it all made good sense. They believed, 'This is the Dharma, this is the teaching, perfectly explained by this great Elder.' So, taking the voting tickets, they naïvely sided with Devadatta. This group, along with his pair of older cronies and Surama, were the only ones who chose to go with him. He had now caused a schism in the Sangha.

Once he was convinced that he had made as much impact as he could, he addressed all his adherents, old and new, 'Come friends, let us go to Gayasisa.'

* * *

News of this plan spread rapidly as Devadatta had made a point of them all setting out for the south-east on the Uposatha Day of the Full Moon, *before* the recitation of the *patimokkha* had been held. This was a deliberate affront to the Master and the rest of the monastic community as all Sangha members were required to take part in the recitation of the Rule on the New and Full Moon days, unless prevented by fire, flood or sickness, or other extreme circumstances. The schism having been deliberately made by Devadatta, he was now underscoring this by making a public display of the division.

Some time after, when Sariputta and Maha-Moggallana were discussing the issue with the Master, he spoke very directly to them both, 'Sariputta, Moggallana,

do you feel the same compassion for those young bhikkhus that I do? Go and see if you can help them, before they come to ruin.'

They needed no persuasion and set off for Gayasisa at once.

On their departure, this having been so sudden and not widely discussed, one young bhikkhu, who was sitting near the Buddha the day after they had departed, burst into tears. The Master asked him, 'Why are you weeping, bhikkhu?'

'How could I not weep, Venerable Sir?' He sobbed, 'the great disciples Sariputta and Moggallana, having gone to Devadatta, will be won over by his teaching too.'

The Buddha smiled, 'It is impossible, friend, it cannot happen that Sariputta and Maha-Moggallana will go over to Devadatta's side. Rather, they will teach the young bhikkhus who have gone with the schismatic and will help them to see the path that leads to the truth, to enlightenment.'

The Master's clear and quiet, utter confidence that this would be the case brought reassurance to the anxious monk. He knew the Master's words were to be trusted, not just because of optimistic thinking, or believing an authority figure, but with the wordless ending of a doubt that comes with intuitive insight. As when one puts on a shoe that fits, the knowledge of that fitting is there before one thinks, 'It's a good fit,' so the veracity of the Buddha's words was known in his young heart.

* * *

At Gayasisa, some Moons later, Devadatta was sitting expounding his version of the Dharma to a large assembly. It was a moonlit night and, to his surprise, he saw Sariputta and Maha-Moggallana emerging from the shadows and appear in a bright patch between the shadows at the edge of the forest glade where his community had gathered.

He was so excited by this unexpected visitation that he halted his talk and declared, 'Look! The Dharma is so well taught and explicated by me that even the monk Gotama's chief disciples have come over to my teaching!' His eyes were aflame and he lifted his arms in welcome.

The words had hardly left his mouth before Katamoraka moved up close beside him and said, 'Venerable Sir! Do not trust these two! They are up to no good. They would not come here unless they had some evil design in mind!'

'Nonsense,' Devadatta dismissed him with a gesture, 'they are welcome since they have come over to my teaching.'

He called out to the two great friends, 'Come, noble ones, Sariputta, please sit beside me.' He indicated the space next to him as he shifted over on the broad Dharma seat. Sariputta declined the invitation and modestly sat on a mat close to Devadatta's feet; his companion Moggallana did likewise.

Devadatta then carried on with his discourse but, after a while, mimicking his erstwhile teacher the Buddha, he looked down at Sariputta and said, 'Friend, the

Sangha is still alert although it is far into the night, please allow a talk on the Dharma to occur to you. My back is paining me, so I will stretch it.'

Sariputta consented. Devadatta climbed down from the seat and went to the place in the forest where he had his sleeping mat. He had eschewed the use of buildings, as part of his five standards, so all these monks lived out under the trees. He spread his robes down on the mat and stretched out in the lion's posture, on his right side, but he fell asleep unmindfully and was soon deeply lost in slumber.

Back in the glade where the Sangha was gathered, the moon was high in the sky as Sariputta addressed the group. He used all his intuitive powers to discern the interests and needs of his listeners and – being a master of eloquent and analytical speech – most of the crowd remained attentive and drank in all he had to say, after Sariputta had stepped down from the seat, Moggallana followed him and gave a talk as well.

While Sariputta was from a refined brahmin family, and was golden-skinned and of gentle countenance, his close friend was swart, big-eyed and of imposing mien. He was from a brahmin family too, and from the same village of Nalanda, but their appearances could not have been much more different.

When Sariputta had been speaking the whole group of younger monks had realized the path to Stream-entry; by the time that Moggallana had finished his teaching every last one of them had reached the full fruition of that stage. They were all beyond doubt, destined to enlightenment and independent of others with respect to their insight.

Sariputta discerned this comprehensive change in the community and, looking to Maha-Moggallana, with his vast psychic powers, to double-check on this, his friend confirmed this state of realization of the assembly with a silent nod. Sariputta then rose and faced the group saying, 'Bhikkhus, we are going back to the Blessed One. Whoever upholds the teaching of the Master, let them come with us.' Thus the two Elders rose up and began to lead the large group of Vajjian bhikkhus on the long walk back to Savatthi.

During the talks being given by Sariputta and Moggallana the two close disciples of Devadatta that remained nearby – Katamoraka-tissaka and Khandadevi-putta – had dozed off, leaning against a rock at the edge of the area. They were both snoring gently through all of this. Surama, meanwhile had made himself scarce, slinking away as soon as he discerned that the noble pair were arriving. He knew that Maha-Moggallana would detect his true nature very easily.

When Katamoraka and Khandadevi-putta awoke, as rosy-fingered dawn was tinting the sky, they quickly divined that all the new recruits had vanished, along with the visiting Elders. Katamoraka raced to Devadatta's bower and roused him, as he was still fast asleep. 'Wake up! Wake up Venerable Sir! I told you not to trust them! Those two had indeed come here with evil on their minds. All the new monks have been led away by them – the whole lot!'

Then and there, even though he was just awake, Devadatta was so shamed and enraged, apoplectic, that hot blood burst from his mouth.

* * *

When the party had completed their journey from Gayasisa, which was a vigorous walk of about twenty days, the Master greeted them all warmly. He insisted that they had not left the Order by siding with Devadatta in this first ever schism in the Sangha, and that, after confessing the offence, and that offence having been acknowledged, they should be considered as members of the community in good standing, like everyone else.

‘So, Sariputta, how did Devadatta act when he saw the two of you?’ the Buddha enquired.

Sariputta recounted the scene as it had happened, then described how Devadatta had said, aping the expression used so often by the Master himself, ‘Sariputta, my back is painning me, I will go and stretch it. The assembly is wide awake, please let a Dharma teaching occur to you.’

As he recalled an incident from the ancient past, the Master’s countenance took on a soft, compassionate expression. ‘Once, bhikkhus,’ he began, ‘there were some elephants living near a big pond in the forest. The adult elephants would wade into the water, pull up lotus stalks with their trunks, then would carefully rinse the roots of them so that they were free of mud and pebbles, then they would eat them.

‘Some young calves, baby elephants, not knowing better, also waded into the pond and, similarly plucked up lotus plants. Instead of washing them clean, however, they chewed them up, mud and pebbles and all, so they incurred deadly suffering and died on account of that. So too, bhikkhus, Devadatta will die miserably through imitating me.

‘Devadatta is overcome, his mind so obsessed with gain, fame and honour, and he is badly influenced by his ongoing evil wishes and the friends that echo those with him. He will inevitably go to the states of woe, to hell, for the duration of the aeon, on account of these evil wishes, evil friends and through stopping halfway with the mere worldly distinction of supernormal powers. Indeed now, owing to his various heinous acts, these powers have now been lost to him.’ It was a sobering statement. The Master left it at that for all to ponder.

* * *

Pujika was getting close to the end of her confinement. She was very used to it by now as this was the fourth time in five years that she had gone through the process.

She was delighted to hear that a group of nuns had been invited to receive their meal offering at the Hall of Assembly that day; moreover it was rumoured that the great Arahant Elders Uppalavanna and Khema would be leading them. She went out early in the morning, before dawn, despite her heavy condition, and covered the votive shrine with fragrant garlands of that season’s flowers. She shook out the mats

and surrounded the seats, especially the first two, with strings of marigolds and her favourite *kanaveras*. As ever she intoned, as she made these offerings, 'May this act of devotion be a cause for me being reborn with my beloved.'

Day was dawning, as it did swiftly in those regions. Pujika waited just long enough to see the colours of her garlands in the full light of day since, when one worked by lamplight or candles or in the silver of moon or starlight, one never saw the real shades the flowers had and how they mixed together. In the morning brightness she assessed how it all looked and made a few rearrangements.

A few of the other villagers and regulars from the Jetavana had arrived by now. Pujika had intended to hurry back to her home and to bring some food offerings as well. She sat for a moment as she greeted the others.

'Jes' getting my breath back before I go.'

'You don't look well,' one of the women observed, 'you alright dear? You're close to poppin' there. Take care.'

Pujika did head home but was sweating in the late Hot Season, early Rains weather. She didn't want to miss the opportunity to see and make offerings to the enlightened nuns who were due that day so she forced herself to return to the Hall in time for the presentation of the meal offering. When she got there the place was crowded but, as she climbed the steps, the people parted a little to let her find a good spot. She leant against a pillar, glad to have the prop, as she was still sweating. The villagers nearby kept glancing her way.

'You alright, dear? You look 'orrid. Shouldn't you go 'ome?'

'In a bit... I want to be here,' she answered, a little weakly but brooking no discussion.

She joined the other lay folk in determining the Refuges and Precepts and was focusing as best she could through the Dharma talk that the Theri Khema gave. Uppalavanna seemed to notice her; she caught her eye once or twice and a look of interest, concern, mixed with a wry serenity, etched her expression. Pujika wondered for a moment, 'Why's she looking at me like that? Like she knows something I don't. Still,' as she closed her eyes again, 'she's known for having powers like Moggallana so she prob'ly knows mos' things about everyone.' She listened to the teaching with all the focus she could, sweat now having drenched her clothing, she stayed this way until the whole event was over.

'Here,' a close by friendly voice said, 'let's help you down.' They descended the few steps from the Hall to the dusty path. 'I'm gon' ter get you home girl – y'r close to y'r time, 'ave you got help there?'

Pujika was grateful for the arm to lean on, she reassured her, 'Yes, two of my sisters are here from the city, or they'll be here soon.' She smiled, genuinely pleased to have had the help. 'Thank you! I don't reckon I would have been good to do that on my own. This one is tougher than my others.'

'What number's this one then, three?!'

'Four,' Pujika gave a half-smile, 'they seem to keep springin' up each year, like the annuals.'

She was glad to be home.

* * *

The sun was setting and her sisters had not come. Her contractions were strong and she felt it could be any moment that her next child would be born. Her husband had, as he put it, 'Jes' gone to the toddy-shop for a nip.' Each birth had been slightly easier and quicker than the one before but she had a feeling this one would be different. Her one-year-old was sleeping in the baby hammock, her three and four year-olds were by her bed, unusually quiet, watching their mother's face in her travails.

'Here it comes!' she cried, 'you two had better be ready, you're the only help I've got today.' She was trying to be encouraging through the sweat and tears. In her mind, over and over, she dedicated this birth to her now single-pointed aim, 'May whatever good comes from this birth be dedicated to me being reborn with my beloved.'

She reached the end of the sentence for the umpteenth time and, on the word 'belovèd', the fourth boy was born and Pujika breathed her last.

* * *

She opened her eyes, immediately knowing 'I'm not in Katara... I'm... where? What...?' She looked down at her body and saw filmy threads had settled upon her, silken ribbons of flower-petals covered the length of her frame. She was by a lotus pond and there was music in the air, and a loud rhythmic beat, she could feel the throb of drumming.

'I'm back, I didn't go to the realm of my beloved with the kinnaris after all. I know this place, I think, but I'm tired. Rest, just for a bit.' She closed her eyes again.

She didn't know how long she'd been asleep but the sun had moved higher in the sky as if it was now late morning, perhaps the afternoon. She felt well rested and decided to risk standing, then realizing she could float on the air, she drifted, like a strand of spider-web on a breeze, towards the music and the pulse of activity in the near distance.

As she approached she could see hundreds of devas gathered. Half were high up in the scented air, dancing, dodging through the branches of the jewel-flowered trees, picking and tossing the blossoms down. These were being caught by the other female devata who were then decking a princely figure, who was plainly the centre of things, from head to toe with the flowers.

'Ninka!' A familiar voice rang in her ears, piercing through the rhythms and melodies that were so intense here. 'Ninka! You're back!' It was that vermillion clad kinnari from her dreams, her visions; was it her beloved? The voice said, 'It's you! It's really you.' The red-robed figure raced towards her.

The newly-arisen one could not fix on a name for this bright, rushing being but it was *her*. 'She called me "Ninka"' – she whispered, knowing the sound of it somehow, and her heart was flooded with joy. She turned to move towards the *kanavera*-coloured presence now beaming at her when, behind her, the voice of the flower-bedecked deva prince boomed, 'Ninka my dear – we haven't seen you since morning. Where *have* you been!?'

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CHAPTER 20:

PRINCE VIDUDABHA VISITS HIS ANCESTRAL HOME



idudhabha had been pestering his mother, and occasionally his father, since he was seven Rains old. He had seen that the other children of the royal household – his half-sister Princess Vajiri and the daughters and sons of the noble families of Kosala – all received presents from their maternal as well as their paternal grandparents whereas he never did. Toy horses, elephants, play-swords and shields, things he envied came to his companions in this way but not to him.

This was not to say that he was not showered with gifts from his royal father's mother, and his great-grandmother who was still alive although very deaf and a little loose in thought, however these 'women's presents' were not like the ones the other boys got from their grandfathers. King Pasenadi's father, King Mahakosala, had passed away long ago, so Vidudabha had received no sharp jewelled daggers, or bows with a spring to make arrows go a decent distance, or any keen-pointed arrows for that matter. He was aggrieved.

Over and over again he would complain, 'Mother, the other boys and girls get many presents from their maternal grandparents but I never do. Are you an orphan? Don't you have a mother and father?' Vasabha, who often found it hard to love her petulant and demanding, entitled son had become used to this appeal and always countered him with such as, 'My dear, my parents are Sakyan royals and they live a long way off, below the Himavant, that's why they never send you anything.' The prince was not satisfied with this but it would end the issue, for a time.

When he reached the age of sixteen Rains his status had changed from that of a child to not just an adult but, in a show of confidence in his only royal born son, the King had appointed Prince Vidudabha as commander-in-chief of the army as well.

The Prince was no longer so interested in boyish presents from grandparents – he had plentiful supplies of all the clothes, weapons and ornaments that an heir to the throne of the great kingdom of Kosala could wish for – but he was eager to go out into the world and he was ever intrigued by the family of his royal mother:– Why do they never visit? Why had they never even sent any messages? Weren't they the family of the Buddha himself? Why were visits from the Sakyan royal family never made? Other folk from the north came by – Koliyans, Sakyans and Kullutans – so the journey could not be so arduous, so why never his grandfather, Prince Mahanama, and his grandmother, the Princess Maddarupi? It was mysterious.

Soon after his installation as the head of the army and his adulthood had been formally declared he asked the King and Queen, 'Honoured Royal Parents! I have long wished to meet the other half of my Royal Family. I have been more than well provided for, educated and trained in military arts here in Kosala. I am surrounded by admirable family and fine friends, but I have felt an increasingly irksome absence as I have grown up. Please! Mother, Father! Your Majesties! Please allow me to visit the Sakyan kingdom and meet my Royal Mother's esteemed family there – my own blood and heritage.'

Vidudabha had taken long hours to prepare his speech and, since he was not gifted in oratory or in verbal persuasion beyond raising his voice and grimacing, he had brought in the court poet and had enlisted his aid with the wording of his appeal. It seemed to be working. King Pasenadi and Queen Vasabha leaned into each other to whisper a discussion. The Queen, after a few moments, turned to the Prince with her most charming smile, and said, 'But Vidu, what would you *do* there? I don't think it's really worth the bother.'

She was a bit desperate as, foolishly, she had become somewhat complacent and, since for quite a while her son had not been asking about her family – when would they visit, or could he go there one day – she had assumed that he had dismissed the idea altogether. She had not realized he had been saving things up for this moment so she was not prepared. As the words left her lips she realized, 'Well, "something to do" there is beside the point, it's the going there and meeting the people that matters.'

'I would meet my family, of course, mother.' The Prince suppressed a smirk as this was an argument that would be hard indeed to contend with, family and bloodlines being held so sacred in the Sakyan world, as he had learned in his studies.

His parents leaned into their huddle once again, the King shrugging and the Queen dropping her gaze momentarily. Finally they both turned to face him and the King pronounced, in formal tones and with a smile, 'Prince Vidudabha, my general, we have long overlooked this aspect of your life and we acknowledge that such a visit to your Royal Sakyan family is long overdue.

'Accordingly, not only will we sanction a visit by you to the north-east, to Kapilavatthu the capital of the Sakyan Kingdom, but also we ask you to head a formal embassy to the Royal Court there. You shall travel with a full troop of elephants and horses, and five platoons of foot soldiers will accompany you. I shall offer Royal Gifts to Prince Mahanama and...' here the memory of King Pasenadi faltered, not being able to recall the Royal Spouse, or Spouses' names, '...er... his wives, and I ask that you bear these offerings from the House of Kosala.'

Prince Vidudabha was pleased, mightily pleased.

* * *

Proud and big, radiant in the armour he had been gifted for the attainment of his rank as head of the army, Vidudabha strode about the barracks and through the palace store-rooms endeavouring to put the stamp of his authority on the embassy in all its dimensions.

Seasoned victuallers, quartermasters, stewards and armourers, to say nothing of the maids, pages and squires, were quick to perk up at his approach even though, once past, they all tended to mock his haughty inflated manner.

“E’s ‘ardly shavin’ and ‘e thinks ‘e knows how to pack a waggon,’ the grizzling head of stables grumbled. ‘You should hear ‘im tell me what food for the road we should take,’ the cook was unimpressed, “e’s hardly ever left the city district and ‘e’s an expert on campfire cookin’”; the theme was echoed all around.

Despite, rather than because of, the Prince’s ministrations, the embassy was readied and all the regal gifts were wrapped and packed before the next Full Moon. Every sign was there that they would be leaving soon and Vasabha knew that a rider had been sent already to inform the Sakyans of the intended visit. She was anxious about the adventure for all sorts of reasons, fearful of the outcome of her son’s visit when the Sakyan nobility were all clearly aware of who his mother really was, not to mention the widespread gossip among the commonfolk. Her having been a slave was an open secret, the servants and workers around the palace having witnessed a brand-new, full-grown princess suddenly appearing from nowhere. ‘Oh look! Lady Madda jes’ gave birth to a sixteen-y’r-ol’. Tha’s clever.’ She had heard the jokes even before they had left Kapilavatthu.

At a moment of great anxiety, as her thoughts ran freely through a list of tortuous possibilities, there was a sudden earthquake that shook her chambers. In the sudden shock she felt it was her fate coming to meet her; her bad karma ripening and the earth about to open up and swallow her. But the shocks subsided quickly and the palace rang with a vibrant silence. She was still safe, for now.

She pulled Kesini in and, in great secrecy, managed to find a messenger who was both discreet and who had a fast horse and good connections along the route. ‘He’s well-used to carrying delicate, private messages, for the merchants as well as the high-ups Ma’am. He’s reliable but expensive,’ Kesini advised.

‘Expense is *not* a problem,’ Vasabha was pleased with the news, ‘our lives and a lot else is on the line here. Whatever he’s asking, pay it, with an advance and a tip. I don’t care if he’s overcharging – whatever gets the word through, I’ll pay.’

‘Right you are, Ma’am!’ Kesini was in motion already. When the courier was brought into the stable-yard, with his horse and his provisions readied, Kesini, placing in his palm the weighty pouch of five gold *kahapanas* said, ‘Here’s your first payment, plus a little extra to speed your way; you’ll get the other half on your return – having delivered the message to His Royal Highness Prince Mahanama, personally. Got it?’

This was a fortune that had been placed in his hand. He realized it meant that this was a highly important contract and so he wanted to make sure he got it right.

‘And the message for the Prince is: “I am living here happily. Let not my lords make any difference in their treatment of him,” is that correct?’

‘Well done. That’s it, word for word. You know your job well. Ride fast, be safe and keep your mouth shut along the way. By the way, don’t drink up the gold before you return. We need you sober on horseback and at the way-stations.’

Kesini and Vasabha had discussed the wording at length. Their final version said what it needed to clearly enough without betraying any secrets, also making any interception that might be made, that could be interpreted in a negative way, plausibly deniable as anything untoward.

Vasabha felt satisfied that they had done all that was possible and the rest was up to the laws of karma, and the chances of nature to ripen as they would. She relaxed into a heap of cushions, saying to Kesini, ‘We’ve done all we can. There is no point in fretting further.’ As she breathed in to give a sigh of sincere relief a strange subtle fragrance filled her senses for a moment, floral, like her own natural scent but unique and fruity. ‘What’s that incense you’re burning?’ she asked.

‘There’s no incense Ma’am,’ Kesini sniffed to see if she could tell what Vasabha was referring to. She smelled nothing but her mistress’s natural fragrance and the evening jasmines, blossoming this season.

‘Oh, well never mind, it seems to have gone again.’

* * *

It was the day after the Full Moon and King Pasenadi had insisted on the Prince and the leaders of the embassy coming to the Jetavana to seek a blessing from the Master before departing. Vidudabha had proposed that, instead, the Buddha and some monks should be invited to the palace (mostly because it would be more convenient for His Serene Highness) but the King and the rest of the family disagreed so it was to the monastery that they went.

They made the effort to be very modestly dressed, to the chagrin of the Prince, and made offerings both before and after the mealtime. The Master gave his blessing for the embassy, with a peaceful but sober cast to his visage. He was warm and sincere as usual but there was a cool, almost sombre tone to his expression.

Queen Vasabha requested a Dharma teaching, to inspire and aid her son along his way, so the royal party settled in to listen closely, although Vidudabha was indicating a need to, ‘Carry on with preparations soon,’ despite everything having already been arranged.

The Master sat and looked over the group – at his old friend Pasenadi, at Mallika who had been a flower girl until the King raised her up, at Vasabha, at Vajiri and Vidudabha. He raised his eyes and took in the crowd of senior soldiers, ministers, lords and ladies and servants who had come along for the blessing too. He seemed to be consciously attuning to who was present, what was in store in their imaginations, what would be useful for them all to consider. He then began.

To the surprise of many of them he spoke of the insight into the characteristic of 'not-self'. This was a subtle topic which even many Elders in the Sangha still found hard to grasp. He explained how the things we customarily take to be who and what we are, and what we consider our possessions, are not in truth that. How, on account of ignorance, we believe the lie that the body, sensations of pleasure and pain, perceptions, thoughts and emotions are 'mine', that they are 'what I am', and that they are 'the real me'.

To the puzzlement of quite a few who were gathered, but what was music to the ears of Mallika, Vasabha, Vajiri and the King, he explained how the attitude 'I am' was a foolish painful conceit to believe in.

"'I am' is a conceiving; 'I am this' is a conceiving; 'I shall be' is a conceiving; 'I shall not be' is a conceiving. Conceiving is a disease, it is a cancerous tumour, it is a poisoned arrow. By overcoming all conceivings one is called "a sage at peace". And the sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die; they are not shaken and are not agitated.' The Master, as he finished this profound statement, paused to let these principles sink in and be reflected upon.

The Prince, meanwhile, had been growing steadily more restless and he was beginning to wonder if all of this talk of selflessness was being aimed at him. He knew he had a bit of a reputation for being pompous and self-aggrandizing, despite high status and being looked up to being the norm for a Crown Prince, so he was getting suspicious. The Buddha didn't look at him directly – as if to say, 'This is for you' – but it was chafing nonetheless.

At last he could not restrain himself any longer and this pause was the opportunity to speak up, 'Venerable Sir, I'm curious, how can you say "I am" is a poisonous delusion when *you yourself*, an actual living person, are sitting there talking to *us*, right in front of you. To me this doesn't make sense.' To his delight he saw one or two heads in the party wagging, nodding in agreement that this was a good point. He was encouraged.

'Venerable Sir, is there a self?'

The Master remained silent.

'Then is there no self?'

Again the Master remained silent. His eyes were now trained upon Vidudabha, to indicate he was not avoiding the question, but still he did not speak. Silence hovered.

Some of those present realized that the silence of the Buddha was the answer to the question. The Prince was waiting for a reply and took the absence of words to mean he had stumped the great wise one with a question that was beyond him. A few others realized 'The Prince is out of his depth here; the Master does this sometimes when someone has asked the wrong question, or they are asking a question that he sees doesn't have any value.'

The King cleared his throat, 'Venerable Sir, the Blessed One has given us a lot of time today and has graced my Prince with a blessing for the journey. We will now take our leave by paying our respects and with offering our gratitude.'

‘It is time now, Great King, to do as you see fit.’

* * *

Vasabha had seen that Krishna was amongst the bhikkhus sitting near the Master. She had also noticed that the now extremely elderly and frail Khujjuttara had joined the group at the back, and was sitting with a couple of the helpers that the Queen had assigned to look after the Elder’s physical needs after Matanga had been so cruelly murdered. Her white hair was thin now and her frame crumpled but her eyes were as bright as ever.

She saw that Dusaka was in attendance too so she asked the King, ‘Sire, as I see that some of my Dharma friends are gathered here to add their well wishing to the embassy, I would like to stay in the Jetavana for a while, to meet and also to discuss this last discourse of the Blessed One. Khujjuttara is learned and wise beyond many of those in robes and I see that she is back there, by the eastern side of the hall.’

King Pasenadi glanced over and saw that the aged sage was there and readily agreed to let Queen Vasabha linger. ‘Of course, my dear, please find a spot to sit and talk. I’m not sure how much longer Khujjuttara will be with us in this world, she must be close to ninety Rains in age by now.’

The Queen came over to where Khujjuttara was seated and she greeted her warmly. They were old friends by now. They had hardly finished their greetings before Krishna, now getting some grey hairs himself to contrast with his dark complexion, came up and said, ‘I’ve set up a place over there in the shade. We can go and sit where it’s cooler.’

It was a familiar, well-worn pattern by now that, whenever Vasabha had the chance to spend time in the Jetavana, she would seek out Krishna, or he her, the bond between them having become ever stronger. She had lost her family in Kapilavatthu, they were gone from her for good, and the only one she was close to in her official family was Vajiri who, against all odds, had still managed to remain unwed and so was still in the palace. Rumour had it that the King wanted to marry her off to Prince Ajatasattu in Magadha but she was magnificently adept at finding excuses not to comply with the Royal Wishes. There was Kesini, her oldest friend, but to have found Krishna, as her real father, was an unexpected joy.

She had loved the times that they had had together over these nine Rains. He was genuinely warm and caring towards her, even when she teased him for being a bit slow on the uptake when Dusaka or Khujjuttara – their regular companions and wise mentors – had made some observation that he had missed the point of. Vasabha could be prickly too, if Krishna or one of the others said something that wounded her pride, but she was even quicker to remind herself that, in truth, she was no queen, either relatively or ultimately speaking, and that she had nothing much to be that proud about. These were just reactions triggered by self-view and the threads of conceit that most folk seemed to have.

The thing that pained most deeply, and which she liked to get advice on, was the longstanding deception based on her pretence to be a person of rank. She was living a lie. It was like a stone in her shoe that could not be removed.

Dusaka had joined them on a mat, in their shady spot on the north side of the sala and, when Vasabha brought this issue up again, along with her new anxieties around the visit of her arrogant and inflated son to Kapilavatthu, the old monk did his best to clarify the picture as he saw it, in order to give her some comfort.

‘Great Queen,’ he began, a bit formally, ‘you should be more self-forgiving and put your heart at ease. It is true you are not without blame, you maintain the façade every day, but the motivation for the pretence didn’t come from you, did it? No. It was the proud Sakyans who put you up to it, or should I say, forced you into it,’ he raised a shaggy eyebrow, ‘you didn’t really have much of a choice, as I have heard it, eh?’ He then added, for propriety a, ‘Your Majesty.’

‘Oh don’t!’ Vasabha’s appreciation of his friendly mocking of her supposed rank was genuine and she giggled. She was grateful for his sincere friendship, and she could discern that the way he liked to use her titles and honorifics playfully was his manner of encouraging self-respect in her, while he simultaneously took a shot at the whole notion of rank and social status.

Krishna felt an unremitting love and delight at being in Vasabha’s company. He had spent twenty-five Rains as an absent father, assuming his fragrant beautiful child was lost to him forever and now – here she was! And so close by! It was something special and a possibility of which he had never dreamed. He did his best to empathize with his daughter’s troubles and anxieties, also being aware of the past traumas and travails of her life in Kosambi as Magandiya, however it was not always easy to do so.

‘I can’t say that I have deliberately deceived people so much,’ Krishna began, ‘but I feel I have believed the lies of others way too easily, too often and, worse, I have believed the lies I have told myself over and over. That’s the hardest thing for me,’ he looked at Dusaka, recounting old lessons, ‘I continually believe my desires, my fears, my opinions, my grudges... all of it... to be absolutely real. I try to learn but I’m slow.’

“‘Brave but slowly wise, thus we hail our hero,’” Dusaka quoted. Kujjuttara gave a wink; Krishna dipped his head, acknowledging the assessment by his mentor, who had been close by and guiding him for nigh on fifty Rains.

‘So,’ Krishna asked, changing the subject, ‘all that “my-ness” I suffer from. How does the Master’s silence on “self” and “no self” relate to that?’

The Queen and Kesini were very interested in this too. ‘Yes,’ she joined in, ‘can either of you wise Elders illuminate this for us? Why was it, when the Master was asked those questions, that he remained silent?’

‘If,’ Khujjuttara began, ‘when asked, ‘Is there a self?’ He had answered, “There is a self”, the Master would have been siding with the eternalists, those who believe in an individual entity existing for all time. If, on the other hand, when he was asked “Is there no self?” He had answered, “There is no self”, then he would

have been siding with the annihilationists, those who believe that there is no substantial reality of any kind and that, at the death of the body, an existent being is utterly annihilated, destroyed. Neither of these two extremes is what the Blessed One teaches. Are you still with me? Her voice, like her eyes, was clear and energized. There were nods all round.

'So, if when he was asked by the Prince, "Is there a self?" he had answered "There is a self" would that have been consistent with the Master's very common teaching that "all things, both the created and the uncreated, are not self"? To answer my own question: "No it wouldn't." Then, when he was asked, "Is there no self", the Prince, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, "I am sure I had a self when I came here but now the Master tells me that I don't exist at all." So, rather than answer the questions according to the way that they were posed, the Master indicated "Wrong questions!" by what I heard as a very meaningful and resonant silence.'

Krishna, despite his many years as a contemplative, was perplexed and somewhat irritated by this explanation. 'I don't mean to be rude...'

'But you will be,' Dusaka cracked.

'... but, how can a reasonable question be "wrong" in itself?'

Dusaka cleared his throat, hinting that he was ready to pick up the discussion. Kujjuttara gave him a, 'Yes! Please! You explain,' look with a tilt of her snowy head.

'Take, for example, a question that you have asked me a few times, such as, "When a being is enlightened, where do they reappear, after the death of the body?"' The whole group was keenly focused since, when Dusaka was in full explication mode it was a wonder to behold and to be a part of.

'Would you say that is a fair question?' Dusaka looked at each of the four people and included Tingri at his side.

'Yes, it's a fair question,' Krishna responded. The rest, with a sense of where Dusaka was going with this, restrained any reply or gesture.

'Wrong – "reappear" doesn't apply.'

'Then they do *not* appear in another realm?'

'Wrong again – "do *not* reappear" does not apply either.'

'Well, do they *both* reappear and *not* reappear?'

'Doesn't apply.'

Krishna's effort to cover every option then made him ask, 'So, do they *neither* reappear, *nor not* reappear?' He felt sure that one of these four must be correct:— What other options could there be?

'Remember,' Dusaka continued, 'we are talking about the principle of "wrong questions". So, imagine we had a little fire burning here, made of grass and some small sticks, and we then let the fire go out. If I then asked you the question, "Where did the fire go? Was it north, south, east or west?" How would you answer?'

'That those directions don't apply. It just went out.'

'Exactly!' Dusaka was alight and Tingri had to position herself to not get knocked by his gesticulations. '*The way you ask the question* – here about "direction" –

presumes a reality that does not exist. With respect to the enlightened, identity, time and location don't apply, and neither do language and concepts. The heart of such a one has realized perfect attunement with its own fundamental nature which is timeless, unlocated and not a self or belonging to a self. "A being" doesn't apply, "going" doesn't apply, "to" doesn't apply, and "another realm" doesn't apply either. Got it?!

* * *

Golden. Everything was golden, rich, bright, fragrant.

'Where? What?' There was wakefulness, a clear perception of light and scent, and sound, strange wonderful sounds.

Consciousness continued to expand: petals, flower-petals; feeling, soft feeling; there is music in the air; air; daylight; fingers, face, feet... soft ground beneath.

'I'm lying on soft ground. It's day somewhere. What I remember... Who is "I"? I remember the grip on my shoulder, an angry eye... My neck... the half-expected, anticipated cut... almost no pain. I gave my self away... I chose that...'

Soon the fragments of memory were lost in the dazzling light which seemed to hold an extra dimension of substantiality, as if the light were alive. Petals, which had been dressing her eyes, fell away as the new-born deva woke into this fresh life. She looked down the length of her body and saw that the golden petals were also formed into strands that clad her; blossoms and soft gossamer threads formed a draping cobweb about her. She lifted a hand and turned it in wonder.

She breathed deeply in and, more so than the light, the air of this place, wherever it was, was quick with life, it loved her, she loved it. Energy rampaged through the limbs, the chest, the belly, the head she now bore. She smiled – 'Now, this is what I call being alive!' Enthralled by the vital power of that breath she took in another and another, as deep as she could. After the third things began to spin, and kept spinning.

'Rest, I should rest a bit. Rest. What a place... And what am I?'

The passing of time was lost to this newly-born awareness. There was softness beneath her and the delicious, deeply scented living air, then it was gone.

* * *

Again her eyes opened and she could, now, clearly remember how it had been when she first awakened. She had no sense of time having passed as the light around her was without a form. She looked into the sky above her, there were jewelled, flower-bearing trees and between them the bluest blue she had ever seen. The sun was there but was it higher or lower than before? She couldn't tell.

Standing, she swayed for a moment then took a few steps. Moss that looked like living emeralds sprang between her toes. 'Well it seems I have hands and feet here, and I can stand and walk.' She reached for a cluster of blossoms on a low

branch nearby. As she reached her effort drew her up into the air, which it took a moment to notice. 'Oh! I can fly too!!' This was indeed a place of wonders.

The distant music now caught her attention, it was coming from... where? She looked about and tried to sense where the sound was loudest although it was in the space around her and in her as much, apparently, as it was emanating from a single spot. She followed the intensity, once she had pinned it down, and drifted through the air towards it, feeling like streamers of light and fragrance were billowing out behind her and following in her train.

There was a grove ahead thickly packed with other beings. She could see they all looked like she did, as far as she could tell. Cautiously, not knowing what she was coming upon, or whether she belonged. Gentle resonances from her life before said to her, 'Beware, there might be danger,' but she tasted that, knew the feeling, and pushed herself on, 'Don't be afraid. No need. I am bigger than this.'

At the edge of the broad glade she paused and looked about her. The rhythmic music was shimmering in the fragrant air and the presence of these hundreds of beings was like the crackling shocks of fur on amber – something she remembered from... Where? When?

Beneath one of the flowering trees, off to one side, she saw a beautiful young being close to a less bright, smaller being, clothed all in carmine and vermillion, a dozen shades of red.

'I know them... do I? From where? When? I know...' She was thinking as she unconsciously floated towards them. 'The red one, she's so familiar... there was a yakkha... long ago... who is her friend?' As her memory stretched to recognize, find a name, she arrived beside them. The two broke off their conversation and turned to her, seeing in her mango-golden raiment and her big-eyed innocence, a friendly face.

'Greetings,' the two said simultaneously. The brighter, beautiful being then spoke, 'I have just reappeared here.' The red-clad one added, 'And I'm only a visitor.'

'And I'm new here too.' She found she had a voice and that she knew their language. 'I have just arrived, appeared, I'm not sure what, as well.' She looked closely at the small being, seeing now that most of her garments were made from skilfully woven *kanavera* blossoms. 'Do I know you from somewhere?'

* * *

It was with great pomp and a beating of drums that Prince Vidudabha led the procession out of Savatthi. In taking leave of his Royal Father, the pleasure at now standing at least a hand-span taller than the King, if not nearly two, was deeply relished. The King was broader, deeper in the chest by far, but the Prince now looked down upon his father and he would probably grow some more before he was done. His elephant was at the van of the great embassy and he was flushed with pride at how splendid he was sure he looked, arrayed in all his finery at the head of the awesome, powerful assemblage of Kosalans. He was not able to hear the

comments such as, ‘E’s got more sparklers on ‘im than a bride in a double dose of bangles,’ and ‘E’s gonna be in deep shtook if ‘e tries to go into a fight on that tusker. It’s got more paint ‘n’ finery all over it than the dancing girls dahn at Sukhavati.’

The journey was, even at a slowish pace, not such a long one, only nine or ten *yojanas*, but Vidudabha did not want to rush so they only progressed a third or even a quarter of a *yojana* per day, with a late start, a long lunch pause and an early camp each night. The Prince made out that the lightness of the burden of distance each day was out of compassion for the animals pulling the carts and bearing the horsemen and howdahs of the group but closer to the truth was that he found the whole affair extremely uncomfortable. He had become somewhat nauseous from the steady rocking motion of his elephant and was saddle-sore from riding when he took to horse as an alternative. He was shocked at how thoroughly inconvenient things were – one had to choose the pausing places according to the needs for water, food and shelter for the animals rather than to meet the Royal Preference.

Twenty days passed in this fashion before, to his great pleasure, caparisoned riders from Kapilavatthu met them on the road. He had enjoyed the first sight of the forested hills of the Himavant, beginning in the foothills of the snow-capped distant peaks. He had expressed his pleasure at the sight of wilder creatures than they ever saw in the grounds of the palace or in the villages scattered around Savatthi, beasts such as leopards and herds of deer, and wild buffalo but, in truth, he only made such remarks since he felt he was supposed to. Also the courtiers around him, and some of the more diplomatically-minded army officers, would grunt in agreement, or come up with a cheery ‘Yes, Your Serene Highness, look at that!’ when he spoke thus, so it gave him the cue that this was what was expected of the Crown Prince.

He was shocked at the sight of a pair of broad-winged lammergeiers, coasting on an updraft at the edges of the lowlands but more out of fear of being attacked by one rather than in wonder at their majesty.

In short he was glad to be arriving and he looked forward to the comforts of a settled bedroom and not having to be told what to do on account of the needs of elephants, horses and oxen. It had become profoundly annoying that the beasts seemed to need to eat, sleep and defecate all the time and that he had been expected to arrange his life around that.

The Sakyan riders were soon joined by further troops from Kapilavatthu and horns were blown, drums beaten and banners unfurled, to welcome the Prince into his ancestral home.

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CHAPTER 21:

THE PRINCE'S FURY



ephyrs carried scents and falling petals gently across the Grove. Ant and Ninka had been locked in an intense conversation before the newly-arrived deva had joined them. Ant tried to bear in mind that her beloved had just been hatched into this new life but she was aggrieved and sick at heart, ireful too. The beauty of their surroundings was lost to them.

'How is it that you didn't recognize Muñca when he first appeared? The princesses said he was notorious in this, their realm – the devas in the Realm of the Guardians had said nothing but, for all of you here in the Thirty-Three, it sounds like he's infamous,' Ant pressed her.

Ninka looked up into her face and could not speak at first.

'Did you recognize him?' Ant was doing her best to read Ninka's expression, now tear-stained as it was. Her heart sank.

'You *did* know. You knew all along. How *could* you?' Ant was aghast, feeling a storm of emotion. 'Why?!?' A righteous rage flashed through her. 'Poor Maggot! And the rest of us tagging along, with the nagas and the yakkhas, and all the way up to the Tusita – you let him drag us all behind him on a wild goose chase,' her words slowed down and softened as she took in Ninka's sweet face now twisted with tears and anguish. A weeping deva is a wrenching sight to see. A realization began to dawn in Ant's heart, 'It was...'

Ninka wiped her eyes, 'For you, it was that I could not bear to be parted from you. A day at a pointless party in the Nandana Grove and decades will go by in the Realm of Humans, for you in the Realm of Earth-spirits too.' She took a breath, letting the vitality of the airs of her home clear her head a little.

'I confess, and I ask your forgiveness – and of everyone of our friends, especially Maggot – I thought that I knew who he was as soon as he appeared in the Underworld. When he whisked us out of there I was certain, then it all came crashing in. If I called him out and challenged him, our search for the baby would lose direction and the group would be scattered, I wouldn't have an excuse to stay with you and I would have had to come back here. Now, as I think of it, it doesn't make sense. Why did I believe those thoughts? What made me choose deception? Anyway, in that flash of recognition, I decided *not* to reveal who he was, that he had such a deceitful reputation, but instead to pretend. And he gave me a look, as if to say, "I know that you know, but you're not going to say anything, are you?" He was teasing, provoking, relishing the trap I was in – that I had put myself in.' Her eyes were a thousand leagues of sadness and regret.

‘Once that moment passed I knew I was now committed to the lie. Can you forgive me?’

Ant was weeping gently too. ‘What you did was terrible, stringing everyone along, but not unforgiveable at all. It was a strange choice for you to make but, when we’re deluded, blinded by love, such things easily happen.’ Ant’s words were cool, serious and loving. ‘Such was the malice and mischief of Muñca, I feel sure he was guided by the Evil One, if not being the Lord of Lies, Mara himself, in disguise. What you said about him relishing your predicament looks like a clear sign to me.’ She took her hand and they sat in silence.

‘Of course I forgive you; if we can rejoin the others you’ll have to tell them too but I’ll speak up for you.’ Ninka smiled. ‘I love you so much.’ It was just after this, as they sat under the trees and looked out over the blossoms and the dancers, that their new companion had arrived.

* * *

Ninka was now fully back in the Realm of the Tavatimsa. The challenging conversation she had just had with Ant had brought her firmly into this life once again. After having got through the issue of her deception, Ant had then brought her up to date on the word from Hiri and Siri; things had been looking up with respect to the search and Ant was excited to tell her all. Their quiet companion, so far nameless, listened in, trying to follow all the events and places being talked about.

Breathless by the end of this Ant went quiet, noticing that Ninka’s brow had become furrowed. ‘What is it?’ she asked, ‘You look worried. I thought you’d be pleased to hear all of that – we’ve got a lead.’

Ninka replied, ‘Yes, and you and I should be there too. I’m scared that he’ll say no but I’m going to ask the Prince!’

Ninka rose up and headed straight for the heart of the party, which it seemed was now growing a little quieter. Ant followed just behind her and the other deva tagged along too.

‘Your Divine and Serene Highness,’ Ninka bowed, ‘Although I have but recently returned to this joyous festival, and although you had to ask me to return many times, I humbly request your Divine and Royal Leave to depart once again, before the revels have ended.’

Prince Malabhari looked at her, a slight puzzlement crossed his face, ‘Asked you to return? Did I?’ He looked about, as if to seek out someone nearby. ‘Well, I might have enquired of one of these sublime beings, ‘Where’s the Lady Ninka?’ but, did I send out some sort of command?’ His gaze landed on one of the devas close to him, ‘Ah, you’re in charge of messages. Did I send for this girl?’

‘Not exactly Sire, but you had noticed she was not about so I took the liberty.’

‘As I thought, it was merely a passing curiosity, not a demand for your presence, my dear. The Divine and Royal Pleasure invites you to do whatever you like, go wherever you please.’ It was apparent that the hours of partying had been

accompanied by copious draughts of nectar-mead – which had an extraordinary potency when made from flowers of the Tavatimsa Heaven – so the magnanimity of Prince Malabhari was more expansive than usual. ‘If you wish to slum it with some...’ he looked askance and somewhat haughtily at Ant, ‘... *kinnaris*...’ the word seemed to bring a off-putting taste to his mouth, ‘... no problem.’

* * *

‘I can’t believe it!’ Ninka was a mixture of relief, resentment, regret and excitement. ‘That whole time there was no need for me to be here at all! This stretch of stressing, hating myself, grinding my teeth in self-justification, fearing to lose you and to be parted for good – the travails of a whole lifetime and having four children in the human world – the suffering, anguishing in *all* of it was completely unnecessary. If it wasn’t such a tragedy I would laugh.’

Through all of this the amber-golden deva who had just introduced herself stayed close by. When Ant suggested they go to the Human Realm and to Kapilavatthu straight away, to follow the rest of the searchers, she asked, ‘Can I come too? I feel I know you and this world is strange to me, although I’m getting a bit more used to it. Can I follow along? Just tell me what to do, or to not do.’

Ninka took her hand, and Ant’s, and they appeared instantaneously in Kapilavatthu. ‘Nink,’ Ant called out, ‘Come on, let’s find them or see if they’ve left traces if they’ve moved on already.’

Ninka was a skilled tracker and it was not difficult to pick up the scents of their familiar friends, especially the spoor of Gumbiya. ‘Let’s go – this way,’ Ninka motioned them to follow her to the palace. The golden deva was meanwhile fixed to the spot, looking at the hills and distant white-capped peaks to the north, ‘Come on!’ Ant broke the spell and took her hand.

They found a courtyard that was thick with the fragrances of Rhamba and Salassa and the fruity aromas of Maggot and Bee, as well as the notably ripe hum of Gumby. Ninka looked around, breathing in the messages that the place gave her, sorting through the many animal and human smells. ‘I’m not sure,’ she shook her head, it was all a bit thick, heavy and coarse after their long stint passing through the higher, more sensorily refined realms.

“Allo,” a slight but firm voice sounded nearby, as they glided by the kitchen storerooms on their search.

‘You look jes’ like them other flower-devas wot woz ‘ere a while back.’ Ant, Ninka and their nameless friend looked about them until they saw two small sprites hovering before them. The brownish one introduced himself again. “Allo. I’m Cob, this ere’s Green-Blossom, pleased to meet yer,’ his green-clad partner waved, with a smile and wagged her cap.

‘You all look like y’r lookin’ for someone or sumfing too.’

‘Yes,’ Ant was delighted to meet these beings who it appeared had seen at least Bee and Maggot. ‘We’re looking for our friends who came to Kapilavatthu, and

they're searching for the lost baby of Miss Maggot, one of the ones who looked like me.'

'Right you are. They woz 'ere all right, a few Moons ago now, eh?' He turned to Green-Blossom who then picked it up, 'They were very nice so we told 'em what we could. By the way, 'oo are you all? We don't get many visits from high ups 'n', she indicated Ninka and the golden deva, 'it's an honour for us hobs and brownies to meet such,' she searched for the right word, 'noble and 'oly ones.' She nudged Cob vigorously while she curtsied and Cob made an awkward bow, 'Er, Your Highnesses, Holinesses, er...'

'Please, I'm Ninka, this is Ant and this is our new friend, whose name is...' and she realized that she didn't have her name yet. The new deva looked at her blankly, and affirmed, 'No one has given me a name yet.' She looked a little vacantly at Ant and Ninka.

'Well,' Green-blossom spoke up, 'such a one as you milady should 'ave a real nice name. Since 'e's cob-brown, and I'm as green as a rice-flower, we could call you Ambaka, on 'count of you bein' the colour of golden mangoes. 'Ow does that sound?'

Ant was pleased with this; it resonated as the perfect name for her new friend but she was getting impatient. 'So, what could you tell them, the others who were on the search?'

'Oh yea, right,' Cob cleared his thoughts, 'What we told 'em was we thought that the girl she was what, sixteen sun-turnings then? She'd gone off to Savatthi. She were a slave-girl from the kitchens 'ere so she's prob'ly in the kitchens there.'

'Savatthi? How long ago?' Ninka was eager to make up for lost time, feeling that she had been to blame for so much delay already.

'Mus' be a dozen, p'raps fifteen sun-turnin's at least now' Green-blossom counted on her tiny fingers.

The three devas wasted no more time before setting off to Savatthi, Ninka carried Ant, as she could fly faster, and Ambaka slipstreamed them, greatly enjoying both the power of flight and the sound of her new name – it was exactly right somehow.

The three of them approached the palace at Savatthi and aimed towards a leafy garden courtyard, close by the main buildings. Tall trees and shrubs were there, amid the structures that filled the area. As they were landing they saw a cluster of very familiar forms, gathered beneath one of the trees. They swiftly descended and joined with their dear companions.

Salassa was the first to greet them, 'Hey, you've got here too!' He turned to Ninka, asking, 'So, how was the party?'

'Long,' she replied, hit by a wave of flashbacks from the garland workshop and the births of her four children in Katara village, 'Long, like you wouldn't believe.'

* * *

Prince Vidudabha was received with splendid and colourful ceremony as they marched into Kapilavatthu's palace grounds. He realized he shouldn't get too carried away but this was deeply pleasing. He loved to be the centre of attention and he certainly was at this time.

The embassy was given space to unpack and settle and then the Prince and his party were welcomed into the Santhagara, the grand audience chamber. 'Well, they called this "grand" but it's not much compared with Kosala; still, they are country cousins, after all, so I should keep quiet on that,' he reflected. Prince Mahanama and Princess Maddarupi, ostensibly his grandparents, were in the forefront to usher him in and invite him to meet his royal Sakyan family.

Prior to his arrival agitated discussions had been taking place around the halls and homes of the nobles of Kapilavatthu. 'It is impossible, Sire, for any of us to pay obeisance to this individual, the son of a slave-girl,' one of the ministers said through a sneer. 'What are we to do?' 'Should we arrange an "accident"?' 'Have all the senior royals be busy on a mission elsewhere?' 'How by all the gods should we handle this?'

Mahanama, who was shrewd and experienced in matters of diplomacy, was struck with a bright idea, 'We shall not send away us senior royals, but simply the junior ones. By rights, as a younger person, the Prince should pay respects to his Royal Elders, correct?' The lords and ladies and members of the royal house nodded or murmured in agreement. 'So,' the King continued, 'if we send away the young princely children into the country on some excuse, then he will pay obeisance to us elders yet none of us will need to pay respects to him. Is this acceptable?'

There were some who balked at even being on the receiving end of a formal greeting from the son of a slave – despite his father being the mighty King of Kosala – but these few were persuaded that discretion was the better part of pride in this case and they agreed to go along with the ruse.

There was an impressive array of crowned and bejewelled nobles in the audience chamber. The Prince began to chat amiably with Vidudabha, expressing how delighted and impressed he was to meet him, and for the first time, and how glad he also was that the great King Pasenadi had brought their houses closer by his marriage to Queen Vasabha:– Now, by having fathered the Prince and named him as his heir to the throne of Kosala, he had cemented those ties for many generations to come. This was a cause for celebration!

'Before we begin any festivities or entertainments, I should introduce you, Your Serene Highness, grandson, to other members of the Sakyan Royal House.'

The Prince was led to the assembled line of nobility and paid respects to each one, until his back ached from the effort. He was sincerely endeavouring to be humble and polite but he was losing patience. Not a one of them had offered him the respects in return – not one – so, at last, once he had come to the end of the long line, he could not restrain himself.

‘How is it,’ he asked, ‘that though I pay obeisance to all of you,’ he looked pointedly along the line of finely-clad and tall-standing Sakyans, ‘none of you offer your respects to me?’

‘Oh, Your Highness,’ Prince Mahanama put on his most convincing, matter-of-fact, dissembling voice. ‘It is our custom here; only juniors pay respects to elders and not the other way round – never!’ As if such a possibility were unthinkable to any right-minded person. ‘Our younger princes and princesses are all off in the countryside at the moment – it’s a seasonal thing we do – so, at the moment, if you’ll excuse us, Your Serene Highness is the most junior of the kshatriyan royals here.’

His words were honeyed and they did their job. Mahanama then invited him to sit in a seat especially prepared for the entertainments, Prince Vidudabha settled himself down and brushed his concerns aside. Any lingering sense that he was being insulted or not treated with proper honour was washed away by the lavish display of dancers and pulsing music that the Prince then offered, by way of amusements. The dancing was followed by a grand banquet and the Prince was swamped with gifts, fine flavours, exotic smells and soothing textures.

‘They may be country people from the hills but these Sakyans really know how to hold a feast.’ He was pleased. ‘I believe I’m going to enjoy my days here.’

* * *

Ant and Ninka quickly noticed that Maggot was wreathed in smiles. ‘You look happy,’ Ant remarked.

‘How could I not be,’ Maggot’s bright face lit up even more.

‘So...’ Ninka dared to ask.

‘So we found her!’ Bee proudly announced, ‘but there’s good news and bad news.’

‘Bad news?’ Ant was now concerned, ‘is she ill? Or dead? No, she can’t be, you’re too happy. What happened?’

Bee settled herself back into Gumbiya’s armpit, leaning against his massive thigh and flank; she loved the fume of him and, now that their search was over, they could all feel more relaxed. ‘You tell the story, Maggot, it’s yours to pass on.’

‘When we got here, a few Moons ago, we raced about, hither and yon all over the palace grounds: the kitchens, the workshops, the stables, the servants’ quarters, since all we knew was that Tam had grown up in a slave family who mostly worked in the kitchen at Kapilavatthu and that is what she had done before going south.’

‘Yes, we heard that.’

‘Shh, Nink,’ Ant scowled.

‘We picked up traces of her fragrance pretty quickly.’

‘Even me,’ Gumbiya chipped in; Bee dug him in the ribs.

‘She was definitely around but we soon came to the conclusion that she did not live with the slave families or in the servants’ quarters.’

'The places where the signs of her were strongest were around the royal chambers. So then, one morning while it was still fresh, I was looking through the windows as the maid opened the shutters and there she was, leaning on some cushions in a parlour room, with some other princess or some high-up lady. I was frozen, couldn't move or speak for shock, but then Bee came up and hovered beside me.

"'It's her!'" Bee shouts out. "She looks like a queen, and twice as old as you!" I thought that was a bit of an exaggeration,' she tipped Bee a nod, 'but she was certainly all grown up. We reckon it's been thirty-five sun-turnings here in the Human Realm, give or take, since she was hatched. And she is certainly no slave girl.'

All five of them who had been in Savatthi for this time were in full agreement on this.

'We've been asking around the local rukkha-devas and kinnaris of the gardens and all seem to say the same: She's a queen indeed and mother of the Crown Prince, as well.'

'So,' Ant was enthralled to hear all this, 'What was your meeting like?' Maggot went quiet.

'That's the bad news,' Rhamba broke the silence, 'She can't see us and it doesn't seem like any of the other people in the palace can either.'

'Gave it our all, we did,' Gumbiya joined in, 'in the palace, rahnd the gardens, jumpin' 'n' yellin'. I 'it the grahnd wiv me club a few times – nuffink. They fort it woz an earthquake'

'Blowing in her ears, whispering her name, singing her favourite lullabies from when she was a baby, none of it gets through.'

'Breathing a full kinnari breath into her face – not a thing, or, maybe she cocked her eyebrow and inhaled a little deeper,' Bee recounted.

'I think that might have been wishful thinking, Bee,' Maggot smiled appreciatively.

'Anyway we've found her and it's wonderful to be with her but, so far, she can't see me or hear me, or any of us, so she doesn't know she's been found.'

'Does she know she was lost?' Ninka reflected.

'That's another story; we don't have any idea about her past. She certainly behaves like she's always been a queen, or a princess rather than a slave or an ordinary person, even when she's just with her maid, who's a girl with one hand who we think is Kesini from Kosambi.'

'I'm sure it is' said Salassa, 'the way she walks is even more distinctive than the missing hand.'

'Though how she got here from Kosambi...'

'No' a clue,' finished Gumbiya.

Ant was intrigued. 'So, what about the Jetavana and the enlightened ones there, could they help?'

‘We haven’t tried that yet,’ Maggot looked a bit sheepish, ‘since she’s my beloved daughter but she is also the offspring of a novice monk, as he was then, and that’s not a situation that I’m very proud of.’ Again Maggot went quiet.

‘So,’ Gumbiya cracked half a smile, ‘ere we all are, ‘appily ‘sconced in the royal gardens, doin’ our best to come up wiv a way to help young – not-so-young – Tambaka meet ‘er mum.’

* * *

The embassy’s visit only lasted for a few days and then it was time to head back to Kosala. Vidudabha felt he had acquitted himself well, made a good impression and had acted very properly, as befitted a prince of high rank. His mother and father would be proud of him and he was now weighted down with rich gifts that his newly-met grandparents had bestowed upon him. It had all gone swimmingly.

His elephant was now prepared and the military escort was drawn up in ranks to depart, the waggon and carriages were ready with their oxen and horses standing in gleaming tack and harnesses. The Himalayan sun shone from a clear bright sky and the road lay ahead.

The drums and trumpets had already sounded when one of the junior lords of Kosala, Viraja by name, noticed that his sword was not strapped at his waist. He began to panic; to lose such a precious item was a shameful thing for any warrior-noble, so he desperately tried to remember where he could have left it. There had been so much drinking and carousing over the previous days it was difficult to recollect anything clearly.

It then struck him that, ‘Aha, bladed weapons were not allowed in that audience hall and we had to unbuckle our belts by the door. It’s there, I’m sure.’

He ducked away from the other young nobles on horseback, saying, ‘Hold my nag a minute, I’ll be right back,’ and thrusting the reins into the hand of his squire he took off.

He passed through the Sakyan folk who had been gathered to give them a good send-off and he made his way to the hall as fast as possible. To his great relief, there to the left of the broad portal, on a shelf, was his sword-belt and his prized weapon, together with a handsome dagger that one of his friends had forgotten too.

He stood by the entrance while he sorted out the buckling on of the scabbard and sword, and was pocketing the knife to return to Sujiva, (after he’s made sure to torment him for having lost it) when his eye caught a strange sight. There were several people in the hall tidying up, doing various tasks, but what struck him was that a slave woman was washing the seat where Prince Vidudabha had been sitting. As he looked closer he saw she seemed to be using an mixture of milk and water to do this. This was strange indeed.

‘What *are* you doing?’ He asked.

‘Oo me?’ She was still fixed on the task at hand so didn’t even bother to glance over her shoulder at him. ‘This is the seat that son of a slave girl was sittin’ on so it’s got to be a slave wot washes it, ‘n’ with milk an’ water too; don’ ask me why.’

“‘Son of a slave girl’ – you don’t mean Prince Vidudabha?”

“‘Course. ‘E’s the son of Vasabha who was a slave girl here, so, got to wash it down special, otherwise no one else can use it – well, none of the nobs anyway.’ Now, noticing his accent, she glanced his way and realized it was one of those ‘nobs’ she was talking to, ‘Oh, sorry sir, didn’t mean to be rude.’ And, thinking no more of it she caried on with her cleaning.

Viraja scurried out and got back to his horse, his mind teeming with thoughts and confused emotions. The way the woman had spoken implied it was common knowledge that Vasabha was no queen and that the Prince was ill-born. His heart pounded as he fretted:– She was telling the truth I’m sure, and revealing a huge secret without realizing it. She didn’t twig that I was from the party of Kosalans. What on earth should I do?

The first thing he did was to seek out his friend Sujiva and return his dagger, quite forgetting to tease him, as he was eager to get some counsel. When he described what he had seen, Sujiva’s dusky face turned ashen.

‘We can’t keep this secret. We have to tell the Prince. It will be our heads if we delay as we’ll be seen to be complicit.’

* * *

They waited until the next rest stop for the great caravan and rode up to the Prince’s elephant, where he had just dismounted.

‘Viraja, Sujiva, what’s up? You two chaps look like you’ve just seen a ghost and it’s still broad day.’

‘A spectre we have encountered in truth, Your Serene Highness,’ Sujiva started, then grew quiet, turning to Viraja to continue. He recounted the incident, reporting it as calmly and clearly as he could, but his pulse was hammering in his head, his chest, and he was sweating rivers; by way of finishing he repeated, “‘Son of a slave-girl’” was what she said Sire, and did so as if it was something that every Sakyan person was aware of.’

As the story unfolded and reached this ending the Prince’s face distorted, reddened and then became empurpled with affronted pride and fury. He raged and yelled, attacking those around him, asking if any of them said the same, had known this sickening truth that shamed him so. As he lashed out he saw the faces of those around him – the nobles, the other princes, the officers of the army, the servants – they all looked equally aghast and shocked. No one knew of this, which was, to him, a terrible truth.

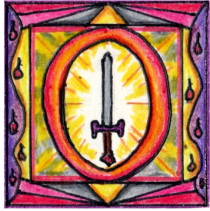
When calm returned he spoke, ‘If these proud Sakyans now see fit to wash the seat whereon I sat with milk and water, here and now before you all, I vow that

when I come into my power I will wash that chair and this city with their heart's blood, and their halls will be filled with corpses and lamentation.'

==*==

CHAPTER 22:

THE ATTACK ON THE SAKYANS



ceans of blood will bathe the feet of the Himavant, Father!' Prince Vidudabha ranted and raged as he brought the shocking news of this deceit to King Pasenadi. He had been determined to be the one to inform his father how the Crown of Kosala had been insulted. To the horror of the Prince, quite unexpectedly, the King responded to this declaration by saying, 'Yes indeed, bathed in blood they shall be, but not by you, slave-son!'

As Vidudabha heard these words he could not at first comprehend what the King was saying, so assured had he been of his own position and of the King's role as his Royal Father. The Prince had spent his life getting away with outrageous behaviour and no one had ever spoken back to him. He had never been scolded by his parents and he had hardly ever been on the receiving end of even a harsh word – except occasionally from Vajiri. So at this moment, as he absorbed the meaning of the King's wrathful declaration, his world came crashing down. Inside, he was shocked, poll-axed, but he was also seething:– How dare His Majesty treat him in this way!

'Out! Out of my sight!' King Pasenadi barked at the Prince. His ire had been steadily building. He turned to his chief minister and shouted, 'Bring her here! Bring her! I will restrain my Royal Disfavour until the truth of this ugly matter is clear,' although it was apparent that this mood was already out of its stable and galloping free.

The fierceness of the rap at her door, when the minster's staff came to get her, had been the sign she had long been dreading. She knew the embassy had returned and was anxiously awaiting word on how things had gone. The sharp knocks at once told her all. 'Here it comes,' she exchanged a glance with Kesini and, in silence, with a wry smile, she rose to her feet. 'Well, we managed it for a while...', she thought, and then stood before the door, which was opened before she had even said, 'Come in.'

Queen Vasabha was brought before the King in the throne room. Queen Mallika had picked up the tremors of the unfolding incident and had quietly drawn close to the King, to at least witness what was happening here. The return of the embassy from the Sakyans should have been a joyous and uncomplicated event but something untoward was definitely afoot. Princess Vajiri, even more quietly, joined Mallika from the side of the chamber.

'My Royal Wife,' Pasenadi began through gritted teeth, addressing Vasabha who knelt before him at the bidding of the chief minister. 'An ill rumour, a report has reached my ears that tells a grim and appalling tale. It pains me that this is news

that you were not of the Sakyan royal house but, rather, were a kitchen-slave who was young enough and pretty enough to pass as a princess of kshatriyan blood. Have you deceived me, your King, your Royal Husband, all these years? Have you betrayed and lied to the good people of Kosala and birthed an ill-gotten son by me, obtained by a false and invalid marriage?' The King spoke steadily but, beneath the film of control, he was incandescent. He saw by Vasabha's posture and her tears that, far from being wronged by these accusations, they were tragically, horribly true.

Vasabha, gently weeping, admitted, 'Yes, Sire, this is sadly true. I have aped the role of princess and queen, a royal mother, these last seventeen Rains. I have deceived you and all the worthy folk of Savatthi, of Kosala. I dare not ask for forgiveness.' She bowed with her head to the floor and stayed there.

Vidudabha, who was noticeably not sitting by the King, and was not in a position to be making any judgements, could not hold himself back from asking. 'But, woman, if you were but a slave you could not have worked this treachery on your own. Surely the king of the Sakyans and his family must have been part of this. How could they not be?'

King Pasenadi recalled the embassy he had made all those years ago, and how Vasabha had been presented to him. It was blatantly clear that the Sakyan royals had to have been complicit.

'Sit up girl!' The King commanded. 'Speak. Was this deception conceived by you or by the Sakyan nobles?'

'It was not by me, Sire. I know not who first crafted the idea but I was chosen and the task was put before me.'

'Did you have any choice?' The point was pressed.

Vasabha considered, cast her mind back as best she could. 'To tell the honest truth, Sire, I had no choice but I wanted to do it too.' She knew she did not have to say the latter part of this but, in the effort to have no more secrets after years of such deception on her part, it burst forth in this way.

'You *wanted* it? You wanted to cheat the King of Kosala and to live a deceitful life?' Pasenadi was getting more heated at the very idea of it.

'No sire, it was not about your Royal Person at all. It was, if I might say, the selfish, foolish dream of a kitchen-girl who has a chance to be a princess, a fantasy that any girl might have. It's not an excuse for what I did but it was a way for me to escape the drudgery of the heat and smoke of the kitchen. At the time I didn't think much beyond that. I was not an educated person.'

A few heads nodded around the throne room at this, conceding that this was a fair point to be made.

Vasabha weighed what she should say further, then, thinking 'In for a *masaka*, in for a *kahapana*', but perhaps not a whole *kahapana* as she realized it would not help things to say she'd found out that she was actually the daughter of a kinnari and a very dark-skinned novice monk. They would all assume she had completely lost her wits if she told them that. She added, 'One small factor that my mother passed on to

me, was that the King, Lord Mahanama, had often called upon my mother's favours in her youth and he would still come by from time to time as we all grew up, since he enjoyed her company. The fact that she was a slave, and married to someone else, counted for nothing.' She looked modestly down as she knew the same uninspiring practice pertained in Kosala, as in most kingdoms, and that kings and princes regularly consorted with any low-class girl they pleased, and law and custom protected them.

'Prince Mahanama held that he could quite possibly be my actual father and so, when he showed me to you saying, 'May I introduce my daughter,' he could justify to himself that he was (possibly) not lying.' She finished and bowed her head again.

'Hrrmph! I don't know whether that makes it better or worse,' he bristled. 'Regardless of the details of your birth, you have been falsely presented to me as a pure-blooded Sakyan, a kshatriyan princess, and you have consciously maintained that deception since our marriage. Exactly what punishment is to be exacted upon the Sakyans is to be decided but you, woman, are herewith deprived of your rank and your possessions, and will go back to the status of slave. You will be kept in the palace dungeons, attending upon my Royal Pleasure, until a decision about your fate has been made.'

Vidudabha, still clad in his finery from the embassy's journey, cleared his throat.

King Pasenadi turned to him, 'Oh yes, you too. You are no longer Crown Prince, or Commander-in-Chief, and are demoted to slave as well. You don't need to be locked up – the crime was not yours – but I can't have a misbegotten child like you as my heir. Give your,' here he waved a dismissive hand at his jewellery and fine attire, 'all this stuff to the stewards and wear something that more befits your station.'

* * *

Queen Mallika and Princess Vajiri had been listening closely to all this and were as shocked as the rest of the court at these revelations and the sudden downfall of Vasabha and Vidudabha. They were both very fond of Vasabha and she had always been friendly, kind and respectful to them both, never wielding clout on account of having borne the King his only son.

After the former queen and the boy had been conducted out, as swiftly as she could, Mallika came closer to the King's side. She made some comforting, soothing mumbles and led him aside to speak privately.

'Of course, Sire, it's the Royal Prerogative to treat Vasabha and the... and Vidudabha exactly as you choose but might it be a prudent idea to consult with the Master before making any decision?' Vajiri dared to peek at how the King was taking this suggestion.

He had cooled a bit by now and, collecting his wits, he nodded. It would relieve him of the burden of some difficult choices and the Master so often had a perspective on things that led to benefit for all. 'Good idea. I think we should go at once.'

With that they made their way to the Jetavana and found that the Master had expected their coming. He met them at the sala and King Pasenadi related all that had occurred.

'Venerable Sir, I have heard that your clansmen gave me a slave's daughter to be my wife. I take this to be a grave insult so I have cut off the wealth of Vasabha and Vidudabha and have deprived them of their position, rendering them both slaves. The woman is in my dungeons since it was she who perpetrated this degrading deception. Do you have any advice for me, Blessed One, as to how matters should proceed from here?'

'Great King, the Sakyans have done grievous wrong, it is true, but have you considered how fickle the matters of birth and rank are?

'Not long ago, here in Kosala, a brahmin pandit called Pokkharasati sent a student of his to meet me and to appraise my teaching. When the youth came to me he did not behave politely or respectfully; he referred to me as "a shaven little ascetic, a menial, a grimy off-scouring of Brahma's foot", then he described Sakyans as, "fierce, rough-spoken, touchy and violent". Then, lastly, he stated that of the four castes, three – the kshatriyas, the merchants and the artisans – were entirely subservient to the brahmins, therefore kshatriyas should always pay homage to brahmins and not the other way around.

'I then asked this youth, "What is the name of your clan?" To which he replied, "Kanhayan".

'I said to him, "Ambattha," for that was his name, "the Sakyans regard King Okkaka as their ancestor. That King had a slave-girl called Disa who gave birth to a very dark child. As soon as that child was born he spoke and he was always known as Kanha, meaning 'The Dark One'. You are descended from him, that is how your clan got its name. Have you heard this story before?"

'Now Ambattha was abashed and did not want to answer, although I asked him twice. At that time, although I had not called upon such a one to be part of the exchange, the yakkha Vajirapani hovered above the head of the youth bearing a huge iron club, thinking, "If this young man does not answer a question put to him three times by the Master, I'll split his head into seven pieces." I had asked Ambattha twice already so the youth, who also saw the yakkha, at last replied, "Yes, I have heard it just as you have said, this is where the Kanhayans come from."

'Further, Great King, in one of my own former lives, a king named Brahmadata was once strolling in his garden; a young woman had been there, merrily singing away as she picked up sticks, making bundles of kindling wood for the fires. The King was enamoured of her and, after they had spent time together, he gave her his signet ring to acknowledge his parenthood should she bear a child. She

did indeed have a child, who was none other than myself, and in that life I was known as King Katthavahana, “The Kindling Carrier”.

‘Further, Great King, do you forget that your own beloved and respected Queen Mallika was a flower girl when you first set eyes upon her? Caste and rank are a great lie. We are purified and exalted, or degraded, by our deeds, words and attitudes, not by our birth: a true warrior faces greed, hatred and delusion fearlessly; a true brahmin is pure of heart; a true merchant is one who is fair and honest in all their dealings; a true craftsperson is one who trains themselves; those “without caste”, who are the most despised and downtrodden in society, they should be honoured most of all since they are close to those who have gone forth into the homeless life of the *samana*, for we too renounce all caste when we take up the ochre robe. The world does not like us to forget the manner of our physical birth but to be born in the “noble birth” is to reject those foolish values in our hearts. The Dharma has no caste.’

King Pasenadi was sobered and touched by the Master’s words. He turned to Mallika and Vajiri, and the courtiers who had come with them, and said, ‘I will reinstate the Prince, but the army should be under General Digha-Karaniya, not him. As for Queen Vasabha,’ he granted her her title back, ‘I’m... I’m not sure. The deception, the affront by the Sakyans can’t go unpunished. She should stay in her quarters under guard until I’ve decided what should be done.’

* * *

Once all the friends were settled together in the palace garden, Ant brought the golden deva forward, as she had shyly been keeping herself to one side. ‘This is Ambaka,’ the deva made *añjali* to them all. Bee drew right up close and stared her in the face, ‘Yes it is!’ She clapped and looked about her. ‘Look who it is!’

Ant and Ninka as well as the others looked askance for a moment.

‘Well I never...’, Gumbiya joined in, ‘you got torched in that fire, back in Kosambi... that little girl by the road, way before. You remember me?’

Ambaka looked as blank as the others for an instant then it came back:– In the woods, beside a stream. A little girl.

‘Amba! Samavati! We lost you! Where have you been?’ Bee was grilling her already.

‘Oh – of course – how did we miss that?’ Ant looked at Ninka. ‘I suppose we were too taken up with our own stuff.’

‘And you’ve even got the same name,’ Bee added, ‘well, nearly the same.’

‘A sprite in... wherever it was we were, gave it to me. I *thought* it fitted. These colours, they seem to go with me.’

The other kinnaris and their friends did their best to tell her all that had befallen after the burning of Queen Samavati and her companions in Kosambi, and more was added to what Ant and Ninka had told her about their present search and the recent finding of Tambaka. It was a lot to take in.

‘We know where she is but we can’t talk with her yet. She’s a queen but she was raised in a slave family among the Sakyans. We don’t quite know how that happened. Although perhaps the King met her and took a fancy to her and raised her up. She’s very fragrant and pretty too,’ Maggot explained.

Ambaka had the strong feeling that there was something missing. The stories of meeting by the road with the three kinnaris and the yakkha; the burning of the palace building, and her; how strangely proud she had been to be able to die like that, in such an unwavering way; now this deva life... there was a gap.

Bee was continuing the update on their plans and ideas, ‘We haven’t gone to the Jetavana yet and it might be a bit challenging to find someone there who can see us and help connect with Tambaka, and...’

‘...And there’s the possibility of Krishna being there, assuming he’s still a monk and not gone off on some other inspired jaunt,’ Maggot shook the first pollen out of that particular prickly blossom.

‘Krishna?’ Ambaka’s brow wrinkled, ‘I’m sure... yes! Yes! He was a good friend, up to the end when...’ and the cut in the dark, at her throat, came back again. The heave on her plait and then the blade, almost painless... It all flooded her senses.

‘I know Krishna. He’s a good monk but he made some bad friends, who were trying to defame the Master. I was a girl, I met him at a well, I was a candala, an out-caste.’ They could see she was piecing things together as best she could. ‘I felt glad to be able to help the Master – to give my life for such a good cause. I was proud to sacrifice myself.’

* * *

The sudden loss of his rank and to have spent even just a day, half a day, in the life of a slave had been a salutary experience for Vidudabha. His elegant clothes stripped away. His jewellery gone. Pushed into the grungiest quarter of the palace, to share a room with a crowd of other youths, in the grimy clothes he was given – it was a blunt and rude shock to the system.

Up to this point in his life there had never been a time he could remember when he had not been the Crown Prince and a *very special person*. Such a knowledge can easily wreak havoc with a child’s sensibilities, causing the assumption that the world is arranged principally for your pleasure and convenience. The intoxication of assumed privilege is frighteningly complete in its delusory power, and Vidudabha had had an endless supply of that drug up until now.

For a spell, before word came back with the King from the Jetavana, he was thrown into a reflective state – something that was very rare for him. With his ordinary life suspended he had had the space to consider things. The staff had, thankfully, not assigned him duties as yet so he wasn’t mucking out stables or cleaning lanterns.

‘Snakes and ladders, I guess, that’s what this royal game is – up the ladders, down the snakes all according to the throw of the dice.’ He was curled up, leaning on the wall in the slave’s dormitory. It was peaceful there, and in the rapidly falling light of dusk the eerie pinkish aura that people could sometimes see about him (which had given him the nickname ‘Vidu the Fay’) was clearly visible. ‘Maybe this is where I’ll be for the next ten years or twenty, what will the dice say?’ He opened his hand, as if letting go of everything. ‘If my mother was a slave and cheated the King all these years, what real power could I have? All that indignant raging has just been stupid, youthful folly.’

At these sober reflections he also began to recall the stories he had heard in the interminable classes with the court brahmins. ‘But,’ he clenched his fist, ‘there have always been those who defied the dice, threw the board aside and made their own luck.’ His eyes flared. As with the strange glow he emanated in the half-light, his eyes had a colour and a luminosity that was unique too; they were somewhere between dark-blue and green and they could pierce any dimness with their bright ferocity.

At the doorway of the dormitory the form of a guard appeared. ‘Is Majesty wants to see you; General Digha is with ‘im.’

* * *

The reinstatement as Crown Prince went very quickly; it was enough for the King to summon him in, say, ‘I changed my mind,’ and add not much more than, ‘well, off you go. You can have your rooms and all your things back – most of it should still be there,’ he looked away and shooed his son off with a gesture.

General Digha-Karaniya led the Prince out and walked with him back to his chambers. There was a sly grin back on the Prince’s face, ‘Down the snakes and up the ladders again; that was quick, wasn’t it Digha?’ Vidudabha knew him well from his long hours of military schooling.

‘Truly, Your Serene Highness. Sir, if I may, I have something of import to discuss. And... er... your current experience with the caprice of your Royal Father’s moods is part of that. Do you have some time?’

Vidudabha was intrigued.

The General began, ‘You no doubt know my uncle, General Bandhula.’

‘Of course, he has been notable in the field of battle and also in the courts.’

‘Yes, Sir. He was a man of great qualities and my aunt, his wife Madhu, was similarly blessed. Their marriage, at first, was not happy as they had failed to produce any children. In despair they went to visit the Master and, though he performed no ceremony or made any sign, soon Madhu was expecting, and they were blessed indeed. Over those following years she gave birth to sixteen pairs of twin boys who all followed in their father’s noble footsteps.

‘When the General was getting too old for the field of conflict he made himself available to perform the role of a judge. Someone who had received a biased

ruling in the court came to him complaining. When he looked into it, it was plain to see that the other party was at fault and so Bandhula pronounced the judgement the other way, to the great jubilation of this man, and also to others who asked him to retry their cases too.

'The other judges, who had all been taking bribes, were bereft of their usual income and thus became resentful of General Bandhula's interference, and his good name was now a major hindrance to them.

'These corrupt judges managed to catch King Pasenadi's ear and, through their wives, they caused your Royal Father to believe that the General, with his impressive array of thirty-two fine sons, had designs upon the throne.

'His Majesty was seduced and so he sent the General off on a falsely-based mission to a border region. After the pretended issues were settled, on the journey back to Savatthi, the General and all his sons, being ambushed and heavily outnumbered, lost their heads to a man. Not a one returned alive.

'It was soon after this, scarcely a Moon ago, that the King was made aware that he had been deceived. He has had little peace of mind since then and he has never apologised to General Bandhula's widow, who lost him and all of her sons on a single tragic day.

'He has now made me Commander-in-Chief, I suspect to allay his shame and regret at having had my uncle – that fair and just man – and all his children killed, nevertheless, I feel retribution is still due and I see that you, as Crown Prince are in a unique position both to see justice done for my uncle and to secure your future and safeguard it from the foibles and whims of your... your Royal Parent.'

This was intriguing, to be sure. The Prince asked, 'How do you propose for me to take power? Hardly ever is such a move a simple thing.'

'In this case, Sir, I feel it will be. Leave it to me.'

* * *

Since the murder of Bandhula and his sons, and with Vasabha under house arrest, King Pasenadi had been sick at heart. Life was joyless so he wished to find some solace; as was usual at such times he sought out the Master's advice. At this time the Buddha was travelling through the countryside and was staying in a forest near a country town called Ulumpa.

The King went with a large part of his army, under General Digha-Karaniya's command, to this same region and sought out the Master there. On arriving at the kuti where the Master was staying King Pasenadi went up to the door, coughed and knocked, he was invited in but, before he entered, he respectfully divested himself of the five Symbols of Royalty that he, as the ruler, always carried – his sword, his royal parasol, his crown, his jewelled shoes and his royal ceremonial fan – putting these items into the hands of the General.

Once the King had been invited into the presence of the Master, inside his kuti, the General surreptitiously took these symbols and, there and then, bestowed them upon Prince Vidudabha, thus investing him as the rightful monarch.

The army had confidence in the General so, when he gave the order to march, as was their training, they formed up in their ranks and went off into the night. The General left the King one horse and a serving woman. The army returned to Savatthi.

Vidudabha was indeed making his own luck.

When the King emerged from the kuti and saw the army gone, the woman holding his horse explained what had happened. The King had been feeling as though great mountains of ageing, misfortune, bad decisions and weariness had been closing in about him; this turn of events merely confirmed this mood of the inevitability of collapse and dissolution of all he held dear and had been accustomed to. He gave the serving woman leave to go her own way and he rode towards Rajagaha alone, hoping, perhaps vainly, to persuade his nephew, King Ajatasattu, to help him regain his throne from his usurping son.

He rode all night and all day but, when he reached Rajagaha, the city gates were closed. An old man on a tired horse, he had no recourse but to find shelter where he could. He spotted an abandoned shed and laying down, exhausted, exposed to the elements and heartsick beyond bearing, in that rude hovel he breathed his last and passed away.

* * *

King Vidudabha resumed command of the army and announced, at the first assembly of the troops in full battle gear, with wagons prepared for a foreign campaign, 'I am your king and your leader in war. I will brook no discussion, chaffering, let alone disagreement with my orders. Is this clear?' The broad ranks of armoured soldiers, the lords and officers on their caparisoned chargers, responded as one: '*Sire!*'

The King was barely seventeen Rains now yet he had assumed full charge of the military force. 'Our mission, which begins this day, is to march north-east to dispense justice upon the proud and ignoble, treacherous Sakyans who have insulted the Crown of Kosala and my own Royal Person. Justice will be done and rivers of blood will flow. None will be suffered to live.'

A tense silence followed. Vidudabha barked, 'Is this understood?'

Prince Jeta, who had been the one who sold the Jetavana park and forest to Anathapindika, wherein the Master had established such a substantial residence, had been an elder friend of Vidudabha as he grew up. This stated mission seemed far out of keeping with any noble principles so Prince Jeta's first thought was, 'What?! He can't be serious.' Jeta was not known as a staunch moralist, rather he had a reputation of being vain and a party-animal, but to him this plan was insane:— Did he really suppose he is going to slaughter the whole Sakyan clan?

‘Your Highness!’ Prince Jeta spoke up. ‘Is it the case that you expect us to slay every man, woman and child in the Sakyan kingdom?’

‘Nay,’ Vidudabha turned to look at this foppish lord, ‘only the men and the mothers need be killed, and the young children. The maidens who are of age I intend to enslave. Do you object?!’ The King fixed him with those eyes that burned with cold fire. ‘Do you?! Answer me.’

Prince Jeta – for whom the best thing he had ever done in his life was the sale and gift of the monastery land, and the resulting wonders of wisdom and goodness that had come forth from there – was strangely clear about his priorities at this at this critical moment.

‘Yes, Your Majesty, I object with all my heart.’

‘In that case,’ King Vidudabha rode his horse over to where Prince Jeta was in the ranks of cavalry, ‘dismount; that’s an order.’

The Prince dismounted and stood by the offside flank of the King’s horse. In one fluid motion the King drew his sword and separated Prince Jeta’s head from his shoulders. He snapped his reins, his horse pirouetted on its hind hooves and the command was given: ‘Forward march!’

* * *

There was much uproar around the palace in Savatthi. Vidudabha had taken over as King and there had been the great departure of the army. Maggot and her friends stayed ensconced within their garden.

Ambaka’s memories steadily returned, at first fragmentary and then more complete, so she told them all what she could recall of Matanga’s life and also of her friendship with Krishna, Khujjuttara, Kesini and Vasabha. She recounted how wonderful it had been to find out that Vasabha was her half-sister, on account of Krishna having been Matanga’s father too. Maggot was made even more awkward by this knowledge.

Bee, with a determined chirpiness, tried to move things along by saying, ‘My head’s spinning! How much more complicated could this get?’

Maggot, endeavouring to be as conciliatory as possible, offered, ‘That must have been something for you, a candala girl at that time, to have a friend and half-sister a queen, appearing like that in your life.’

‘Yes, I’d got used to having no family at all by then.’

‘We can go and see Vasabha now – she’s in the palace all the time these days,’ Ant proposed. ‘Come on, let’s go and see if her half-sister and old friend can get through.’

They had picked up, through the tumult of recent days, that some crisis had just happened. The old king was gone and the new king had taken off for Sakya. Vasabha never left her rooms and was dimmed and subdued, turned inward with only Kesini to keep her company.

The group, now eight of them, made their way to where Vasabha was under house arrest in her chambers. Gumbiya shrank himself down to be as modest a size as he could manage.

Vasabha was there, with her faithful Kesini, but they were oblivious of the presence of this crowd of celestials. She was plainly in an anxious and saddened state; there was a sickly melancholy in the air and her fragrance was less rich than was the norm.

Ambaka drew close, taking in her face, her voice as she spoke with Kesini. More memories cascaded through – her fearless little sister protecting her in Ujjeni, her unexpected rival and tormentor in Kosambi. She had to draw back, take a breath. She approached again, ‘Tam! Tamba! It’s me, from long ago! Amba! Remember? You rescued me from a monkey attack. You ran to get help for Amma, in the night.’ There was no response.

Various of the others tried vainly too but with no result.

‘You know,’ Ambaka looked at them, chancing a glance at Maggot, ‘we could go to see if we could find someone in the Jetavana who could help us communicate with her. I was there often with Krishna and Khujjuttara and Vasabha, and Kesini, and though none of us could ever see any spirits or subtle beings, Dusaka could – he seemed to live in that realm half the time – him and Tingri. I remember them well now. If we tried the Jetavana perhaps Dusaka, or one of the enlightened ones with powers, would be there, then he could intervene for us, or something. He could do *something*, I’m sure. He was always full of tricks.’

* * *

Maggot’s mixed feelings became even more so as they arrived in the Jetavana. It was late morning and, there on the north side of the sala in a shady spot, were the Great Elder Ananda and a very recognizable Krishna, despite being in his mid-fifties and with grey bristles coating his head, and Khujjuttara, perched on the edge of her familiar cart, leaning on a staff as well. As the group of kinnaris and their friends drew close, Dusaka approached from one side and had Kesini with him. They had just come from Vasabha at the palace.

‘No one but me’s allowed to see her but somehow,’ Kesini grinned, her wrinkled face creasing cheerfully at the memory, ‘our wise friend can walk past all the guards and they somehow assume he’s supposed to be there.’ Tingri yipped. And they don’t object to you either! Very impressive.’ Kesini was also middle-aged by now, like Krishna something like fifty-five Rains old, so she settled her frame down close by the wizened Khujjuttara, taking a pillar to lean on too.

On seeing Krishna for the first time since he was a lad of just twenty Rains, remembering the bitter words they had exchanged and the loving moments too, it was all a bit much for Maggot.

Ananda rose up and left. 'Take care good friends. I hope you will find some way to help Queen Vasabha with her imprisonment but there's little I can do myself.' He gave Dusaka a brief glance and saw that the sage was nodding to him already.

'I assumed that's what you were all talking about,' Dusaka said as he arrived, 'how to help or rescue Vasabha,' he didn't really need to check. Since this recent crisis and the day she had been made a slave again and thrown into the dungeons, there had not been much else to discuss.

Dusaka looked around him, as he eased himself onto a grass mat, staff across his knees. He tipped a salute to the three kinnaris, Ninka, Gumbiya, Ramba and Salassa and the new arrival.

'Ah, here you are.' He smiled at Ambaka broadly. He then looked at Maggot, and then at Krishna, then back to Maggot again, his face conveying several messages simultaneously. She returned his smile with a wry twist, a shrug and a wiping of one eye.

He looked to Khujjuttara, Kesini and Krishna then said, 'Do you know who's here?'

Krishna, although more care-worn and restrained than the kinnaris and their friends remembered him in his youth, cocked an eye as this was the sort of thing Dusaka dropped into conversations at rare and special moments. Kesini's brow crinkled, not guessing what he was talking about, while Khujjuttara at once said, 'Don't keep us guessin', though I'm sure you'd loike to.'

One by one he named the celestials gathered, finishing with the kinnaris, 'Here's Ant, and Bee and,' he flicked his chin at Krishna, 'your erstwhile beloved and mother of Queen Vasabha, Maggot,' he dipped his head in her direction too. 'N lastly here's a new arrival,' at this he gave Khujjuttara a big grin, 'a new one who's well-known here. What's your name now? Do you have one yet?'

'I'm Ambaka.'

'Very suitable,' he grinned at her again. 'Who used to attend our friend Khujjuttara and help out, last time around that was.'

As he made the introductions, or rather the indications since it was all one way; the three humans were looking about them, this direction and that, trying to get some sense of where these invisible entities might be located, to no avail.

Krishna was flooded with emotions: the fact that Maggot was close made him simultaneously nostalgic and excited to be near her again, and afraid of her wrath, should she still be unforgiving; and it seemed that Matanga, who had been his daughter too, was in some celestial form and was right there as well:— How wonderful that she was now in some divine state, after the shock and misery of her death which he had helped cause! It was overwhelming; his heart beat like a tabla drum while his head whipped side to side in the effort to see some trace of all their presences.

Maggot looked long and hard at Krishna. He had a lonely air about him. Ananda had been sitting with him, so that was an honour and a boon, but she

sensed a solitariness too, which surprised her given how gregarious he had formerly been. She didn't know of his poor reputation following his dalliances with the disreputable Group of Six and the poisonous Devadatta, but it was writ there in the lines of his face, the set of his shoulders. His catalogue of unwise choices were thoroughly scrutable and a surprising wave of compassion welled up in her heart.

She drew close. Her once-belovèd had clearly lost his way, but she also felt a calmness in him that was never there before, and beneath the signs of his cares, she saw he had been joyful too. Dusaka looked at her.

'He's had nine sun-turnings in the company of his and your daughter, that's been a great blessing for him. And I told him how, and I should tell you all too,' Dusaka looked about him, 'Vasabha was not only Tambaka in this life but, before that, well one before before that,' he said cryptically, 'she was Tamba and Magandiya,' he grinned again.

'N for the sake of completeness,' Dusaka turned to the three people there, 'along with these devas you've seen or heard of before, this new one tells me she's called Ambaka. She's a Tavatimsa deva like Ninka; she was Matanga here in Savatthi but, 'fore that she was Amba in Ujjeni and Samavati in Kosambi. So the family's all back together. Now I suppose I will have to teach you all,' he shot Krishna a look, '*again*, how to see clearly the beings of other realms.'

'You don't need to bother with me,' Khujjuttara was not fussed, just to know Matanga had drawn close was plenty, 'but you should help Vasabha.'

'And me,' Kesini complained.

'And I need a refresher, I agree,' Krishna grinned too, 'I'm a bit out of practice and I'd love to see Maggot and Matanga – and all the others of course – once again.'

* * *

The rumour mill churned vigorously with respect to the mission of the army and Maggot was even more torn than normal. Part of her wanted to stay close to Vasabha while Dusaka made his efforts to train her in deva-vision. The other part wanted to pursue the army and see if she could somehow dissuade her grandson, Vidudabha, from creating terrible karma, His announced intention to massacre and enslave the Sakyans had sent shockwaves through many realms.

One short visit, however, to the mobile force had suggested how impossible it would be for her to get through to the young King. He was hilt-deep in his commitment to this rashness and his mind was shut to all else. At least in Vasabha, her Tam, there was an inkling of possibility of communication. She would stay in Savatthi.

Not long after the meeting of the deva friends with Dusaka, the Master himself had sent Ananda to summon Krishna to see him, at the Gandha-kuti.

'Krishna, the King has set forth with his army on a blighted path. He is your grandson as well as the ruler of Kosala. I am going to see if he can be coaxed onto a

path of reason and wisdom instead of destructive savagery. I invite you to come with me. Let us see if disaster can be averted.'

As the Master spoke these words, Vidudabha's army was already half way to Kapilavatthu. The hills of the Himavant and their deep green forests were now visible in the distance, to the north and east of the marching troops. Soon the King would be there, to exact his revenge for the ineradicable insult that lay behind his birth.

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CHAPTER 23:

THE BUDDHA IN THE SHADE



ollow along after the Master and get close to the King. You might be able to help,' Dusaka's expression was uncharacteristically grave as he said this.

They could all tell this was serious indeed.

Maggot and Ambaka chose to stay with Vasabha, along with Dusaka, Khujjuttara and Kesini since, now reconnected with her child after such a long search, Maggot could not bear to be apart, besides, it was uncertain if even the Master would be able to turn the King from his destructive course. Ambaka, still finding her feet and her flight as a deva, was similarly keen to stay close to this one who had been her sister, her rival, her murderer and her friend, in her most recent human life.

Thus it was that Bee and Gumbiya – now expanded to full battle-size – Ant and Ninka, and Rhamba and Salassa, took off at speed, racing to the north-east from Savatthi to see if they could catch the army in time and to do what they could to help avert disaster.

* * *

Krishna was puzzled. The journey on foot cross-country with the Master had been exhilarating – he had been amazed at how swiftly the Teacher could walk without ever seeming hurried – and the stretch this morning had been several leagues, so why were they sitting to rest under this bodhi tree, with its sparse leaves, this being the Hot Season, instead of the deep cool shade of the aged banyan across the road and not more than a bowshot away? As usual Krishna came to his own conclusion, assuming there was some historical or mystical significance in the bodhi tree having been the type that the Buddha had been sitting under at the time of his enlightenment. This then led to some grumbling (internally) about attachment to perceptions and sentimental feelings that it seemed even the great Master was subject to. As these thoughts took shape, the Master turned to him and said:

'The leaves on this tree are scanty, this being the season for their falling, however this tree is just inside the lands of the Sakyans. That broad banyan across the way with its appealing shade, as deep as midnight in its inner reaches, sits within the borders of Kosala. It is better for our purpose that we rest here, to await the King and his army.' Chastened, Krishna sat and listened to the gentle continuous shimmering sound of the bodhi-leaves as they shook in the warm breeze under the hills.

As the Master said this, an unusual scent was carried to them on the wind from the west. It was a rank and sharp smell, not of rot but of animal and human sweat and soil, oil and leather, and mixed with plumes of heat-raised dust. The army was coming.

Krishna looked to the Buddha, as if any confirmation were needed, and also to gain a sense of what they were supposed to do. As the son of a merchant and then a monk for most of his life, he was at a loss when it came to military questions.

To his surprise the Master's first words were, 'One can smell a marching army long before one can hear or see them.' This piece of knowledge having come from his long training in arms and combat in the years before he left the palace in Kapilavatthu at the age of twenty-nine, as well as many previous lives as a military commander. 'It will be some time before they reach this border.'

Krishna was reassured that they would have a little while before the encounter so he took the opportunity to ask why the Master had chosen to sit here where the sun was now baking hot and the shade offered by the bodhi-leaves so meagre.

'Venerable Sir, can I ask the reason why "it is better for our purpose that we sit here"? Is it because this is closer to the road? Or perhaps because the shade under yonder banyan is so dark and deep that we would not be seen there?' His mind had been coming up with a few more 'reasonable reasons' in addition to his more critical ones.

'It is good that you ask for a reason, Krishna – that was something your father neglected to do when we met – but now is not the time to talk of it. Things will become clearer when the King arrives.'

They sat quietly beneath the tree. Still the only sound they heard was of bodhi-leaves a-quiver, as with gentle ease that somewhat foetid breeze stirred, that hot morning on the borders of Sakya.

* * *

When the columns of troops finally arrived, the Master's practised eye told him that King Vidudabha had brought with him the vast majority of the army of Kosala. This was to be no empty threat or embassy for parlay; this young man was intent on destruction and was not leaving anything to chance by way of numbers. His troops outweighed those of the Sakyans by a great proportion.

The Buddha and Krishna sat together beneath the bodhi-tree, close by the side of the road. The vanguard of the army came into close view as they turned the corner at the base of the low hill that led to the border. As they slowly approached, by the time they reached the great banyan, it seemed that the Master had been recognized and word was being sent back through the messengers to the King, in the midst of the vast column of men.

The troops slowed and came to a halt as the King rode forward, now on horseback rather than an elephant for ease of mobility.

This was the first time that Vidudabha had met the Buddha since he had seized power from the old king, his father. Mixed feelings raged within him: fear that his father's great spiritual mentor and friend would castigate him for seizing power as he had, by subterfuge; anger that these monks were getting in his way as he went to wreak vengeance for the insult of the Sakyans; awe at the serene and peaceful power that the Master emanated; it was confusing but his years of princely training led him to dismount, hand his reins to a squire, then walk slowly to where the Buddha was seated.

The King's mind was racing, it was obviously no accident or happenstance that the Buddha was sitting by the road, at the border, ostensibly waiting for him, but what should he say to him? 'Get out of my way. I'm going to slaughter your family'? 'Please can I have your blessing for what I'm about to do'? 'Could you give me your advice on how best to deal with the Sakyans'? 'You are one of them! Were you part of this appalling deception too? I should have you executed!?' 'What a surprise to see you here, Venerable Sir. Has anyone offered you food today?' As he knelt and paid respects to the Master in the traditional way, with three prostrations, his mind defaulted to the neutral subject of the weather.

'Venerable Sir, the day is so hot, why do you sit at the foot of this tree, with such sparse and scanty shade? Please, sit instead at the foot of that ancient banyan, just over there, which has thick leaves and a cool, dense canopy.'

The Buddha responded, 'Be not concerned, great King. The shade of my kinsmen keeps me cool.' He indicated the road ahead, to nearby Kapilavatthu, as if to underscore the fact that he was in the land of the Sakyans.

The King realized that this was a clear message. The peace-filled atmosphere, in such close quarters with the Master, stirred his heart and he knew, 'The Teacher must have come here solely for the purpose of protecting his kinfolk. I cannot oppose him.' For a moment he looked up into the Buddha's face and saw there such an ocean of friendliness and grace that there was nothing else to say. He bowed again three times and took his leave; briskly mounting his horse he ordered the army to return the way it had come.

* * *

This exchange was witnessed by the kinnaris and their deva and yakkha friends, they having arrived too late to slow the advance of the army. Once they saw that the columns had turned around and were heading back to Savatthi, they repaired to the foot of the banyan tree to decide what to do.

'The Master's words seem to have had a dramatic effect on Vidudabha but, as we all know, kings are a fickle bunch,' Bee was in mutually-agreed charge of their expedition so all were listening closely. 'We should not assume for a moment that His Serene Majesty won't change his mind. In fact, we should assume that he will. So, what's the best way to keep him on track, returning to Savatthi?' She looked around the group for suggestions.

Ant immediately piped up, 'What about some dreams? Maggot's good at that but I can do it too. Ninka's probably even better,' she was trying to help them to forgive and forget her partner's deception of them all. 'We could plant some dreams in the mind of the King, and a few advisors, about how the life of a warrior-noble king is so luxurious and enjoyable, endless fun, easy life in the palace, and that he could change his tactic and regard the slight by the Sakyans as a kind of emergency fund – he could demand tributes of gold from them, on account of the insult, at any time he likes in the future. How does that sound?'

'We could appear in it,' offered Rhamba, 'my brother and I, and provide some appropriate song and dance. What do you think?' Salassa, the brother in question, smiled at the opportunity. 'I'm happy to oblige.'

That night, with the army half a day's march back in Kosala, they camped and rested since the drive to Kapilavatthu had been hard on the animals as well as on the troops. There was a spritely mood among the tents as conflict had been avoided and the food wagons were plentifully supplied.

King Vidudabha was deep in his cups, now being assailed by doubts as to whether he had made the right decision after all:– It had been so obvious when face to face with the Buddha.

Those mixed emotions were now back in force, despite him trying to drink them into oblivion; rage at the cruel disaster of his birth; shame at launching this campaign and then turning back after such a brief meeting with the Master; desire to impress the Royal court with his nobility and competence, after having unseated his father King Pasenadi from the throne; these chased each other around until, in the late watches of the night, sleep finally took him.

* * *

Bee, Ant and Ninka, and Rhamba and Salassa were pleased with their handiwork. They had woven images of great luxury and bliss into the dreams of the King – without too much of a specific story – displaying the life of a head-anointed warrior noble king as an endless feast with a sumptuous array of entertainments. They had planted dreams of a similar kind in the minds of his closest advisors, as far as they could tell, to allay any rumbles of criticism or shame with regard to the King's less-than-auspicious birth.

'I was particularly impressed by that image you made, Ninka, of an older version of Vidudabha receiving trunks of gold from the abased Sakyan nobles,' Bee chuckled. 'That was neat. So he has a way to restore dignity.'

'And get some extra cash,' chimed in Ant, 'if he needs it.'

What the six friends did not know was that Mara, the Lord of Lies, was listening in with great personal interest to all this. Even as the self-congratulations were proceeding he made his way to the King's tent, whilst sleep was still upon him, and inveigled a dream of his own creation into the King's mind. He selected the faces of the Royal Court of Kosala, painting upon them expressions of

disappointment, disgust, disapproval and some wry smirks. Mara then brought in his most rational and empathetic voice to say, 'It's all very well not to wish to oppose... a great holy man,' his slight pause before choosing words to refer to the Buddha spoke volumes, 'but to all intents and purposes, your *honour*,' he leant heavily upon the word, 'will be shredded... has been so already, if truth be told. But it's not irreparable. It's actually your *duty*,' again he stressed the word, 'to carry out your mission, just as it was the duty of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra; Lord Krishna himself reassured him:

*'How has this weakness taken you? From where
Springs this inglorious stalling, shameful to the brave,
Barring the path of virtue? Nay, Arjuna!
Forbid yourself this feebleness! It mars
Your warrior name! Cast off this fit of cowardice!
Wake! Be yourself! Arise and scourge your foes!'*

'Lord Krishna also said to him, "Do not become a coward, Arjuna, because it does not befit you." That's applicable here too... no?' The voice of Mara spoke clearly and convincingly.

King Vidudabha awoke at dawn with a surprisingly unfoggy head. He gave the order at once. 'We march again to Sakya!'

* * *

The pattern repeated itself. The Buddha and Krishna were still seated beneath the same tree, just inside the border of the Sakyan kingdom. The King, fixing his mind on the idea of honour and duty, steeled himself as they approached the border of Kosala. He was determined not to be dissuaded again, sure that he would drive the army on to its goal of Kapilavatthu.

As they took the bend in the road and climbed the gentle slope, however, the rigid walls of certainty he had erected faded like morning mist and, as he came close to the Buddha, seeing him seated exactly as before, without a word his resolve was broken. He halted the troops with a gesture of his raised arm then simply announced, 'About face! March!' And the army retreated once more.

A second time Ant, Bee and their companions contrived to populate the King's dreams with scenes that would encourage him in his choice and warn him of the dangers should his mind be inclined to change again. This time Gumbiya was brought in as a chief actor, displaying the threats of hellish torments in store for those who deliberately kill their fellow humans and other living beings.

The dreams they wove for Vidudabha and his courtiers were vivid and terrifying, and once again they were proud of their handiwork, but once again the Evil One was lurking close at hand, unbeknownst to the companions.

Again, Mara crafted a dream to counteract the message of the six friends. This time he brought into being the face of an ancient sage, calling himself 'the worshipful Vajashravas'. He began, 'Some people assert that divine punishment threatens the one who kills. I declare this is nonsense. These are fairy tales conjured up by fearful rulers who wish to keep their subjects submissive. These are stories told by parents to force their children to behave as they would wish.

'What is a "warrior-noble" if they do not fulfil their duty to wage war? And how can war be fought without lives being taken?

'If that is the holy duty of a head-anointed warrior noble king, how could such threats of punishment be real? These are, in truth, only fancies, phantoms conjured up to frighten children, and the cowardly ignorant weaklings who are afraid of taking decisive action. Come, Great King, you will be famous! Now, begin the fight!"

Again Vidudabha awoke and turned his army around.

* * *

None among the foot soldiers or the cavalry, or even in the waggon-train with the food supplies, dared to crack a joke about the repeated 'about-faces'. The memory of Prince Jeta's head falling and rolling in the dust, and the thud of his body as it hit the ground, were still vivid in the minds of many, and the story of it had spread to those who had not seen it themselves. The King did not have a sense of humour – at least nothing of that side of him was ever shared in public – so a wisecrack about 'seeing a lot of North-east Kosala' or suchlike was not something anyone wanted to risk.

For the third time they took the bend in the road and climbed the low hill. King Vidudabha now rode at the front of his troops and his jaw was set, rigid and resolute in purpose.

Once again, despite his grim determination to stick to his plan, as he drew close he saw that the Master was still in his place under the thin-leaved bodhi-tree, with his dark companion beside him. Sweating and tense he rode up the slope, repeating internally his commitment to deliver justice to the Sakyans without regret or remorse.

Each step of his horse drew him closer and, yet again, his rage could not sustain itself, the litany of wrongs began to sound petty and childish in his head, the warmth of the Buddha's great compassion flowed through his being and, almost without willing it, he reined his horse to a halt and turned around again.

This time, by now the third reversal, a few sideways glances were risked amongst the troops. Speculation was rife as to how many more times they would be toing and froing up this road.

As these marches and reversals had been proceeding, the Buddha and Krishna had maintained their vigil beneath the sparse shade of the bodhi-tree. In the

early mornings Krishna and the Master had walked for alms-round in the nearby village but for the rest of the days and the nights they had held their post.

Krishna now understood why the Master had chosen this tree, and how to stay here was an unequivocal message to the King. A message he had received but seemed to be repeatedly forgetting. He also noticed that the Master would sometimes wince in the heat of the day and, after Krishna asked if anything was wrong, he replied that he had a slight headache. On hearing this Krishna quickly realized that suggesting that they move to the other, shady tree, or trying to find medicine in the village, would not be agreed to.

This had been the most wonderful opportunity – to have travelled alone with the Buddha as his attendant, and now to have spent these important days with him – this was the chance of a lifetime.

As he saw this occasional pained expression on the face of the Master, he longed to help and so he considered how he might get Vidudabha to go back to the city of Savatthi once and for all. Without asking the Buddha what he thought of the plan, and without asking what the Master had in mind for them on the morrow, Krishna took off after dark and followed the road south-west.

He arrived at the camp and was, as he had expected, stopped by the guards but he was easily able to convince them that he was the dark monk who was beside the Buddha as his attendant when they were sitting under the tree – many of the soldiers recognized him by now. He asked if he could have an audience with the King as soon as possible. After some discussion he was led to the grandest of the tents in the camp. Around them was the clamour of voices over cook-fires, flagons and crock-jars, as well as the ringing crickets of the forest night.

Krishna had decided that maybe the best thing for the young King was to tell him the full story of his mother's origins, as far as Krishna knew it, and to introduce himself as the King's grandfather. This idea being based on the principle that 'the truth shall set you free'. So, once knowing all about his origins, the King's heart would be more at ease – this was the hope that had hatched in Krishna's mind, ignoring the fact that he had also been sitting in the Hot Season sun for three days and that his thinking might be more than slightly addled. Mara had seen an ideal opportunity, once again.

A courtier ushered him into the tent, after having received the go-ahead from His Serene Majesty. The King was plainly in his cups once more. 'So, why do you want to see me? Eh!? To mock me as Vidu the Fay *and* the Indecisive? Eh? What do *you* want?' The King was both aggressive and fragile in his manner. Krishna cleared his throat.

'Your Majesty, Great King, I come to inform you of some truths that I hope will be a balm to your heart and to help settle...' Krishna hunted for the best words, 'the current situation.' He could not easily read the expression on the King's face – was it irritation? Interest? Insult? He decided to plough on.

'The long and the short of it is that I am not just a dark-skinned monk who is the attendant of the Master, I am also your grandfather.'

At this moment the King was absently looking for a surface to place his drinking vessel upon. The last words caught his attention and his blue-green eyes flared, fixing Krishna like a gimlet.

‘What?! You claim to be my grandsire? How so!?’

Krishna sank lower in the small chair he had been offered. ‘Many years ago, before I joined the Order of the Buddha, I met an unusual being, a kinnari, and we became enamoured of each other. I was a callow youth and she was much older but had the appearance of one my age.

‘To cut a long story short we became a couple and had a child, that child is your mother, Queen Vasabha. That is how I am your grandfather.’

‘This is outrageous nonsense! I should have your head at once for this insolence. Are you saying that my grandmother was an animal!?’ His face was flushed and his eyes ablaze as he said this.

‘Well, I wouldn’t call a kinnari an “animal”.’ Krishna began, but realized quickly that being pedantic about names and designations would not be helpful. ‘She was an earth-deva. That’s why your mother has some unusual qualities – does she not always have a beautiful fragrance?’

The King grunted agreement.

‘And does she not have a gentle glow, when it’s dark? And don’t you have some of those attributes too, Sire?’

‘S’true – that’s why I’m known as Vidu the Fay.’ The King became reflective for a moment. “So, where was she born? In Kapilavatthu?”

‘No Sire, she was born in Ghositarama, Ghosita’s Monastery in Kosambi.’

‘Why was she born in a monastery?’

‘That’s because I was a novice monk at the time.’

‘You were a novice? Weren’t you supposed to be celibate, in that Order of yours?’

Krishna, again cautious not to get into pedantry and say that there wasn’t actually a rule against cohabiting with a deva at that time, opted for simply acknowledging, ‘I was not a very well-behaved novice.’ He looked at the mat-strewn floor of the royal pavilion, then risked a glance at Vidudabha.

The reflective mood was gone and the King looked even more enraged than before. ‘You mean to tell me that, not only was my mother a kitchen slave but that she was born from an illicit union of a shameless monk and a forest creature?! And you tell me this in order to *console* me?! Get out of my sight, *grandfather*,’ he spat the word, ‘before I take your head off myself. General!’ He called for Digha-Karaniya, who was leading the troops. ‘We break camp *now* and march by night – there will be no reversal this time.’

* * *

Krishna rushed the few leagues back to the border, his way guided only by the moon and stars, and then the lightening of the sky in the east. When he reached

the Buddha, the Master was already packed for the road. Krishna was breathless and desperate, but it seemed that, once again he was too late.

‘There is nothing more we can do here. The Tathagata has exercised his influence three times, if someone presses on beyond those three, then it is out of the Tathagata’s hands. Come, let us go cross-country, to the River Aciravati.’

The army moved through the night as well, reaching the edge of Kapilavatthu at sunrise. On account of the many appearances of the Kosalan troops on the road over the last few days, the Sakyans were prepared for trouble and, as news reached them earlier that Vidudabha had seized the throne from King Pasenadi, it was not difficult to surmise that he had found out about the deception of his mother and that he was on the warpath for vengeance.

All the warriors of Kapilavatthu stood ready, having been on the alert for days. As the ranks of the Kosalan army formed on the fields before the city walls, the Sakyans considered how to show their strength yet, still keep to their preferred standard of non-violence, Mahanama, ruler of the Sakyans, said, ‘We, the kinfolk of the Enlightened One, are unwilling to slay our enemies, rather we are willing to die instead of taking their lives. We are nonetheless trained and skilful; we are expert archers. We will not take the lives of others, since that is now unlawful for us, instead we will demonstrate our skill in archery and put this army to flight by showing our superiority in the field.’

Mahanama declared this all with a clear and resounding, battlefield voice.

The two armies stood face to face, the smaller force of the Sakyans against the walls of the city; the vastly greater forces of Kosala arrayed before them. The Sakyans strung their bows and, aiming with supreme care, darkened the sky with their arrows. The Kosalan forces stood their ground and every single arrow passed between their shields and their flanks with not a single man or horse or elephant being struck.

If this was supposed to impress King Vidudabha it failed as a plan completely. He noted the precision with which the arrows had been fired, turned to face the Sakyans once more and quickly issued the order, ‘Kill them all, man, woman and child, even infants at the breast. Save only Mahanama and whatever nobly born Sakya maidens that can be found.’ General Digha-Karaniya was pleased at the decisiveness of the King, after all his hesitancy.

He roared the order, ‘Forward! No quarter! No mercy! Kosalans, attack!’

* * *

The Kosalan forces scythed through the ranks of Sakyans like the mowing of ripe corn and the city gates were breached in minutes. All the townsfolk were rooted out and slaughtered in the streets and squares.

The King strode proudly into the Santhagara, the audience hall where he had sat and where his insult, this ineradicable stain, had been discovered. His heart was closed to any moral sensitivity other than that rising from his rage and wounded

pride. He had the highest ranking Sakyans lined up against the walls of the hall and their throats were slit as one. Only King Mahanama was left alive. As the blood flowed over the stone slabs of the hall Vidudabha ripped off the front of Mahanama's smock, soaked it in the pools of blood and declared while wiping the throne with exaggerated gestures, 'I said I would wash the chair in the lifeblood of the deceitful Sakyans and so have I done. I have been true to my word unlike some others.' He glared at Mahanama, then walked slowly out into the daylight. Thus was the stock of the Sakyans uprooted by Vidudabha.

* * *

The army looted the city in summary fashion and was soon ready to travel back to Savatthi once more. The King kept Mahanama close to him and relished his conversations with the now-debased Sakyan, gloating unabashedly over the slaughter and degradation he had wrought. He was looking for some humility on the part of Mahanama who was now completely in his power.

On the morning of their first day on the road Vidudabha invited Mahanama to have breakfast with him. The food was laid out in a shady spot close by a lake, still quite full despite it being the Hot Season. Even though he had just seen his entire clan destroyed on account of their overreaching pride, still Mahanama could only think, when receiving the invitation, 'Members of the kshatriya caste, the warrior nobles, would rather give up their lives than eat with the sons of slave-women.' So, by way of an excuse, he said, 'Dear grandson,' for he knew nothing about Vasabha's having been adopted, 'I am grimy after a night in the pens. I would like to bathe before we eat.'

'Very well, *grandfather*,' he smirked, 'go and do what you need to.'

Meanwhile Mahanama was thinking, 'If I refuse to eat with him, he'll kill me. It's better if I die by my own hand.' Then he went to the lake and, by screening himself behind some bushes, he drowned himself and was long dead before anyone found his body.

The King was infuriated by this escape, and he suspected that it was for exactly the reason that Mahanama did it, underscoring the pride of the Sakyans and his own fixed predicament of birth.

Once Mahanama's body had been fished from the lake, the army started south-west again, and proceeded slowly through the day. The sun was hot and the animals were now extra laden with the booty from Kapilavatthu. When they came to a halt to camp for the evening, Vidudabha was reminded of his order to round up the young maidens of Sakya and to keep them as captives.

He ordered these girls to be brought to him and, once they had all been gathered outside his pavilion, he emerged, wiping his mouth from a snack. There were between two and three hundred young women clustered together. They were grubby from the road and from rough handling by their captors, and some were

bloodstained from the slaughter of their families. Nevertheless, they all stood proudly and did not seem the slightest bit intimidated by the situation.

‘Daughters of Sakya, you will all now be my Royal Concubines; consider yourselves greatly favoured.’ The young King smirked again relishing his absolute power.

‘We won’t be possessed by the son of a slave girl,’ said one of the taller of the group.

So, far from meek compliance he was being met with disrespect and audacity, again.

‘Does this idiot speak for all of you?’

The response was loud and widespread that she did.

‘There’s not even one of you who chooses to live in luxury rather than die out here in the woods, to be skewered by a sword and die in a ditch?’ His harshness carried an unwanted note of imploration, almost begging, for a moment. There was silence, decorated only by the ringing of cicadas and crickets and the soft hoot of an owl.

‘So be it.’ He turned to the captain of the guard, ‘Count them now and then kill them, and bring me their right hands. I want to make sure every single one is dead.’

‘What should we do with the bodies, Sire?’ the captain asked.

‘Why, dig a pit and throw them all in.’

* * *

The six companions had witnessed the end of the march to Kapilavatthu but could not stand to be close to all of the screams of pain and the bloodshed of the massacre. In shock they sought out the Master and Krishna; the companions stayed close by as they made their way through the woods and fields. In their pauses the Master kindly gave them teachings, as he did Krishna, to comfort them and give perspective on what had just happened. He explained that even a fully enlightened Buddha sometimes does not have the power to sway someone in their intent. Similarly how life is not under personal control, no matter how absolute one’s authority seems to be.

After a day or two the Master halted close to the dry river-bed of the Aciravati, which usually flowed strongly and consistently by the city of Savatthi. They were a few leagues from the city still. They made a camp in the forest by the bank of the river, with the Master stating, for his own reasons, ‘This will be a good place.’

Before long the smells, sounds and sight of the Kosalan army became apparent. The river-bed was bone-dry and wide and flat, and since the banks were thickly wooded, King Vidudabha announced, ‘We will pitch camp here, it’s as if the ground was cleared for us.’

A few of the seasoned members of the troops glanced at each other warily but no one dared to say this was a bad idea, and very risky. The King and his less-experienced companions were delighted at the choice, 'We even have soft sand to lie on – this is luxury!'

The entirety of the army thus lay down to rest in the bed of the River Aciravati. During the night a few of the soldiers were bothered by ants and could not rest. So they shook their uniforms out and climbed the bank and found a good-enough spot to rest, up on top of the slope.

Far into the night the rumbles of thunder and lightning were heard in the distance. A downpour began where the army was sleeping but it had been preceded by a downpour up-river, and high in the hills. A flash flood of gigantic proportions burst down the river-bed. It was a wall of water racing too fast for any to escape its wrath. Men, horses, waggons, elephants – all were washed away, in the chaotic maelstrom of people and wood and metal, harnesses and weapons, everything was smashed to pieces, torn apart and not a living being survived. All became food for fishes and turtles, their remains carried by the flood as far as the estuary and the sea.

* * *

The few soldiers who were up on the bank, having been moved by the ants, looked on the inundation in horrified awe, powerless to offer any aid. They thanked the six-footed friends who had been the cause of their survival. They were, in fact, not far from where the Buddha and Krishna had made their camp so, once the flood had passed its peak and the sudden shock of it all was abating, the Master asked Krishna to go and invite the soldiers to join them. Bee and Gumbiya, Ant and Ninka, Rhamba and Salassa were all gathered close by too, not wishing to be far from the blessed presence of the Buddha at a terrible time like this. They had been close to the 10,000 people being killed in Kapilavatthu and now 10,000 soldiers and their camp-followers had been wiped out by the forces of nature too.

The Master welcomed the three soldiers and Krishna gave them a mat to sit on. It turned out that each of these three had not been involved in the execution of the Sakyans. 'We wangled the job of lookin' after the 'orses – didn't want to do no killin' – good fing if y'ask me.' The others nodded in agreement.

The Master advised them that it was on account of good karma they had created to have been the only ones to escape the torrential flood. While he was offering them some cheer, they having lost so many friends in the disaster that had just happened, he noticed that Krishna was looking filled with despair, heartbroken once again. He turned to him and raised an eyebrow.

'What grieves you, in this moment, Krishna?' His voice as kindly and reassuring as ever.

'I can't believe I was so stupid. If I had not gone to the King and told him about me, us, his grandparents, he wouldn't... I had the thought that the truth would help set him free of his insecurities. I thought he'd be proud to have a deva as

a grandmother. He called her “an animal” – how could he!? She’s an angel, a goddess.’ Krishna wept and the other kinnaris, Bee and Ant, swooped down from the branches where they had settled to comfort him, hug him from either side. He could feel something there but sobbed on.

‘I’m such an idiot. I never learn!’

‘Krishna, your intentions were good, have no doubt of that, but the Evil One took an opportunity, seeing you were tired and addled from the heat. Your mind was under his malign influence at that moment so you failed to ask my advice and you plunged in with your wish to convey the truth.

‘A wise one always speaks the truth; however, they will only speak on something if it is beneficial, not if it is harmful or of no value; whether it is pleasant to hear or painful to hear, a wise one will know the right time to utter such speech. In this case it was true, and could have been beneficial at some future date, but that night was *not* the right time. So now it’s for you to acknowledge that mistake and to endeavour to do better in the future. Life is uncertain:

*‘Even while a person is gathering flowers,
And is absorbed in pleasure,
Death comes and carries them off
Even as a mighty flood overwhelms a sleeping village.’*

Krishna’s heart was immeasurably warmed by this; and he felt comforted too by the presences beside him. The moonlight was bright and he thought he saw red on his left and garnet on his right. Something shifted in him.

‘Ant? Bee? Is that you? Are you here too?’

The hazy figures nodded, and his heart swelled again.

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CHAPTER 24: REUNIONS



very tongue was wagging in Savatthi. The stories of the massacre of the Sakyans – the Master’s own people – as well as the demise of virtually the entirety of the Kosalan army, had reached the city with great speed. Bad news travels fast.

People had been generally unhappy about the way that Vidudabha had seized power. Even though his father, King Pasenadi, had made some grievous mistakes, such as the wiping out of General Bandhula’s family so recently, he had been regarded as a good and just king. He was a sincere and dedicated disciple of the Master and always displayed the most genuine humility and friendship towards him, and to his monks and nuns. He had been beloved by the populace, his only shortcoming in the eyes of most people had been his failure to produce more than a couple of children. Princess Vajiri and now the late King Vidudabha were his only offspring, either through formal or casual liaisons. Now that Vidu the Fay was gone, and it was well known that the old King had passed away near Rajagaha, the big question of the day – along with the issues of funerals and inheritances for many of the noble houses of Kosala – was ‘who will ascend the throne of the kingdom, since both legitimate kings have passed away?’

It was a sad time for all. It seemed that a majority of the families of Savatthi, whether humble or noble, had lost at least one man in the army that was washed down the Aciravati, as well as many women who were in the waggon train and cook-tents. Hardly anyone had any physical remains of their loved ones that could be properly cremated, however, so there was an endless succession of bodiless funeral ceremonies and memorials held in the burning grounds outside the city and on the river’s banks, and at the local shrines.

The lamentations and mourning for the Sakyan people also filled the air. Yes, they had caused offence by foisting a low-caste bride upon the King, and that subterfuge had been maintained for many years, but Queen Vasabha was well-liked regardless. It was now suspected that her genuine ‘common touch’, and ability to relate comfortably and helpfully with the poor-folk, was a result of her own humble origins, like those of the equally appreciated Queen Mallika.

In the search for a new ruler it was appreciated that King Pasenadi had had a number of other, so-called ‘minor wives’. There were Ubbiri, Soma and Sakula (some male relatives of whom were considered), and Vimala who was a sister of King Bimbisara. Pasenadi’s sister, Kosaladevi, was married to Bimbisara too, so there was a doubly close connection. The problem with looking to Magadha for a suitable ruler was that King Ajatasattu had recently killed his father by starving him to death, while imprisoned, and the Queen, Kosaladevi, had died of grief shortly

after. If any approach was made to the throne of Magadha, it was highly likely – as many of the busy gossip-mills had it – that King Ajatasattu would grasp the opportunity to claim the throne of Kosala for himself as well, thus uniting the two great power-holders of the region and perhaps seeding a whole empire for himself. Thus, amid the sad ceremonies to mark the great losses experienced by the manyfolk, there was an energizing anxiety about the future:– Who would lead the country?

Although it was unprecedented, the solution that the ministers of state decided upon, despite a few of them offering to be a ‘steward’ of the throne until a suitable royal could be found, was to appoint Queen Mallika as Royally Anointed Regent, with Princess Vajiri at her side as Crown Princess Regent. Amidst the many heated and convoluted discussions, with the Princess being the only legitimate heir of King Pasenadi, and Vidudabha having been too young to be married, many were the glances cast in her direction with the word ‘husband’ being mingled freely with them. The Princess, meanwhile, cultivated a selective deafness when she overheard such conversations. She was in her twenties and as yet unmarried and was keen to stay that way for as long as possible.

* * *

‘Given everything that has happened, Vajiri, don’t you think we should release Vasabha from her imprisonment in her chambers?’ The Queen Regent was slowly getting used to the accoutrements of power; it was up to her to decide on many, if not most matters, now that the symbols of Royal Office were in her hands.

‘Absolutely,’ Princess Vajiri leaned into a pile of cushions in their cosy antechamber that now served as their day-to-day conference room, ‘but what do we do about her status? She was Queen and the mother of the King so she can’t exactly go back to the kitchens, or even marry someone else and open a shop, or if one of the lords wanted to marry her regardless – she is beautiful and still of childbearing age, after all... and she’s a nice person! People love her, or *loved* her until this scandal broke and these thousands of people have died on her account,’ for so it was popularly regarded. Vajiri rummaged in a bowl of fruit until she found a custard apple, then deftly broke the sections apart and removed the rough peel. She popped chunks of the sweet fruit into her mouth between sentences, delicately spitting the hard dark pips into her hand and dropping them into a dish.

‘You know, mother, I think that the best thing might be to simply invite her here for a chat, or,’ she paused to drop a few seeds thoughtfully into the vessel, ‘if you didn’t think it outrageous, or even a little bit inappropriate, we could go and see her – make a social visit. What d’you think?’

‘I think that’s a very good idea. It might be unprecedented – and earn a few scowls from the ministers and court officials.’

‘And some of the more snooty servants.’

‘Yes, them too, but I am the Royally Anointed Regent so I can do what I like and no one can object.’ Queen Mallika was beginning to enjoy this new role.

* * *

Vasabha had been even more broken up and tearful to hear the shocking and horrific news than many others in Savatthi; not only had her son wrought brutal destruction on the family and city of the Master, he had died himself, literally washed away on the waves of his own hubris, his inflated pride and conceit. She had wept for days, feeling also the echoes of the painful results of such fear-based pride in her previous life, the horrific tang of her own flesh frying and being fed to her, and in flashes of heat, scarlet flame and smoke, and molten green-flamed rivers, that broke into her consciousness from time to time.

Dusaka had contrived to visit almost daily during these dark days, along with Khujjuttara whom he managed somehow to bring with him. He persuaded the palace guards that the most appropriate means of conveyance for her to visit the former queen was in a sedan chair. Thus he would push her in her cart to the edge of the courtyard – with Tingri invariably catching a ride onboard – then two sturdy footmen would help her into the chair and carry her, in great style, through the halls along the loggias in the inner palace, until they reached the rooms where Vasabha was kept confined. No one ever questioned how it was that these people were allowed to see the disgraced former queen and why royal guards were doing the duty of chair-men.

On this day Dusaka, Khujjuttara and Tingri were well settled in with Vasabha and Kesini before the royals arrived for their social call. Without trying to get her to suppress her grief, which is never a good policy, Dusaka had brought up the subject of her learning to see etheric beings, and how he could teach her, and how that would probably be to great advantage in the long run. He had told her that her mother, Maggot, was often present (which was an understatement), along with Ambaka, who had once been her sister and later rival, and more recently her friend Matanga.

They were deeply ensconced in what had become a daily lesson. Dusaka was saying, ‘You almost have to catch yourself unawares – looking to the side of things...,’ when a knock came to the door. It was far more gentle and tentative than the sharp raps that she and Kesini were used to from their guards.

‘Come in,’ Vasabha responded. ‘We’re quite decent,’ the prisoners being expected to be in plain-coloured clothing and well-covered up in their chastened status.

‘Your Majesty!’ Both Vasabha and Kesini knelt at the Queen’s arrival with the Princess. ‘Majesties,’ Kesini corrected her, automatically.

‘S’cuse us if we don’t get up,’ Dusaka indicated the white and wispy-haired Khujjuttara beside him. ‘Old age and infirmity.’ Tingri yipped and sniffed in a way that indicated sarcasm, which, surprisingly, everyone present was able to

understand as, “‘Infirmity” – oh yes – very convenient.’ Dusaka cocked a bushy eyebrow at her, while she stood up and pointedly walked in a composed fashion to the Queen’s feet and, stretching out her front paws, lowered her head. She then did the same for the Princess, sniffed again, as if to say, ‘That’s how it’s done properly’ then processed in stately mode back to the cushion she had been settled on.

‘Dear Vasabha, how have these terrible times been for you? I’m so sorry we have taken so long to come and see you.’ Princess Vajiri, who was closer to her in age, immediately leant into her and took her hands.

‘We really don’t care about your humble origins,’ Vajiri began, ‘after all my Royal Mother was a flower girl when she caught the King’s roving eye. The fact that you were a slave matters not to us.’

Khujjuttara had long been unbothered by social niceties and protocols. She was not rude, as a person, but such aspects of life were of little value to her. She cheerfully said, ‘Well, afore she were a slave she were born in a diff’rent family, her dad was a novice monk then, he’s the elder Krishna now – you’ll ‘ve seen ‘im at the Jetavana from time to time – and ‘er mum was a kinnari,” the elderly sage forgetting that Dusaka had mentioned that Maggot was in the room that day with them, as ever, although not visible. Both Dusaka and Tingri glanced over to where she was sitting; Maggot blushed a deeper shade of pink.

‘A kinnari! Your mother?!’ Vajiri was amazed. ‘Is that why there’s always that mysterious fragrance around you, like now, even when you’re forbidden perfumes? And you do glow gently pink in the dark – I’ve seen it. Well... What...’ Her words ran out.

Vasabha was not sure what to say. Dusaka had told her of her real ancestry many years previously and Krishna and she had drawn close, but it was still something of a mystery to her. She had never met her real mother although she had been trying hard to learn how.

‘What we came here for,’ Queen Mallika interjected, ‘was to talk with you about your future and what we could do to help you out of your current predicament. You’re a widowed dowager queen, and guilty of a grand fraud, albeit not at your own instigation, and of a mixed ancestry, *very* mixed we now learn. So we’re at a bit of a loss as to how you might fit into society. We wish to protect you but not everyone does. Some are...’

‘... saying it is on account of me that half the menfolk of Savatthi have been slaughtered. I’m the one who caused an army of 10,000 to be destroyed,’ she smiled wryly, sadly.

‘We know that’s not true,’ Vajiri chimed in, ‘but...’

‘... people say what they say,’ Vasabha finished the sentence for her too.

‘What *I’ve* been thinking,’ Vasabha continued, ‘is why “fit into society” at all? I could just go and live in a monastery, then I would be outside the expectations of folk in the worldly sphere, *and* I could give more time to learning how to see and be with my mother, and her friends. I’ve been thinking that,’ she looked around the people gathered there and vainly to where she thought Maggot might be perched,

'the nuns' monastery by the Eastern Gatehouse of Savatthi might be a good place. I could be a lay sister there, no status to speak of or to argue about. The holy life is admired as an alternative to marriage so I would not be bothered by any suitors.' She gave a sympathetic glance to both Queen Mallika and the Princess. 'It's close to the city but outside the walls. What do you all think?' Around her was a field of nods and smiles, everyone agreed.

As joyful tears came to her eyes, at the way this next phase of her life was unfolding, she saw a definite rosy pink form through the glazy film – she hadn't been looking and was distracted from herself – and that half-distractedness enabled her to see her loving mother, for the briefest flicker, for the first time since she was a baby. As their gazes met for just that instant, after so many trials and travails, tears of joy burst freely from Maggot's eyes as well.

* * *

The move to the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery went very smoothly. Vasabha was keen to shed many of her possessions, those that still remained hers, so she and Kesini had distributed many small items of clothing, and the jewellery that had not been taken from them already, amongst the maids and servants, cooks and cleaners of the palace.

Dusaka and Tingri 'helped' with the move, mostly by gently encouraging people to lend a hand and guide the way, and then to ask the nuns at the new monastery to help her get settled in. Vasabha and Kesini soon took their simple vows as lay sisters, committing to live on the Eight Precepts and to wear plain, unadorned clothing around the sanctuary. And that was about it. They were given one of the modest kutis to share, just as were the other former royals and ladies of state had who had joined the Sangha, such as Sister Khema who had been a wife of King Bimbisara.

There was a great joyfulness in this new life. No more pretences, nobody to be afraid of, no expectations put upon them other than to live harmoniously with the other nuns, novices and lay women who comprised the community.

'Oh, what bliss!' Vasabha was wreathed with smiles. 'After all the drama, Kes, we can be who we are and live a simple life. I can even help in the kitchens again! I don't think I will have forgotten how in the last twenty years.'

Somehow Dusaka managed to contrive the same arrangement that he and Tingri had had at the palace. Despite being almost the only male person in the compound, he was given a free pass to come and go as he pleased and seemed to be held in the minds of the sisterhood as an honorary female. In respect of the welcome he was given he was always gracious and helpful where he could be and Tingri strove to make herself useful as well. She was particularly adept at staving off monkey-raids to the food stores and fruit trees in the compound and in keeping stray dogs from the city in their proper place.

The lessons in deva-vision continued, with ever-increasing success after the small breakthrough in the palace room. Vasabha's ability to see Maggot and the other kinnaris, plus Gumbiya and Ninka and Ambaka, steadily developed. Initially there were just flashes of clarity, vague shapes that held distinctly but only for a moment. She could not hear their words but Kesini began to have this ability; just a phrase, or a sound here and there, was all she could discern at first. On rare occasions this blur of sound formed into whole sentences but it was tricky to sense who had said what.

Dusaka was not there every day as he was spending equal time with Krishna at the nearby Jetavana Monastery, all the more poignantly named since Prince Jeta had been the only one of the Kosalan nobles to stand up to Vidudabha and condemn the attack on the Sakyans. The progress Krishna made just about paralleled that of Vasabha and Kesini. He had acquired the skill in the past whereas the others never had, but he now had a lot of layers of resultant karma to deal with, far more than when he had been a child in the garden in Ujjeni with Dusaka and Tingri. Bad memories could easily pop up – of Kitagiri, of Devadatta and Matanga, of his dubious friend Surama who seemed to have vanished these days. There were the images of the journey with the Master to Sakya, and Krishna's perceived causing of untold misery in the destruction of the Sakyans and the Kosalan army too – there was a lot to let go of. Not to mention the old scar of having lost the beloved baby of Maggot and himself, and how that heedless act still left an ache in his heart; despite having now been reunited with Tambaka, the love of his life had been lost to him – there *was* a lot to let go of.

Nevertheless, his faithful mentor Dusaka did not seem to have wearied of the task of helping him, and this great wise being kept repeating: 'Let go of the past; learn from your mistakes, acknowledge them, and endeavour to do better in the present and on into the future. Don't create the future, with plans and hopes and worries. And don't fill up the present with thoughts about yourself. We don't need to get too excited about our own story – I haven't told you a hundredth or, come to think of it, a thousandth part of *my* story yet.'

The Moons went by as they each developed their skills in seeing the beings of other worlds. When Khujjuttara was around she regularly chimed in with comments of 'Oi'm too ol' for this lark. It don't interest me much either – visible world, invisible world, it's still jes' the world, eh?'

Finally the day came when Krishna could see the deva friends who had come with Dusaka and Tingri. 'Bee! Ant! And Gumbiya, you are so huge – I keep forgetting. And Ninka... and you must be...' he went very quiet.

'I am Ambaka – in past days I lived as your sister Amba, then as Samavati who burned. Then as Harita who became Matanga, your daughter by Sugandha of Kulluta, and now I'm here again. I'm newly...' she was not sure how to phrase it, she had not been born like a girl, or hatched like a kinnari, '... arrived. I reappeared in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three a short while ago. I'm still getting used to

everything.' She looked to Bee and Ant appreciatively, for all the help they and Ninka had given in aiding her to find her feet and her flight in this new life.

As Krishna took in who this beautiful golden deva was, now that he was able to see her at last – not only Amba and Samavati of forty or fifty years ago, but Matanga at the Jetavana, who had visited here so often and whom he had befriended at the well when she became besotted with Ananda – a wave of grief and regret surged up in him.

'Matanga – I caused your death! You were murdered because of me, because of some stupid plot to discredit the Master that I was too blind to see. And you were my daughter. You saw what was happening and you walked to your death willingly; if I had had half your wits I would have seen it and stopped it, I promise,' he choked up and felt his eyes filling. 'And you were Amba, Samavati too!? I failed to save you then as well.'

To his surprise Ambaka seemed to glow with pride at the reminders of her deaths.

'Well, it has ended happily enough,' she spread her arms and blazed with even more radiance than before – she shone like the sun. 'No blame! Brother, father, friend! No blame!'

Such was the intensity of her kindness it was impossible for Krishna to stay sad. He found his dark grief and self-reproach being drenched in the pure light of Ambaka's warmth and compassion. Now he smiled too.

* * *

When Dusaka and Tingri went over to the Eastern Gate Monastery, they were still glowing with the flush of success in the way they had finally enabled Krishna to overcome his obstacles and to be reunited with his companions of old. It had been more than thirty turns of the human year since he had last seen a deva of any kind.

Vasabha's abilities had been gaining strength too. Bee and Ant and the others came along with Dusaka, also beaming and brimming with the energy of being reunited with Krishna after so long. They had seen him, of course, many times, but until this day it had all been one way. Copious tears of joy had been shed and fragments of each other's stories had abounded; they talked across each other and gleefully interrupted to tell their tales a different way or plug in a missing tidbit. Krishna expressed regret again and again, apologizing for his repeated and unconscionably stupid choices but, again and again he was met with compassion and forgiveness from his dear companions.

The group had left him when Tingri pointedly yipped and sniffed, and Dusaka announced, 'Let's go and see how Vasabha is doing.'

They arrived to find Vasabha and Kesini at the base of their kuti, on some mats with Maggot very close by, face-to-face with her daughter. Singing old kinnari

songs and lullabies in an attempt to break through the walls of fog and non-reception.

Dusaka and Tingri made themselves at home, as usual. The other companions gathered round and almost automatically joined in the songs with Maggot.

Vasabha told Dusaka that she was frustrated at not being able to properly see or hear, and this aggravated the sense of blockage. 'I'm not a patient person!'

'Yes!' Dusaka chuckled, 'that's how it is and you've always been this way. You've got to try not to try. Play at being nonchalant. Trick yourself into being focused *and* totally relaxed. Not preoccupied or wanting anything at all – even unconsciously.'

The songs meandered on, with all parties at least semi-consciously wishing for a break in the haziness for her. Slowly an idea formed in Gumbiya's mind, informed by some of his military training. He gently blew up his size to full battle-yakkha mode and innocently drifted behind Vasabha and Kesini, as if a bit distracted and not drawing attention to himself, while all were focused on Vasabha and Kesini. Just when there was an almost soporific lull, the music having soothed the senses to quietude, he clapped his huge hands together and **CRACK!** The sound exploded through the trees and all the friends gathered there rose several hand-spans into the air, Tingri and Dusaka included. Those who could fly kept rising even more.

Vasabha spun around. 'What was that?'

'I,' Kesini whipped her head to look too, "I'm not sure, it..." she turned to face the front again and that distraction had done the trick. 'Oh my...'

Vasabha turned back also and there, those eyes that she had met for the briefest of instants, the face that had at first only been a fleeting phantasmal impression, beamed with a full teary smile. 'It's you! I can see you and...'

'I think you can hear and feel us too,' Maggot wrapped herself around her child.

Vasabha could indeed. The levitation-inducing clap from Gumbiya had succeeded where gentler means had not. Vasabha enfolded Maggot in her arms as well and burst out laughing and crying at the same time. 'I can't believe it! So long I've waited. I know your smell! *That's* what I knew the echo of but could never find. It was you – mother. Oh, I'm so happy to be able to say that.' The tears came thick and fast now. Maggot sobbing too. Kesini, meanwhile, was gobsmacked at the whole experience. All she could say was, 'My heavens!' then hearing herself she added, '*Real* heavens and heavenly beings!'

After a while Maggot held Vasabha at arm's length and looked closely into her face. 'You are so much older than me!'

'Yes! How is that?' laughing through her tears, Vasabha was indeed curious. 'I'm about thirty-eight Rains, give or take, you look like you're fifteen. How is that?'

'It may look that way but, by human reckoning, I'm one hundred and seventy Rains. We kinnari live to about one thousand, by your reckoning, so me and Bee and Ant are relatively young, by our standards. I'm the old lady of us three, Bee is the

youngest at one hundred and fifty-three and Ant is in the middle at, I think one hundred and fifty-eight, give or take.'

Vasabha shook her head, as if that would make the concept of a mother who was one hundred and seventy, but who looked twenty years younger than herself, easier to digest.

'Time is a strange quality,' Dusaka offered, to which Tingri barked an agreement.

Once the intensity of their first meeting had peaked, the conversations began. There was a flood of questions from Vasabha about what had happened in their search and, in turn, there were half-a-dozen stories ready to be told simultaneously. Vasabha had heard some of the accounts via Dusaka but it was completely different to hear it all from her mother and her companions in the search. They explained that a brother and sister apsara couple had helped them too but that they had returned to their home in the Heaven of the Four Guardians a while ago.

After the tale of the great search had been completed, with account of those whom they met along the way, Maggot asked in turn how it had been for Vasabha with the tragedy of Vidudabha's brief and ill-starred reign, his war on Sakya and his own consequent destruction. She had been in the room for much of Vasabha's grief and regret but she had not been able to talk or console her.

Vasabha went quiet, 'I feel my child, your grandson, was born under a bad sign. Since his birth a shadow of conceit and selfishness clung to him. All good influences we tried to bring to bear, he had no sympathy for. On account of this I found it hard to love him, which pained me greatly too – there was an *otherness* to him, even as a babe, that I do not feel in relation to you, despite our just having met. I *know* you; my son has always been a stranger to me.' She breathed deeply and sighed.

'He seemed cursed by evil counsel, but whence that came, who can say? He was surrounded by teachers and mentors who were good-hearted, noble people but perhaps that evil counsel came from within. I know not.'

'Well said,' Dusaka joined in. 'I would have described it that way myself. Sometimes the Lord of Lies exercises all of his capacity to inflate the defilements of mind in an individual. And when such a one is an intelligent and rich crown prince, the field of opportunity for the Evil One is fertile indeed: conceit, views and opinions, doubts, dullness and restlessness, moral shamelessness, combined with greed, hatred and delusion, all of these are empowered to grow to fruition if there's a lack of awareness in the mix.

'Your child, grandchild, was cursed with superiority of birth and fortune. Maybe he will learn lessons in lives to come that will help him find peace and fulfilment, so that he can put his great capacities to work in better ways. We shall see.'

* * *

Maggot was a new being, now able to spend so much time with her daughter after having been parted from her for so long, in both human and heavenly time-spans. Her days were joyous but an anxious shadow lingered in the sidelines as she had not been to see Krishna for a long time and Dusaka had assured her, and the others, that Krishna had been making as much progress as Vasabha and Kesini had. Almost on account of that progress, Maggot was reticent to go to the Jetavana.

The day soon came when they heard that the Master was to offer a teaching in the evening and Vasabha deliberately suggested that they all go over in the day, to spend time at the Jetavana and to find good places to sit in the Dhamma Hall for the talk. Maggot gave her a momentary imploring look. Her daughter knew exactly what the silent message meant.

‘I have been close to Krishna for ten years or more now. He’s not the same person that you lived with. He was a good father to me, as far as that was possible with my covert life, and a solid spiritual advisor. You have seen him – he’s a grey-haired Elder now. He’s been a monk for nearly forty years – he’s a changed man. He still makes mistakes – that hasn’t changed! But you *should* see him, please; for me if not for you.’

Maggot had no riposte for this so they all agreed to go that day. A large group of nuns from the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery, led by the Elder, Sister Khema, plus Vasabha and Kesini, and Dusaka and Tingri, made the short walk to the Jetavana in the late afternoon.

As they followed the broad track, Maggot asked Dusaka, ‘Will he be able to see me?’ Half-hoping that there was some possibility that the meeting wouldn’t happen. ‘Oh, I think so,’ Dusaka sounded confident, ‘but you never know. Everything is always uncertain. Let’s see what we find there.’

The large group settled themselves in various parts of the Dhamma Hall and sat in meditation for a while. Maggot found it hard to settle, her eye darting to one side of the open-walled hall or the other. Every ochre robe she saw arriving along the forest paths she stared at for a moment; anticipatory tension building within her.

Moments before the Master himself arrived Krishna appeared with Ananda and readied the teaching seat, checking to see there was water to drink and a palm-leaf fan, in case he needed to be offered a cool breeze should the evening stay hot. Krishna sat close to the Master and, to her disappointment, Maggot’s head was so filled with scripting the upcoming conversation, she swore she did not really take in a single word that the Master had said during the entire evening. She only realized that distraction when the Master concluded the teaching by saying, ‘*Evam* – thus it is.’

As the assembly broke up, Dusaka and the companions settled in their familiar spot on the north side of the hall, under the eaves. Vasabha and Kesini were there, as well as Bee and Gumbiya (still basking in the impressively positive result of the great hand clap), Ant and Ninka, Ambaka and, of course, Tingri. Gumbiya was wondering if Krishna would need a levitational clap too but, as Dusaka led him over and offered him a place on the mat, he looked about him with a broad grin, ‘Good to

see you all again,' he made *añjali* towards Ant and Ninka, Bee and Gumbiya, smiling broadly and nodding his greying head – shining in the moonlight in strong contrast to his inky skin.

His eyes met Maggot's and his breath caught. 'I... er' was all he could manage at first. He too knew that this deeply awkward moment was going to come at some point. He too had found his mind racing and rehearsing – to no avail as now, both of them looked down at the mats in silence. Vasabha made a glance around the circle.

'I fink I'll take a wander. See if any o' my mates came for the talk too,' Gumbiya broke the ice. In short order the rest of the group departed except for Krishna, Vasabha and Maggot.

'I... I'm so happy to see you. It's been nearly forty Rains for me... You're so beautiful still, and I've become an old man.'

'I didn't think monks were supposed to say that sort of thing,' Maggot half-quipped.

'Well, you know I come from the "Bad Monk" lineage.' He glanced up at Dusaka, sitting a short distance away and chatting, apparently, with Tingri in their own language.

'I'm so sorry...' Krishna began to weep, at first gently and then in great bouts. 'I'm so very sorry. How could I have been so foolish, selfish? Our child grew up and we weren't there for her. She was raised by strangers in a strange place. We... I...' He lost his voice in tears again.

Maggot was experiencing a flood of swirling emotions as she received all this. The desire to forgive and the inability to forgive were there in equal measure. She reached out and wrapped her arms round him.

'You shouldn't really be doing that,' Krishna half-quipped in turn.

'It's my prerogative,' Maggot chuckled, 'I don't have the same rules as you.'

Vasabha smiled, her heart warmed to its core by this seeming mutual love and forgiveness. This was just what she had been hoping for.

Ambaka, meanwhile, had been politely waiting at a distance, watching the dynamics and waiting for her moment. Up until now, on account of wanting to allow Maggot the fullest opportunity to reconnect with her daughter, and vice versa, she had held back from introducing herself to Vasabha. The others had agreed that this was very kind and thoughtful of her. Now that she thought about it, all her intuitions said this would be the best moment – all of them, who had been so close in different lives – could come together again. She floated over to the mat and settled between Krishna and Vasabha. At first Maggot was wondering if she should make the introductions as this new golden deva had never been seen before by Vasabha, although she had been able to be seen by Krishna for a while. Maggot was about to speak, then paused.

Ambaka was looking meaningfully into the faces of Krishna and Vasabha, back and forth, as if contemplating making some powerful statement. Vasabha was wondering who this radiant, golden being could be who had joined them on her own initiative and who seemed to be acting as if she knew them. Instead of some

profound utterance, to their mutual surprise she began to chant an old playground rhyme – one that had been adapted to their family in Ujjeni:

*'Amba, Tamba, Krishna too,
The one who will be He, is YOU.'*

Ambaka smiled genially. 'That's the last time we were all close together. Do you remember?'

Faint echoes reverberated through both Vasabha and Krishna. She recalled it all before Krishna did. The image of playing He in the rain, lifetimes ago; it shot into vivid memory.

'Amba, is that you?'

Ambaka's smile broadened visibly. '*Amba,*' she pointed to herself, '*Tamba,*' she pointed to Vasabha, '*Krishna too...* It was more than fifty Rains ago, by how old Krishna now looks. But that's when we were last all together, playing off-ground-He in the rain, before our mothers argued and *we* had to leave,' she indicated Vasabha. Waves of recollection washed over Vasabha and Krishna. He had forgotten that that game in the monsoon-burst was the last time they had been united as a family.

Ambaka was pleased with the impact she had made. Maggot had released Krishna from her hug by now so Bee and Ant, Ninka and Gumby all gathered in close as well.

Dusaka heaved himself to his feet, ambling over to join them. Kesini and Tingri were the last to sit with the group.

Krishna looked all around him. 'I can't believe it. Here we all are, after so many troubles, so many lifetimes lived. My sisters, my children, my friends, my...' he paused, 'my beloved whom I hurt so much – here we all are.'

'Not all,' Dusaka added, always ready to give the final word. The group looked perplexed. 'Khujjuttara's not here. And I don't think she will be with us at all for much longer. We should go to see her.'

* * *

Ever since Matanga was so cruelly killed, the great lay disciple Visakha had taken it upon herself to organize physical support for Khujjuttara. Dusaka was prone to coming and picking her up, to wheel her in her cart to the Jetavana, to the palace or to the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery to see Vasabha, and when she was with him all her comforts were taken care of, but on a day-to-day level the increasing needs she had required some fit and youthful women to help.

When the group reached her little cabin they were surprised to see not one or two but a whole crowd of the folk from the village who had been taking care of Khujjuttara. Their faces looked grave as they turned to meet the newcomers.

Khujjuttara had long since eschewed the stairs to the upper storey and had set up residence at the kuti's base, between the stilts of the building. She was lying on a low, broad platform with the seven or eight helpers gathered around.

Dusaka stepped up and cheerily announced, 'More company for you to make small-talk with!' She smiled, her deeply wrinkled face now looking far older than his; white skimpy strands of hair lay unbraided on her shoulders.

'Ah,' she wheezed, 'my charioteer. Would you be so kind as to prepare the vehicle? I have one more journey to make.' She thought for a moment then corrected herself. 'I suppose that should technically be "two" but one is related to physical location and the other is not.' She was still mentally as sharp as an arrow, despite being some ninety-five Rains in age.

'As you wish, Milady.' Dusaka rose to the request with a wry wrinkle to his expression. The villagers seemed concerned about their aged charge making any movement, Lady Visakha having pressed upon them the special and sacred duty they had in looking after the wizened sage. Despite that caution, Dusaka exercised his way of causing everyone to comfortably adapt to his wishes. He brought the cart up to the side of the sleeping platform, arranged a few mats and cushions, and the village women, aided by Vasabha and Kesini who had joined them that day, carefully lifted her in, each of the villagers now convinced that Lady Visakha would be very happy with this arrangement on this occasion.

Dusaka gently wheeled her forwards with Tingri at the vanguard, paws set upon the front bulwark of the cart, following the well-worn path into the eastern entrance of the Jetavana.

* * *

The Master seemed to have been waiting for them, which should have been no surprise. He received them on the verandah of the Gandha-kuti; his own dwelling, which was a rare honour.

'Venerable Sir,' Khujjuttara began, 'do forgive my not rising and bowing but my lifeless limbs have joined my bent back in refusing to cooperate with my wishes.'

'Noble lady,' please be at ease; for what reason would you pay honour to this unattractive collection of parts that are called the Tathagata's body?'

'It's a long time since I've seen y', Master; I've not bin fit enough to come.'

'Why do you feel the need to see this body? One who sees the Dharma, sees me; one who sees me sees the Dharma.'

Following this the Master expounded the teaching on not-self. He asked the question: 'If the body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts and sense-consciousness are subject to change, and to states of affliction, is it appropriate to say of those aspects of body and mind: "This is mine; this is what I am; this is my true self"?''

Khujjuttara's answer was soft and breathless: 'No, Venerable Sir.'

'And so,' the Master continued, 'Khujjuttara, whatever aspect of the body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts and sense-consciousness there may be, past, present

or future, internal or external, far or near, gross or subtle, all aspects of body and mind should rightly be considered thus: “This is not mine; this is not what I am; this is not my true self”.

‘Seeing in this way, Khujjuttara, the wise noble disciple becomes dispassionate towards the body, feelings, perceptions, thoughts and sense-consciousness. With such dispassion, such coolness of heart, there comes liberation. The heart knows: “It is liberated”. What needed to be done in terms of spiritual work has been done. All dissatisfaction has now ended.’

These were the words of the Master, the Blessed One. As he finished this discourse, on the word ‘ended’, Khujjuttara smiled, breathed out and did not breathe in again.

The group sat quietly around her now lifeless form. The deva companions, Dusaka, Vasabha, Kesini, the village women and Tingri too, all felt uniquely blessed to have been present at this passing of a Great Being.

The Master declared, ‘This great and noble one reached the state of non-returner before her death. Accordingly, she has already reappeared in the Aviha Brahma World. She realized Arahantship even before she reappeared there – this rare accomplishment is called “enlightenment in the interval” – so she will live out the life of a brahma deity, which in that Realm is one thousand *kalpas*, and live as an Arahant throughout that time. Great was her wisdom and virtue. She was foremost amongst my female lay disciples possessed of extensive knowledge.’

* * *

A few days later, after the grand cremation ceremony that the Master officiated at, there was a small gathering of the friends in their regular spot on the north side of the hall. Krishna and Dusaka were there, with Vasabha, Kesini, Maggot and Ambaka. Bee and Gumbiya, Ant and Ninka had set off for their various homes, now that parents and child had all been reunited, as well as brother and sisters who were also father and daughters.

Krishna, his expression sober, looked for a moment to Dusaka. He raised an eyebrow and Tingri snorted, so Krishna began. ‘It is wonderful that we have all had the chance to come together during these times, despite all the trials and challenges along the many roads we have each taken, or found ourselves on. I have made many mistakes but, somehow, miraculously, Vasabha has found a home at the Eastern Gate Monastery, with dear Kesini; Ambaka is a bright and beautiful deva of the Tavatimsa Heaven; and Maggot has learned how to move with ease through all realms – although I don’t know how she developed that ability.’

Dusaka interrupted, ‘Such a skill comes from honesty. Our Maggot never deceives others and she doesn’t deceive herself, this is the source of her great power and also why the meaning of the Bodhisattva Maitreya’s words were so clear to her, and how to understand them in order to find Tambaka, our Vasabha.’

He nodded to Krishna, indicating that he could continue, if he wished. Krishna ploughed on with his speech.

'I have made terrible mistakes, repeatedly, but I'm profoundly glad that, after all my mistakes, Maggot can spend as much time as she likes with our dear daughter Vasabha, or maybe we should call you Tambaka, again. It was deeply moving to meet up, after so many Rains and, even though we have shared a moment of great closeness once again, I don't want to force Maggot to forgive me and be near me if that is not in her heart to do so.'

'I wish to forgive you in my head, in my mind, but I can't in my heart... thus far; but I can be patient with my inability to forgive.' Maggot spoke sincerely and quietly. Dusaka nodded his approval, 'See – perfectly honest, even though it might sound harsh or unsympathetic,' he was looking at Krishna as he said this, as if to indicate: 'Take note.'

'I have felt that was so,' Krishna replied. 'So I will leave you to your new lives together. Like the Bodhisattva Gotama did when he had fallen in love with the queen who was his pupil; once he had seen the error of his ways he took leave of those who loved him and went to the mountains.' All gathered there were still, listening closely.

'I will go to the Himavant, with my great mentor and guide Dusaka, and I will reside there in solitude, endeavouring to learn from my mistakes. We will take our leave in the morning.'

It was a dramatic ending – even a bit melodramatic – which Tingri lightened with an indignant 'Yip!' The indication being that it was actually the *three* of them going off to the forest and the mountains, and not just two – it was irritating how the four-legged and the small were continually overlooked.

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CHAPTER 25:

LONE WANDERINGS



lose to the city of Savatthi it may have been, but the world inside the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery was a place apart.

Vasabha and Kesini settled into their new life feeling a strange buoyancy and delight, not despite but rather because of their changed circumstances. The loss of status, from Queen to new and junior lay woman, from King's Mother to monastery helper, was a massive relief to Vasabha, in contrast to what some around her expected. The nuns, novices and other lay helpers, and aspirants to the monastic life, were steadily impressed, as the days and Moons went by, that Vasabha and her one-handed companion were cheerfully ready to be part of the community in a heartfelt way and were happy to pick up any chores and tasks asked of them, sometimes even the grubbier the better.

The great joy they both experienced was from two sources. Firstly, the bliss of not having to pretend anything to anyone, even to the extent of mentioning that Vasabha was prone to smelling fragrant not because she was wearing perfume and thereby breaking one of the Precepts, but because her mother was a kinnari. She wore this attribute quite casually and, when some doubted it, she was grateful that the Arahant, Sister Uppalavanna, assured others that this was no new deception of Vasabha but was the reality. She could know this directly by being able to see Maggot and Ambaka often around Vasabha and Kesini, and the great Elder had regularly chatted with them herself as well.

Kesini was also quite open about the absence of her hand and, in a similar vein, she would sometimes jokingly mention that the cause of its loss was the very friend she had been serving for the last twenty years, since it was Magandiya that had set the plan for the burning of the seraglio in place, and that this had been Vasabha in an existence a lifetime or two previously. Accordingly, Vasabha might blush or look sheepish at the reminder but Kesini's bold good humour was clearly sincere around such memories – she had no hard feelings, resentments concerning the condition she had been living with all these years. She would often say on this, 'Being one-handed makes you mindful and sharpens your wits. You have to think things through and take nothing for granted, and it also reminds you that life is very uncertain and undependable. You should try it sometime!' She would chuckle.

The second reason for Vasabha's great contentment was that, at last, after a lifetime of not having known of, let alone met, her real mother at last they were together. There had been a little less time, subjectively, for Maggot in the length of separation – it had not been the nearly forty sun-turnings as it had been for Vasabha – but the time-warped imprisonment by the Queen of the Underworld had been heart wrenching in its apparent endlessness, so, added to the other time spent on the

search, the feeling of separation was quite similar – it had felt like five hundred Moons to her.

Vasabha – who now easily answered to ‘Tam’ or ‘Tambaka’ from her mother – felt a profound sense of homecoming, of a warmth and security she had never known in Kapilavatthu. Her family there had been close and friendly enough. Her adoptive parents and sisters and brothers were all good-hearted and kind – although she had never been told that she had been adopted – however, the daily demands, the ceaseless round of duties day after day, had pushed the family world into the background. Once in a while, as a child, in the rare moments of quiet, she would smell something or imagine or remember a strange fragrance, or a sound would cause echoes in her heart, and she would feel a gap, an ache, an unnameable something that was missing amid the closeness of her mother, Nagamundi, and the others. Now that *something* had been found. The smell, the sounds, the taste of her mother’s breath, that indescribable flow of floral delight that came from her kinnari mother’s heart, all reached into her being and said, ‘Home!’

The presence too of the deva Ambaka, whom she and Kesini could now see and hear easily, was a similar boost for both of them. Ambaka too carried no grudge about how Vasabha had, in their former lives, been the cause of her death by fire. Like Kesini she forgave her in a full and sincere way and, as her former maidservant and friend did, she looked gratefully upon the profound lessons she had learned in enduring that conflagration with an open and peaceful heart. In addition, she rejoiced in the teaching that, she now learned from Khujjuttara, the Master had given when he received the news about the deaths of Queen Samavati and her women of the court:

*‘Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless
Heedlessness is the path to Death
The mindful never die
The heedless are as if dead already.’*

Kesini had lived her life in the role of helper and friend. She had been the practical and able companion and support to three great women, as she held them: the sage Gavinna, Queen Samavati in Kosambi and Queen Vasabha in Savatthi; now, after these many twists and turns, as she reached her later years, she was able to be again with these two – who had happened to have been sisters before and half-sisters more recently – and she was able to live closely here in the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery with them. It was almost too good to be true, still, here they all were day after day. She loved their lives amid the shady trees of the monastery, hearing the sounds of crickets at night and the forest chickens by day, the calls of kukals and the barking guttural clicks of geckos, while the hubbub of the city, with its worldly values and intrigues, carried on as a faint murmur in the background. The community of women monastics and the lay-folk of the monastery were slowly becoming their new family. Life was good and peaceful at last.

Krishna had been led by Dusaka into the area of the Gandha-kuti, early the morning after his conversation with Maggot and the others. It came as no surprise to him that, instead of being out on alms-round at dawn, as was his custom, the Master had been waiting for them on the verandah of the kuti. They had brought their travelling gear with them; their robes and bowls were packed and they both bore walking staffs, instead of just Dusaka, as was the norm. Tingri had a sprightly air about her, perked and eager, which was not always the case in the early morning.

The Master, with Ananda sitting close by, welcomed them and indicated the mats on the space in front of him. They all paid their respects and Krishna began.

‘Venerable Master, Blessed One, I have troubled you, other members of the Sangha and many lay-folk over the years. Despite all this I remain sincerely faithful to your teachings, so kindly imparted to me. I am still reeling from the destruction of so many thousands of your clan, your family, as well as the flower of Kosalan youth and nobility that subsequently perished too. I know you have given me reassurances and offered all forgiveness for any part I unwittingly, foolishly had in those tragedies but still, the heart aches.’ He paused as those familiar waves of regret and remorse washed through him.

‘I wish to go into the wilderness alone, or at least with my treasured and respected mentor and friend Dusaka, and Tingri,’ he smiled down at the dog beside him, her head on Dusaka’s knee. ‘It amazes me he still has the patience to guide me, even now when I almost have more white hair on my head than he does.’ Krishna glanced over to his wrinkled and dreadlocked mentor, who still appeared the same age as he was when he had arrived at their gate in Ujjeni fifty Rains ago. It was a mystery how Tingri seemed the same age too but he had long since abandoned any idea of figuring out how the pair of them achieved this.

‘We are intending to wander into the north, to spend time in seclusion in the Himavant, so we seek your blessing and any advice you may wish to offer before we go.’

‘Krishna, you have been my disciple for forty Rains, first as a novice, then as a bhikkhu. You have indeed strayed from the Path in the past.’ He paused as if reviewing Krishna’s involvement with Kitagiri, Devadatta and then Kapilavatthu in his history. ‘We all make mistakes and part of the Path is that of acknowledging them and learning from them, as I have said to you before.

‘It is wise of you to travel with the Great Being Dusaka. He can keep you under his wing and help you not to get into trouble again but, I declare to you, you are indeed capable of learning, Krishna, so one day you should be ready to take leave of the guidance of Dusaka too.’

Krishna’s heart leapt at the words; such a categorical statement by the Buddha, he knew, was evidence of an immutable fact in the universe. ‘I *can* learn! He said that! I *can*!’ While he was distracted by this excited internal flush the Master paused again, waiting for Krishna’s full attention to refocus.

‘You say you seek solitude but, necessarily, you will encounter villagers and other travellers, groups of people here and there. Do you feel ready to share the Dharma teachings in a way that respects the traditions and understanding of the Tathagata? You will not always be able to defer to the Mahasattva.

‘One who is invited to share reflections on the Dharma in an assembly should not tremble when they arrive, even in the midst of a field of fierce debaters; one should not miss things out, out of fear to speak, thus concealing one’s true message; one should speak without wavering, without hesitation, or prevarication when asked a question – if you can meet these various standards you are one who is worthy to represent the Dharma-Vinaya in assemblies. Do you feel you can embody these qualities, when needed?’

To his surprise, before he could think too much, Krishna heard himself say, ‘Yes, now after so much guidance from you, Blessed One, I can, I feel I can.’

The Master smiled. ‘In addition, one final point, if some *samana* or brahmin asks you, “When an Arahant passes away, what happens to them with the breakup of the body, after death?” – being asked thus, how would you answer?’

‘If they were to ask me this, Venerable Master, I would answer in this way: “Material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations such as thoughts and emotions, and sense-consciousness are all impermanent; that which is impermanent is subject to affliction and is therefore unsatisfactory; what is unsatisfactory has ceased and passed away.” Being asked thus, Venerable Master, that is how I would reply.’

‘Good, good, Krishna.’ The Master’s smile blessed him again and his affirmation warmed Krishna’s heart even more. The Master added, ‘Formerly, Krishna, and also now, I just describe unsatisfactoriness, suffering, and the cessation of such suffering. You have my approval for your journey and I offer you encouragement for your ongoing spiritual endeavours. If you persist in your efforts, eventually you will reach the end of the Path to Enlightenment.’

Krishna was deeply pleased to have his understanding confirmed and to have received the blessing, the agreement of the Master for his seclusion in the great forest beneath the Himalayan mountains, the abode of sages and the location of so many tales of spiritual struggles and holy people, not to mention the prediction of his eventual enlightenmen! He was lost in his thoughts and hardly noticed that the Master and Dusaka, and occasionally Tingri, were speaking quietly for quite some time. Krishna could not pick up what was being said, in spite of them sitting quite close by, for reasons unknown and unknowable to him.

Dusaka at last gave him a nod. ‘Time to go.’ Krishna emerged from his reverie, they bowed to the Master and to Ananda, and took their leave.

As they walked out of the gate of the Jetavana Krishna remarked, ‘You know, it’s strange. I keep meaning to ask the Master about the mangala, the protection against death. I still carry the amulet you gave me, which has preserved me through a few scrapes, as you know, but my interpretations of it, meaning firstly, to live indulgently – assuming “Sooner! More!” meant “consume every experience you can

and as soon as possible too". Then going to the other extreme and assuming it meant self-denial, "The sooner you give up things and the more you give up, the better!" – both of these were, I learnt, truly misguided, but when I meet the Master I keep forgetting to ask what it was that the sage Gavinna meant. That prophecy was clearly relating to me:

*"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."*

'And she said it had been written in flame by the Eternal Youth, Sanat Kumara himself so... so why do I keep forgetting to ask him?'

While Krishna posed this question to Dusaka he failed to notice that he was now neglecting to ask Dusaka too. Tingri sniffed and yipped in her way that served as her version of a wry smile and a chuckle.

* * *

When Sariputta and Moggallana had left with the majority of Devadatta's new disciples, he had become so enraged and frustrated that he had burst some vessels in his throat and coughed up blood in his fury. It had started as an emotional reaction but it was, from that time, the beginning of a chronic illness too. The sickness continued for many Moons, with losses of blood and increasing weakness. Over and over, being confined to a resting, immobile state, Devadatta was caused to look back over his life and reflect, since although his body was debilitated his mind was ever active.

He reviewed his childhood and the sense of competition that there had been with his cousin from his earliest memories – Siddhartha had always been the favourite: more handsome, better behaved, cleverer, more athletic, more thoughtful of other's needs – from the first, it had been sickening.

As he went over these memories there began to dawn, along with the litany of perceived slights, a sense of, 'His goodness, his excellence is only a source of grief because it made me feel inferior. Not everyone can be the best – that's how nature works – one lion is the strongest, one hawk is the fastest – and, in all those years, even when we were little children, did he ever gloat over me? Did he ever flaunt a victory or rejoice in making me look bad?' His mind searched and, even though it was so used to finding fault and resenting, he could not find anything. This, in his weakened state, made it easier for the insight to float to the surface that, 'All the conflict or tension there has ever been has only come from one place, *my* mind, *my* jealous heart. He really has done right by me, at every turn. Even when he called me "a gob of phlegm" in front of the whole community, his pointed words were, in truth, a perfect match for the rude, ungrateful and selfish place that my suggestion I

lead the Order had come from. He has not cherished so much as a hair's tip of hatred towards me. And, in very truth, towards the murderer Devadatta, the robber Angulimala, the mad elephant Nalagiri, he has manifested the same love as he has for his son Rahula.'

Devadatta was surprised at how clearly now he saw his faults and his succession of errors of judgement. Finally, able to endure no longer the pangs of remorse, he called his few disciples to his abiding place beneath the trees of the forest at Gayasisa.

'My friends, disciples, faithful companions – Katamoraka, Khandadevi-putta, Surama – I have decided, now that my life appears to be ebbing away, that I should make peace with my esteemed and worthy teacher, my brother-in-law, my cousin, my partner in this troubled journey of our lives, Lord Buddha Gotama. Please make preparations for the journey to the Jetavana. I believe I will need to be carried as my limbs will not be able to bear me so far. I can barely walk to the bathing place here in the forest, let alone the many leagues to Kosala.'

The three Elders shot shocked and confused, aggrieved looks at each other. After so many years of incessant fault-finding and negativity how could their teacher's view have changed so much? They each spoke with him, there and then, to ascertain whether he really meant what he said, in full awareness, or whether this was the fevers talking and that his mind would change to an opposite view in a few hours or days.

After some time, when the day had passed and all of them had spoken with him, they clustered together in their own part of the monastery area and discussed, with furrowed brows, what they should do.

'I'm amazed, to be frank,' said Katamoraka, 'it's quite the about-face, but he seems clearly set on it.'

'We're all surprised,' Khandadevi-putta was scowling, 'and it feels almost disrespectful toward the principles we've followed since, well, way back... but...'

'But it's what our master wants,' Surama filled in. 'As good disciples we should listen and respect his wishes and, as we've all seen today, the message is consistent. He's not wandering in his head, he knows what he's saying and he has said it repeatedly. So, I feel the only choice we have is to organize the journey and it should begin as soon as possible.'

* * *

The grumbles continued for a little while, Khandadevi-putta even at one point striding back through the forest to speak to Devadatta again, rousing him from his sleep to say, in great agitation, 'When you enjoyed good health, you constantly maintained enmity towards the Teacher; we will *not* lead you to him now!'

The weary, sad look in Devadatta's eyes, the yearning in his voice, dissolved the indignation in his student. With words wreathed in sorrow and sincerity, Devadatta said, "'Do not destroy me. I have indeed nursed a hatred towards the

Teacher but he never returned that. He never cherished for a finger-snap even a shred of negativity towards me. I beg you,' his voice now weak, 'take me there, to him.'

The preparations thus began the next day, to create a litter on which to carry Devadatta. The group was small so the carrying duties fell to the three Elders and the couple of local lads who had been helping out with different tasks around the monastery area of the Gayasisa forest. By the next morning they were ready to set out.

Word spread quickly once the small party had crossed into Kosala and they had drawn near to Savatthi. When the news of Devadatta's approach was definite and not just a rumour, monks approached the Buddha, somewhat anxiously, to let him know, 'Venerable Master, we hear that Devadatta is on his way to see you.'

On receiving the news, the Master was quiet for a moment then gently said, 'He will not succeed in seeing me in this present existence.' The monks took this in, appreciating the gravity of the statement, that it was categorical, but still the agitated concern was in the air:— Hadn't Devadatta tried to kill the Master? Defame him? Hadn't he tried to cause a schism? There was a lot to worry about!

As the leagues passed under the feet of Devadatta's party, carrying him on a stretcher through the countryside, different monks kept coming to the Buddha to let him know, 'They are getting closer! What should we do?' To each and every one of the worried appeals the Master gave the same response, 'Let him do as he likes; he will never succeed in seeing me again.'

As the travelling group reached only a bow-shot from the Jetavana, just passing the nearby lotus-pond, the Master gave the same kind of response once more, 'Even if he enters the Jetavana, he will not succeed in seeing me,' for the Master knew, with his unerring inner vision, that the extent of Devadatta's hurtful actions against the person of the Tathagata made it intrinsically impossible for them to meet once more. According to the laws of nature, this could not happen; there was no chance. On account of Devadatta's past choices, the resultant karma could not be avoided. There was a poignancy in the voice of the Master when he made these pronouncements for he knew of the painful consequences that would be due for his maleficent and now repentant cousin.

The group bearing Devadatta – presuming that they would soon see the Master, as well as being weary and grimy from the road, decided to stop and bathe at the lotus pool within the boundary of the Jetavana. They set the litter down and prepared to help Devadatta join them to get cleaned up in the waters. However, as soon as Devadatta's feet met the ground they sank into the earth. He immediately realized that the karmic results of his various heinous acts – shedding the Buddha's blood when a splinter of rock from the boulder he had pushed broke off and cut the Master's foot, and having deliberately split the Sangha in a schism – was now ripening. His body sank lower and lower as his followers stood frozen in horror around him, all, that is, save Surama, at the back, whose face was wearing a smile of

deep satisfaction. Devadatta's eyes blazed with fear, like a trapped animal awaiting the hunter, as he slid lower and lower.

Just before his jaw reached the ground, however, a shift of light appeared in his eyes, something moved within him. His expression cleared, all fear vanished and he declared:

*'With these bones, with these last breaths
With all the energy of my being,
I go for refuge to the Buddha,
Foremost among humans,
God of gods, trainer of those who can be trained
All seeing, endowed with the auspicious marks
Of a hundred virtues.'*

His heart had opened at the close of his life.

With those final words his head was swallowed by the earth, which sealed itself off over him. The air was vibrantly still. Devadatta's monks and lay helpers were all in shock at this strange and terrible end of their teacher, all that is except Surama, who looked disconsolate and thoroughly disappointed.

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Several Moons had come and gone as Krishna, Dusaka and Tingri ambled their way through the countryside, ever northwards. Along the way, at Dusaka's prompting, Krishna had responded to a number of invitations to teach to groups of villagers or to answer questions of the farmers and travellers they met in open country.

It was good to be back on the road again, and, somewhat like the feelings of his daughter Vasabha, there was the joyfulness of not having to be anything for anyone, as well as not struggling to find his way so badly. He had Dusaka at his side and so something in him relaxed in a profound and tangible way, even though he realized he was still far from his goal of enlightenment. His bones were older now, soon he would be a man of sixty Rains, but his feet flew lightly over the forest paths, his nose was able to rejoice in the fragrances of the flowers Dusaka pointed out to him, his ears turned fondly to the rustlings of nocturnal creatures, the owls and crickets at night, and the calls and shrieks of monkeys and songbirds during the days.

They reached the vast forest of the Himavant and Dusaka took the lead – he appeared to know the territory extremely well although to Krishna it seemed a massive pathless mystery filled with vines and hidden streams, giant boulders and rocky crevices. Dusaka kept up a murmuring dialogue with Tingri, some of the time, but when they were climbing he compassionately paused their chats so that her

shorter legs and smaller lungs could more easily handle the terrain. Krishna followed behind and kept up as well as he could.

Day after day they traversed the invisible paths that Dusaka could discern so easily. His feet finally led them to a beautiful level glade, beside a rushing stream, with copious different fruit trees in the forest around them. For some of these the season was almost over and a few wrinkled or over-ripe fruits remained, some were trees burgeoning with colourful, appealing offerings; others were blossom-laden, entering their season and full of promise for the coming Moons.

Smooth rocks surrounded the clearing. Tingri and Dusaka homed in on what were their chosen spots to camp with practised eye.

‘You’ve been here before,’ Krishna surmised.

‘Oh yes,’ Dusaka replied. ‘See that scooped out rock where young Tingri has parked herself?’ Krishna could see the soft curves of the grey stone under the black and white shag of the dog’s coat. ‘That was flat on top the first time we came here.’

‘What?!’ Krishna was incredulous, his eyes popping open and his hands halting as he unpacked his gear for the camp. ‘Are you saying that that has been worn away just by Tingri sitting on it?’ She yipped, noting that she was being talked about as if she had not been there.

‘Well, not *just* her. There have been occasional foxes, wildcats, a rabbit or two, some martens and many three-striped palm squirrels, various snakes – popular when the rock’s warm but that’s seasonal. All that said, I’d reckon that nine parts in ten of the hollow were on account of Tingri. See, it’s just right for her, and she likes it warm too.’ She sniffed an agreement.

‘This one’s mine,’ Dusaka indicated the wide flattish slab where he was unpacking. Krishna realized that it had the distinct shape made by a cross-legged human form pressed into it, together with a smooth backrest conformed for someone just about Dusaka’s height. Krishna could see that it was worn quite smooth as well.

‘How old *are* you!?’ He couldn’t help asking. ‘Both of you? This isn’t the only place you stay, I know, so...’

‘Get unpacked, and find your spot, and I’ll tell you a story.’

* * *

Tingri was very comfortably ensconced on her spot, Krishna had found a soft patch of ground with a rock beside it at the perfect angle to ease his ageing back against, while he sat facing Dusaka. The grizzled sage placed his staff across his knees and over his shoulder, so he could lean and recite simultaneously. The forest went quiet around them and even the mosquitoes ceased to bite.

He began:

*‘Sing devas! And rejoice and wonder how
It was that, long ago, Goddess Nü-wa,
As she repaired the sky, melted she down
Vast quantities of rock, and this was on*

*'The Incredible Craggs of the mountains
Called Great Fable. She moulded the hot melt
Into thousands of great blocks but then, when
Her work was done, a single block remained.*

*'This poor lone stone lay all on its own at
The foot of the mountain, Greensickness Peak.
Since it had been goddess-moulded it was
Blessed with magical powers in full store.*

*'It could move at will and it could expand
Or shrink to any size it wanted to.
But there was sadness, shame and resentment
Since all the other blocks repaired the sky.*

*'This stone alone had been deemed unworthy
So its years were spent in lamentation.
But one day a being was seen coming
From afar – or was it two? – or perhaps*

*'It was two-in-one: a Taoist Elder,
Tousle-haired and limping, propped by a staff;
The other a Buddhist monk, bare-footed
And scabby-headed. Yet then there was one.*

*'By the time they/he reached this very stone
And set to talk, or contemplate aside,
The stone had shrunk itself to be the size
Of a precious jade fan pendant. The eye*

*'Of the visitor fell soon upon it
"Aha, I see you're full of magicals!
But you're smooth, with nowt to recommend you
I shall thus undertake to inscribe you*

*'With some words so that anyone you meet
Will know you are indeed something special.
After that I shall take you to a place,
A brilliant, successful, poetic,*

*'Cultivated, aristocratical,
Elegant, delectable, opulent,*

*Luxurious locality on a
Little trip." The stone was quite delighted.*

*"What words will you cut? Where will we go to?"
"Do not ask," I replied, for it was I,
"You will know soon enough when the time comes."
The story I inscribed upon the jade*

*'Is your tale too and one yet to be made.
So this is how it was that I appeared
Or at least encroached upon your story
The tale of Precious Jade is close to yours*

*'For he too has two girls he is tied to
One with hearty smiles, one a debt of tears,
The Crimson Pearl-Flower whom he brought to life,
And while their story, your story, began*

*'In ages long gone by, in truth that tale
Has yet to happen, but surprisingly
Like that of Yeshe Tsogyal that I told,
And Tilopa and Naropa, you see,*

*'If it hadn't happened already somehow,
About it how could I be telling you?
Their passions and follies, joys and sorrows
The ups and downs of fortune of these three,*

*'Are foreshadowed, informed by the travails
That you and your sisters of Ujjeni,
And the kinnari and their companions,
Have all known in these sixty Rains just past.*

** * **

*'What we learn best from, unfortunately,
Is the state of pain, especially
The pain of our regrets, the sad refrain
Of the heart when bad choices have been made.*

*'We are all the same, young Krishna; you see,
Even the Bodhisattva Gotama*

*In ages past, was moved by gross folly,
Yes, the one who is the Buddha, he too,*

*'When living as a yogi near to here,
A need for salt and other essentials,
Brought him into Varanasi city.
His demeanour on alms-round pleased the King*

*'Who invited him to set up his camp
In the gardens of the Royal Palace.
He had the ability to fly, so
Each day, the Bodhisattva would rise up*

*'And, entering the hall of offering
He would receive his alms-food for the day.
On one occasion, with the King away,
He entered accidentally the wrong*

*'Window of the palace halls and there found
The Queen at rest, and not properly dressed.
He was smitten by the sight, like a tree
Felled by an axe. The Queen, named Gentle-Heart*

*'Knew not of this but saw the sage walk home.
It was noted that he flew not, he no longer
Had the power. "Like a crow with wings clipped"
He staggered and stayed for a week abed*

*'Unable to eat or rest, his good heart
Now aflame with lust, fully enslaved by
The loveliness of the Queen, Gentle-Heart.
When the King returned from the border war*

*'The hermit's absence was made known to him.
"What ails you, Venerable One?" He asked
"My heart is stricken, Sire, by lust alone,
No other ailment afflicts me truly."*

*"Lust for whom?" The King enquired. "For the Queen."
"Well then," with wise magnanimity,
The King pronounced, "She is yours." The hermit
Was well-pleased. Meanwhile the King exchanging*

*'A glance with his Queen, who, kenning well, said,
"Have no fear, Sire, we both respect our sage.
He has lost his way but I will save him."
The King profusely thanked Queen Gentle-Heart*

*'For his concern too was to help their man.
"We need a home," she said and so the King
Gave them a tumbled-down and grubby shed
Wherein passers-by would themselves relieve.*

*'Gentle-Heart refused to enter, she said,
"It's filthy!!" "What am I to do?" He wailed.
"Why, clean it out!" She said, smiling inside
While playing the harridan to the world.*

*'Once it was cleaned she pressed him for the rest
Of all household needs. One by one she asked
Him for: a bed; a stool; a rug; a pot.
Back and forth the former hermit ferried,*

*'Item by item until, at the end,
After fetching water and a thousand
Other things, he sat himself exhausted,
Beside his new bride on the bed, she said,*

*'As she took him by the whiskers and she
Drew his face to hers, "Have you forgotten
That you are a Holy Man!? Well, have you!"
As if waking from a dream the hermit*

*'Regarded the Queen with thanks, seeing what
She had done for him. He asked, gratefully,
"May I restore you to the King?" She smiled.
"If His Majesty will have me, that is."*

*'They returned forthwith to the palace gate
And asked for entry; they were homespun clad,
Not sure they would be allowed in again.
The guards teased them skilfully; the entire*

*'Royal Household seemed privy to the plot
The sage begged for an audience, meanwhile*

*Queen Gentle-Heart stayed quiet, her mien
Straight-faced, though inwardly rejoicing that*

*'Their wholesome subterfuge had worked its charm.
An audience with the King was granted
Following much pleading, and then at last,
The hermit asked the King if he, out of*

*'Great compassion, would forgive his foolish,
His selfish craving which had now passed by,
And accept Gentle-Heart back to his side
As Queen. The King, unable to resist*

*'The chance to play "hard-to-please", but not just
From childish sport but to drive the message
Deep into the sage's heart. His duty
As a grateful student was to give aid*

*'To his teacher who had lost the pathway,
That he had to them so well expounded.
At last, "After some consideration",
The King agreed to take his wife again*

*'As Queen and consort. At this moment the
Powers of the sage returned and all was
As it had been before that fateful day.
The King and Queen confessed to their teacher,*

*'Their beloved and respected master,
That they had schemed together as to how
To save him, so they asked for forgiveness
For their rudeness in so deceiving him,*

*'And, Queen Gentle-Heart too apologised
For the indignities she put him to
In her effort to break the spell, that glaze
That had warped his vision and caused him to*

*'Lose the Path, for a little while. The sage
Of course forgave them and asked them in turn
To forgive him, once again, for now he
With renewed intent, would return to the*

*'Himavant. There he would give his whole heart
To his meditation and endeavour
To learn from these recent lessons they gave.
Thus the sage back to the forest flew just*

*'Next to where we sit. The story shows us
How often the best of us can get lost
And how our friends and even our students
Can help us when we lose our way. In that*

*Life the hermit was the Bodhisattva
Gotama, today our Blessèd Master,
Ananda was King, Uppalavanna
The wise Queen was, the nun of powers great.*

*'The message here
From these ups and downs,
Is: wisdom's always in us,
Though we act like clowns.'*

* * *

Krishna sat quietly, listening to the susurrations of the forest night. The air was rich with a luminous charge.

There was a lot to take in from Dusaka's recitation, but it couldn't all have been recited – a lot of it had to have been spontaneous as so much was specific to him and his friends, his family. Either way his heart was full and no words were needed for now.

Late into the night they were all still sitting in their places when a question came to him:

'Dusaka, what happened, or will happen – I'm not sure how to phrase it – to Precious Jade once you took him or will take him on that promised jaunt to the interesting poetic place?'

'Precious Jade takes the monk's robes, just the same as you.'

'Did he, will he, find a mangala, to protect against death and help answer the big questions, to defeat death and go beyond?'

'Now that,' Dusaka gave his best, most sagely nod, 'is a good question'; silence hovered and, for reasons he couldn't fathom, Krishna was fully satisfied with that.

* * *

Muñca was back in the Realm of Gandharvas, his section of the Realm of the Four Guardians. He was at home but he was ill at ease. Despite being reasonably well-respected there (unlike in the Tavatimsa Heaven) he kept noticing what he took to be suspicious looks out of the corner of his eye. When he followed these anxieties up, engaged with other gandharvas and apsaras in conversation, his fears were regularly proved groundless but he could not rest. He was seeing threats and accusations, enemies on every side.

He decided, after long deliberation, that if he could change his appearance, and create a fully fresh identity, all his troubles would be over. In his travels he had heard of the esoteric rejuvenation methods of the kumbhandas, which were also members of his group of Realms, as dwellers in the Southern Quarter of this domain of the Four Guardians, and simultaneously in the Underworld.

The ruler of the upper regions of the South was King Virulhaka; in the Underworld it was Queen Oghabala, whom he had come dangerously close to meeting previously. He decided to seek aid below and damn the risks of discovery. He had enemies everywhere, or so he felt, so he had to do something.

He put on the most suitable apparel he could find – indicative of an elder gandharva, as he was advancing in their deva-years, but not too flashy or tasteless – and descended to the Underworld. He adopted his most easeful and respectful bearing, assuring the guards he met in the caves that he belonged there, as a visitor of distinction, and that he was the kind of person who, when asking for an audience with Her Chthonic Majesty should be granted such without question.

When he was conducted into Her Presence he felt both pleased (to have been received) and terrified at the awesome entity before him. She was *huge* and, as he had heard, shockingly but magnificently ugly, to a degree that made her irresistible to gaze at.

‘DOES WHAT YOU SEE PLEASE YOU, VISITOR? OR DOES IT PERHAPS APPAL? YOU STARE, SO SOMETHING MUST BE COMPELLING YOU.’ A sub-sonic rumble was felt through Muñca’s feet so he took that to mean she was laughing, teasing him.

‘Nay, Your Chthonic Majesty, it is not attraction or aversion that I experience, only awe at Your Majesty’s might and power.’ He bowed gracefully to the floor of the great cave chamber.

The semblance of a smile crossed the Queen’s crag-like face and she beckoned him to a seat.

‘WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE TO THIS DIM DANK DOMAIN, GANDHARVA? SURELY YOU ARE MORE AT HOME IN THE LANDS OF SPACE AND LAVISH LIGHT.’

‘I come in search of youth – to be completely frank. I am aged as my tribe goes, losing my strength, and my looks, so it may be vanity but I seek the famed Cauldrons of Youth that are spoken of in whispered rumours and I would fain ask for the favour, the blessing, of the cauldrons to restore my vitality.’ He had prepared the speech far in advance so he hoped it made the appropriate impression.

‘FORTUNE FAVOURS YOU, SMALL ONE.’ She paused, looking closely at him. ‘MY ELDEST SON, PRINCE IOHANA IS IN A STATE MUCH LIKE YOUR OWN. HE IS OLD FOR A KUMBHANDA, SINCE I AM *FABULOUSLY* ANCIENT,’ her basso profundo laugh rumbled like a small earthquake again.

‘HE IS DUE TO MARRY, AT LAST, AND HIS BRIDE IS A YOUNG NEREID, AN APSARA OF THE WATERS. HE IS BESOTTED WITH HER AND SHE IS A FINE GIRL – I HAVE APPROVED THE MATCH. SHE IS FAIR TO LOOK UPON, AS MY SON PUTS IT: “HER EYES ARE THE COLOUR OF THE WINE-DARK SEA, HER SKIN WITH THE SHEEN OF COAL.” IT’S A LITTLE POETICAL OF A WAY TO DESCRIBE HER BUT HE FEELS HE NEEDS A REJUVENATION BEFORE THEY WED, SO SHE CAN HAVE A BEING CLOSER TO HER AGE – TO ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES – TO SERVE AS HER LIFE PARTNER. WE HAVE THE CAULDRONS BEING PREPARED AS WE SPEAK. YOU CAN FOLLOW HIM IN THE CEREMONY TOMORROW.’

This was more favourable than Muñca could have dared hope for. He bowed gratefully to the Queen and backed out of her awesome presence.

* * *

Alyona the Nereid princess was indeed fair to look upon while Prince Iohana, as an aging Kumbhanda, was not so easy on the eye, as Muñca reckoned.

The ceremony was set up in a large cave hall that was on a branch off the main throne room. A huge crowd of the kumbhanda royals and courtiers and their families were gathered. This was a rare rite and there were significant powers being employed to bring about the magical transformations desired. Everything was arranged very beautifully, despite being in the dark confines of the Underworld. Lanterns were in abundance, exquisite embroidered hangings decked the walls behind the three giant copper cauldrons. The floor and the exteriors of the vessels were inscribed with complex yantras and words of power, in the runes of the ancient carvings of the kumbhandan mages.

The Queen and her retinue were seated, she at the centre on a throne almost as gigantic as the one in the main chamber. She beckoned to Muñca to draw close.

‘YOU, NATURALLY, HAVE NEVER SEEN THIS BEFORE. I AM HAPPY TO DO THIS FOR MY SON. HE IS NOT THE SHARPEST CHISEL IN THE TOOLRACK, AS THEY SAY, BUT HE IS HONOURABLE AND HE HAS A PURE HEART, AND THAT’S WHAT MATTERS MOST, SO SAY I; WHAT SAY YOU ON THIS?’ She cast an enquiring glare in his direction.

In full diplomatic, not-wanting-to-say-anything-wrong mode, Muñca agreed completely. ‘Oh yes, Your Chthonic Majesty, I am of the same mind entirely, without virtue we are finished.’ Her gaze lingered on him for a moment then she commanded, ‘BEGIN!’ Drums began to be pounded, filling the hall with echoes.

There were different contents in each of the three cauldrons. The first was boiling oil, the second was boiling water and the last was cool water, fresh from the

icy lakes of the mountains. Muñca, now having turned his attention to the prospect ahead, began to experience great trepidation. His armpits started to moisten as he sat there, as was characteristic of an ageing deva, and he could smell the rank tang of his own fear. It suddenly hit him that neither the Queen, nor any of her ministers, had hinted let alone spoken directly about what he might be expected to pay, or how, by way of a fee. It was too late to back out now but he was anxious, not just about the ritual, but also about what price they might ask of him as an elder gandharva.

That inner voice that had prompted him so often, when he was engaged in one of his 'projects' – like the trip through the realms with those foolish kinnaris and the others – was strangely absent. There was an unaccustomed inner quiet.

He asked himself:– Why do I do those things? I even went to the trouble of collecting the babe's piece of comforting shell from the Kosambi forest floor to cement my story. Why *do* I go to such lengths? I suppose it gives me a sense of power, a thrill, to know something that others do not know, and to twist them around according to my will, but, *so what?* What value does that have for me in the long run? It's just...

His musings were broken off by the burly and wrinkled Prince, with an ample girth and not much hair on top, climbing the steps to the cauldron of boiling oil. Without any hesitation he dunked himself in the seething liquid and then rose up, head dripping and lathering himself, as if he were in a bathhouse. He looked very comfortable and happy. The fires were definitely blazing beneath, and the shimmering air and oil fumes told Muñca it had indeed been raised to a great heat – this was extraordinary!

After his stint in the boiling oil Prince Iohana climbed out, his white loincloth dripping and his mottled skin shining, and he plunged his great bulk into the cauldron of boiling water beside it. He bathed happily there again, then, moving to the last cauldron, his cheerful expression was clearly transforming into a wrinkle-free, smooth visage and the form of his body was noticeably changing too.

He emerged from the last cauldron of icy mountain water and the transformation was impressive. He stood in resplendent glory at the top of the steps, then walked down and bowed before his great mother. She thundered:

*'FRESH AS SPRING,
AS FAIR AS THE DAWN.
THE HANDSOMEST YOUTH
THAT EVER WAS BORN!'*

She was waxing even more poetical about her son than he had been about his youthful bride.

Muñca could not wait to follow suit and was quickly down to his loincloth as soon as the Queen gave him the nod. 'BEGIN!' She intoned again. Muñca climbed

the steps of the first cauldron eagerly, he slipped right in and was immediately boiled alive in the seething oil. He hardly even managed a scream.

The Queen and the Court looked on with grim and sober satisfaction.

‘IDIOT. HE REALLY THOUGHT HE WOULD NOT BE KNOWN HERE. YOU DO NOT FREE PRISONERS THAT ARE ENTERTAINING THE ROYAL PLEASURE, AND EXPECT TO LIVE A LONG AND COMFORTABLE LIFE.

‘◆LET◆THIS◆BE◆KNOWN!◆’ She shook her vast, gnarly head. “‘TO BE HONOURABLE AND TO HAVE A PURE HEART IS WHAT MATTERS MOST,” I TOLD HIM, AND HE AGREED. HE SHOULD HAVE ASKED HOW THAT MIGHT AFFECT THE RITUAL OF REJUVENATION – I WOULD HAVE TOLD HIM, “THIS WORKS FOR THE VIRTUOUS, NOT FOR THE UNVIRTUOUS.” HE DID NOT ASK. NOW INSTEAD HE HAS CREATED HIS OWN REWARD FOR HIS CHOICES. ◆SO◆IT◆IS◆.’

* * *

Moons and Rains came and went in the forest of the Himavant. Krishna’s hair turned completely white and thinned on top while his beard grew steadily thicker. He still considered himself a monk but the motivation to shave regularly, whilst living with Dusaka and Tingri alone, ebbed and faded over the next decades. He took to hacking off the largest excesses of his head-hair but he let his beard grow.

He lost track of the passing years as his enjoyment of the simple forest life, and the endlessly cheering company of Tingri and Dusaka, kept him steadily progressing, as he felt, along the spiritual path.

When he remarked one day about how he seemed to keep in good health and to remain energetic, despite his advancing age, Dusaka explained, ‘The amulet you carry does not just protect you from physical harm, it’s a life-charger as well.’ When Krishna’s gormless expression told him that he had never heard of such a thing, Dusaka elaborated, ‘It gives the bearer a longer than usual life and it keeps you free from disease too – when were you last ill with anything?’ A bushy eyebrow lifted in enquiry. He didn’t wait for Krishna’s response. ‘See, it’s quite the power-source and protector. You’ll live a very long time and have plenty of energy, as long as you don’t lose that amulet, or give it away.’

Krishna therefore made sure he kept this precious possession safe, however, he never got around to asking about what other mangalas there might be and exactly what Gavinna had really meant, or at least he kept forgetting to. He told himself, whenever it came to mind, ‘I’m too old to have any cares about that now.’ But he was wrong again.

A day came when Dusaka surprised him by being packed and tidied up, his precious rock-seat once more just a shiny stone with no human odds and ends around it, as had usually been the case over the thirty Rains they had spent there.

‘Well, I’m off,’ Dusaka declared. ‘Things to do and places to go. You’ll have to find the mangala on your own.’

‘What!?’ Krishna was startled beyond belief. He thought that Dusaka could no longer surprise him. ‘You what?’

Dusaka and Tingri, without a backward glance, pattered off into the forest, heading east, as if it was the most ordinary and natural thing to be doing.

Krishna was left gaping – ‘catching flies in his beard’ as Dusaka would say:– The day that the Master had spoken of, years ago, had come. What was he supposed to do now? Well, it seemed like the message was, ‘You’ll have to find your own way’. And that means exactly what?

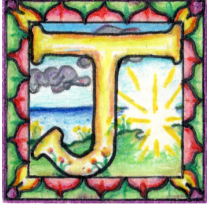
Krishna pondered, ‘So, I’ll have to find the mangala on my own.’ Almost without any thought as to why or how, Krishna slowly gathered his things. There were many odds and ends that had accumulated over the years. Wooden tools made from forest timber; a few good needles a yogi had given him when passing through; some fine thin rope that a few villagers had donated, thankful for some advice he had given years previously – such were the precious few items a wandering forest monk might need.

By the next day he had sorted what to take and what to leave so, trying to emulate his beloved mentor, the Mahasattva Dusaka, who had cared for and guided him now for over eighty Rains, he walked into the forest, heading west. He had said farewell in gratitude to the beings he had shared the precious glade with, and he did manage to walk away without a backward glance.

==*==

CHAPTER 26:

ON THE WESTERN SHORE



ammu, Swami-ji! Here Jammu,' the village children had crowded around Krishna, this stranger with a weird accent, and who was so black and white. His beard was now long and the colour of fresh snow, his skin had weathered to a wrinkled but still soot-black sheen.

Krishna had emerged from the forest, after having ambled his way through the open stretches but, more often, having clambered through tangled thickets, and had entered this village in the early morn. The journey thus far had taken him several Moons, without the blessing of Dusaka and Tingri's guidance.

The children excitedly showered him with questions but most of it was lost on Krishna. He was struggling to understand the dialect and there were half a dozen voices chirping at once.

'Taxila?' He questioned, gesticulating to the west, the south and the east. 'Do you know where I should go to reach Taxila?' The smallest boy, eager to be heard in the gaggle of voices, spoke up loudly, and with authority, stepping to the front, to declare, 'Jammu!' He pointed in all directions with a grubby finger, 'This all Jammu! Not Taxila,' he felt proud to have made that clear to this wandering holy man who had just emerged from the forest.

A taller, quiet girl stepped forward from the rear of the group of friends, put her hands on the little one's shoulders and spoke, in slow and clear words, 'Taxila, big city, south, not here, River Vitasta – follow Vitasta – to walk, many days. People here, go there,' she pointed to the ground and the stone-built houses around them layered with wooden timbers, and the smaller wooden shacks. 'Taxila south, there.' The sun was now well-risen to their left and she pointed firmly to the downslope of the hill ahead. 'Thank you!' Krishna was relieved to have now oriented himself. He then stood and indicated his iron alms-bowl, which he had maintained with great care all these years, and made the universal gesture of pointing to his mouth. The new day had brought with it the old feeling of an empty stomach.

The children immediately understood and he was grabbed by several of them, being invited to homes in a number of different directions. By gesturing with his walking fingers he indicated he would make a circuit of the homes and people could offer something if they wanted to.

His alms-round was not very quiet as the gathering of keyed up youngsters had expanded as word of the aged and unusual visitor had spread. A few adults had joined them too, one of them apparently being the village headman as he spoke to welcome Krishna and to show him, mostly by gesture and beckoning, the best way to walk around the village pathways.

Krishna found a flat spot to sit and eat, his now-devoted cluster of companions gathering to watch. He had declined the invitation into a house to eat

since he had not been in a building in thirty Rains and the open air was now home to him. This was also the first cooked food he had eaten in that time – having lived on fruits, nuts and roots in the Himavanta – so he thought it wisest not to risk offending the hospitality of a family if his stomach could not cope with the sudden change of diet.

To his relief his body was very happy to receive the delicious repast and he saw his bowl had been emptied at great speed. ‘That went quickly!’ He chuckled to himself. He felt a glow of vitality as the food soaked into his system and he was soon ready for the path again.

The village headman had now been joined by a collection of other elders of the community. Krishna realized that the way they looked at him, and the gestures of respect they made, indicated they saw him as a sage, a holy man of distinction. He regretted he did not have enough of their language to offer any advice or teachings so he decided to simply chant a blessing for them.

The verses came easily to mind – despite being nearly ninety Rains in age by now his memory was still good and he had recited for himself, as well as for Dusaka and Tingri, regularly in their beautiful forest glade.

‘Bhavatu sabba mangalam, rakkhantu sabba devata...’ he was pleased that his chanting voice was still in passable shape and that the years had not rendered him croaking like an ailing crow.

When he finished the blessing the assembled villagers, he noticed, were mostly looking at him somewhat open mouthed. He wondered what he might have done wrong and why they looked so surprised.

‘Buddha Bhagavan!’ The headman spoke up. ‘You, Buddha Bhagavan.’

‘No, me not Buddha! Me bhikkhu, *bhikkhu*.’ He tried a couple of dialects.

The headman made a gesture, stroking his own chin, his hand descending to his navel. ‘You not rishi, you Buddha Bhagavan. We think rishi, Shiva-puja,’ he rubbed his chin and then gave a sweeping indication to Krishna’s by now ragged robes, repaired with woven tree-bark and slender vines.

The motley nature of his clothing had been something he was so used to – having also been shored up and patched with offerings from the occasional forest yogi who had come by and a couple of hiding robbers who offered spare items they had, on receiving blessings and good wishes, as well as encouragement to mend their ways from Dusaka and Krishna – that now he had forgotten how unlike a regular bhikkhu he now looked.

The village elder took the edge of his tattered dhoti outfit, tugged politely and asked, ‘New? We give new cloth?’

This was something that had not crossed Krishna’s mind but, now it was mentioned, he was delighted by the offer. He searched out a part of the patchwork that most closely resembled the ideal ochre colour and asked, ‘Have?’

Three or four of the women came forward and took a close look, then one of them turned to the tall girl who had first spoken with him and gave her a stream of instructions, then called after her as she ran down the dusty pathway.

She returned in a short time with a pile made up of a few lengths of material, some fine some coarse, some small, some large. They presented them to him and asked, 'You take?'

Krishna was warmed by this great kindness and readily accepted. He sorted through the heap and chose the pieces that could be sewn into the set of three robes he should have. The villagers made stitching gestures that he read as meaning, 'Can we make robes for you?' Krishna's immediate response was, 'No. I can do that,' as his feet were now itching to get moving. He suddenly realized that the few forearm lengths of thread that he had carefully been hoarding would never be enough to complete such a sewing task when the eldest of the women called the tall girl forward again and she presented a precious offering – three fine needles and a thick spool of good thread – this was riches beyond belief.

Krishna accepted these with great gratitude, seeing full well that these were not wealthy people and that these goods were valuable to them too. He chanted another blessing, his eyes moist with appreciation on account of this flood of human kindness he had received from so many strangers. He then packed his bundle and headed downhill to find the Vitasta River.

* * *

Another of his prized possessions, that he had kept carefully through the rains and the heat and the cold of life in the Himavant, had been his razor. The blade and its sharpening stone had been carefully wrapped and tended as such an item could not be allowed to develop even a speck of rust. Its sheath had had to be replaced a few times but the blade still could be given a keen edge and the handle was firm. Even though he had let his beard grow out and only occasionally chopped the straggles of his head-hair off, the sharp edge was useful in a myriad ways for the everyday tasks of forest life.

Now he was keening the blade to renew his appearance as a monastic disciple of the Buddha. The trimming back of the beard and the close shaving took a long time. The icy waters of the stream, which fed the Vitasta River below, did not help the traction of the razor. The lid of his iron alms-bowl, fashioned over many hours in the forest from mango-tree wood, served as a shaving dish, which pleased Krishna greatly. Such a vessel could serve many purposes. Time would tell whether it would crack and fall apart but for now it held the water perfectly; the tree the lid was crafted from had certainly served well in other ways, having given shade and years of delicious fruit, before it fell.

The sun was sinking by the time Krishna was done. His hand felt with pleasure the odd sensation of a bare chin and moustacheless lip. He smiled at the chill he felt from the night air around his face, 'That beard kept me warm!' He chuckled to himself as the breezes washed around him. 'Time for gentler climes.'

The robes took many days to bring into being. He remembered the paddy-field patterns well but a lot of stitches were required for three, full-sized monk's

robes. He carried the bundle of cloth with him as he progressed along the banks of the great river, doing a bit of sewing each day, adopting the new robes, keeping the old for patches and discarding the unusable, as each was finished – first the sarong, then the upper robe – until at long last the double layered warm outer robe was finished.

‘Done!’ He cut the last thread with his trusty razor, after knotting it when the fourth corner was complete. ‘I’m a clean-shaven bhikkhu with three robes and a bowl once again. Just in time for Taxila.’

* * *

The city was a jungle of sounds and smells and sights. Even though he had been on the road for several Moons now and had passed through a number of villages, Taxila was another world altogether. It was like Savatthi in size but, in contrast, there seemed to be dozens of languages spoken here and the shapes of people’s faces, the colour of their skins, the clothes people wore, were of an astonishing variety. The presence of the great university drew not only scholars from all quarters of the known world, but also a vast array of service industries that supplied every need – tools for writing and liquids to write with of a type Krishna had never seen before; regional food-stalls for students and their teachers from the far south, from north across the Himalayan mountains, from the distant east and the fabled western regions too; couriers to carry messages; scribes to write letters; cobblers for shoes and sandals in the styles of the far regions as well as clothing shops stocked with things even more varied than what was seen on people in the street.

Krishna was swiftly carried away by it all. His advanced age was quite forgotten as he took it in; and there was the chance to talk again:– People here speak my own language too!

In the years he had spent in the forest, apart from his conversations with Dusaka, he could count on one hand the discussions he had had of any length or substance. One or two of the forest rishis had engaged with him while more kept silence as a vow; there was a man who had lost his wits who spoke for hours but none of it had made much sense; one of the robbers who was hiding out was quite the philosopher, as he had heard his father Kamanita had once met, through talks Krishna had had with the other monks who knew him; but all in all he had been starved of conversation for thirty Rains.

The first group of bhikkhus he saw, young lads here to study and learn other languages, he cornered at once in an alcove by the entrance to the University. They were sitting in a huddle and in deep conversation about their classes when Krishna asked if he could join them. They saw he was an Elder of their Order and, learning he was a bhikkhu of nearly seventy Rains, they swiftly rearranged their seats on their mat and offered Krishna a padded rug to sit on.

The group had hardly introduced themselves when Krishna started to speak and the torrent began. The sun had moved noticeably across the sky between the buildings before he even paused for breath. One of the students raised his voice to say, 'We are studying rhetoric and also grammar so we...' Krishna did not let him finish his sentence before he was off again, rawgabbiting about subjects he really knew little of. As the sun was falling the young bhikkhus chimed in with more and more excuses, and left one by one, until the last forlorn member of the group managed to pull himself away, saying, 'We have been here since full noon, Venerable One, it is late and I *must* go and give my excuses to my teachers for all the classes I have missed.' He rose up as he said this, leaving Krishna alone.

'I think I might have overdone it there – was that really half a day?' He reflected, although only half-regretfully. It had been great to talk again although he considered, 'That was fun, but not much use to me – in truth. Time to move on.'

* * *

Krishna felt a pull to go west, not just attracted by the notably delicious food that came from those regions but a murmur in his heart still made itself felt. 'It was the far west that Gavinna, the sage, came from. If I am to ever find the meaning of her words and to learn of the great mangala she referred to, it's west I must go. No one I have spoken to in the Sangha has ever offered me much different from the advice Ananda had recited for me all those years ago. It was guidance of great value but...' The niggle was that he *knew* the 'highest blessings' of the Teacher's words were not what the agèd visionary had spoken of. He reflected:– Perhaps I will die on the way, perhaps I will make it. I have passed more than one thousand Moons in this life and it feels as though I have some remaining before the last breath, especially with the help of the amulet. So, to the west. Let's keep going.

* * *

Gandhara
Ariana
Bactriana
Parthia
Hyrcania
Caspia
Alarodia
Lydia
Ionia
Illyriya
Dacia
Gallia
Brittanica

Demetea in south-west Cymru.

It was a journey of seventeen Rains. Having crossed deserts and mountain ranges, grassy plains, rivers wide and narrow, having passed through gorges deep and roaring, and cities ablaze with lights, having spent time with skin clad tribes in tents of hazel-rods and finally, having crossed the foam-capped sea, he had arrived in the land of Gavinna and her fathers.

* * *

Contented years passed by in the Monastery of the Eastern Gatehouse. Vasabha lived in an easeful harmony with Kesini and she delighted in getting to know her youthful mother, as well as the deva Ambaka, her erstwhile sister and friend.

Maggot had further developed the ability to visit different realms and when she went with Ambaka to pay a short call to the Heaven of the Thirty-three Gods, in order for Ambaka to visit Ninka and for Maggot to see Ant, despite it being 'short' in deva terms, by the time they returned to the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery ten human years had passed, Vasabha had begun to grow a few grey hairs and Kesini had reached seventy Rains. They had a tearful reunion, with Maggot profoundly apologetic for having underestimated the effect of their time in that realm. She had not recollected that one hundred years passes by in the human world for each day and night in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. They had gone for a quick 'hello' but, what with the joyful catching up, the time had flown by on the wings of a supanna.

'Maybe next time you can take us with you,' Kesini joked. They all laughed at this at the time but it set Maggot thinking. As usual, Ambaka was not so charged up as Maggot could be so it was the kinnari who had the idea, based on her knowledge of the Master's teachings and stories about him and his disciples, to try a way of taking the people to visit the upper realms.

'If you two, Vasabha, Kesini, enter into samadhi as deeply as you can, I believe the pathway of the gods will open up and we can take you with us, in your etheric bodies, while your flesh bodies sit here in Savatthi. How does that sound?'

'It's worth a try,' Kesini was always up for a new exploit, even though she was getting elderly by now.

'Yes! That's an excellent idea. Let's give it a go,' Vasabha too had an adventurous spirit. 'But won't our bodies get older while we're gone? And what should we tell the others here in the monastery? We still have duties, you know.'

'I've been thinking about that,' Maggot's brow was furrowed, 'I'm new to all this still, true, but I've got a feeling that, since you're half-kinnari, perhaps that will have an effect. You have aged slowly, according to normal human years so far; you are what?'

'Fifty-nine Rains since I hatched, I've now worked out.'

'However, I think it's quite possible that having a mother who is likely to live to one thousand sun-turnings in the human realm is going to have some effect.'

‘What about me?’ Kesini chipped in, with a cheeky grin. ‘Can I bypass ageing this way too, if that’s what happens?’

‘We’ll have to see, won’t we,’ Maggot was quite excited by the idea of this new escapade.

* * *

They decided to try and make a short visit to the Heaven of the Four Great Guardians, where one day and a night was equivalent to only fifty years in the Human Realm. They let the others in the monastery know what they were planning and Sister Uppalavanna, being the Senior Nun of the community, approved their plan. She also explained to the rest of the group that they should not be concerned if the two lay women did not appear for meals or chores, ‘For the next little while.’

Vasabha and Kesini settled themselves in sitting meditation. At first they both had to deal with a little excitement at the prospective journey but once they had relaxed and concentrated on their breath, leaving all concerns aside, they both felt Maggot appearing before them, taking them by the hand, and whisking them upward, or was it inward? It was hard to tell.

The excursion went smoothly, as far as they could reckon. They were as briefly in the heavens as they could effectively make it and still have a bit of a look around. They were able to say a very quick hello to Rhamba and Salassa, who had been informed of the plan by Maggot, as well as to Gumbiya and Bee who were also on a visit there.

They returned after the somewhat breathless hellos and goodbyes, barely one hundredth part of the day had gone by in the heaven of the Guardians but six months had passed in Savatthi.

Vasabha and Kesini emerged from their samadhi. Their mouths were dry and legs a bit weak but otherwise they felt wonderful.

‘I still look pretty much the same,’ Kesini was staring at her face and grey braid in a metal mirror she had borrowed. ‘It’s hard to tell. Next time, let’s go for longer.’ The next round they tried was not so rushed at the other end. The community of the Eastern Gatehouse Monastery had been pleased to see that the two members of the group were alive and well, and there were many compliments about their skill in meditation. There was thus no resistance to them making a longer ‘session’ since, for their monastic and lay friends these ‘journeys’ seemed merely to consist of the two of them sitting face-to-face without moving for months.

They went back to the same heavenly realm, this time spending three watches of the night there, about one quarter of the celestial day. When they returned to the monastery six Rains had passed by and, whereas Kesini had grown some more grey hairs and looked distinctly older, Vasabha seemed not to have aged a day.

‘Well that’s interesting,’ Kesini said to Maggot and Vasabha, ‘It won’t take many of these trips and I’ll be done for this life.’ By mutual agreement it was thus

decided that Maggot would take Vasabha on these excursions but Kesini would only go along once in a while, and on very short ones to some of the lower heavens.

Ambaka always went too but she was usually more of a quiet passenger. When they were spending time in the monastery she would often sit or float apart, seemingly absorbed in her inner world and absorbed in her own brightness.

Maggot and Vasabha, and Kesini as well, sometimes found her remote and disconnected from them. This was strange since they had all been through so much together with her in their past lives, especially Kesini and Vasabha, but what was there to say? Ambaka seemed to rejoice in her own goodness and radiance, but she stayed with them all the time so their connection was maintained, despite the fact that she appeared a bit adrift, apart for some reason.

Maggot, Vasabha and Ambaka prepared for another visit, this time to see Ant and Ninka in the Heaven of the Thirty-three and they planned to pick up Bee and Gumbiya along the way. As they took leave of Kesini she, now bent and completely white-haired, joshed with them, 'Don't be long! I'm not sure if I'll be here when you get back.' This caused them to realize she was joking and not joking, so they took longer in their farewells this time, but assumed Kesini's famous resilience would see her through.

They went to meet Bee and Gumbiya in the forest of the Ghositarama, in Kosambi, where they had resettled but, to their surprise, Bee waved off the opportunity, 'Not up for it today,' was all she said, so Maggot and the others moved on.

'What was that about, d'you think?' She asked Vasabha and Ambaka, 'Bee is always ready for an adventure, and Gumbiya and Minti both had an odd look about them. Very strange.'

By the time their journey was over, and they had returned to their place at the monastery again, Vasabha opened her eyes in their kuti and, blinking to be sure she was not mistaken, she saw only one sleeping mat there. The place was dusty and close with mould, as if it had not been aired in a long time. Very quickly she realized that, as Kesini had hinted, she had passed on by this time and was no longer there.

She had lived over one hundred Rains, being just one year older than Krishna, and her time had come. Vasabha, Maggot and Ambaka all shed a few tears, regretting that they had not been there when their faithful companion had breathed her last.

* * *

'Oof.' Bee plunked herself down, somewhat indecorously in the large nest she and Gumbiya shared in the Ghositarama forest. Her yakkha partner looked both pleased and terrified, excited and sternly protective all at once. He had shrunk himself down to a human and kinnari size as best he could, and had made that his regular practice these days. He had to be ready, on hand to help, although he had no idea what help he might be able to offer.

'I can't believe that Maggot and the others didn't notice,' Minti remarked, 'you were already the size of a house, though I suppose you were sitting down and these flower gauzes of ours can hide a lot. You're the size of a barn now,' she added in an obliquely loving, sisterly way. Bee had not wanted a lot of fuss and bother about the birth so they had decided to keep it quiet.

'Thank you, Mint, that's encouraging,' Bee shot her a look. 'Urrrgh, I think the first birth is happening very...' her eyes widened and she lay back against the thick padding of the nest's edge that Gumbiya had gathered and packed in place for her.

'Ghraaaargh! Oooh...' and there it was, an opalescent egg of spectacular size, its colours shifting and glowing all over the shell.

'Wow!' Minti was in awe. 'That was inside you? No wonder you were so huge!'

They had been there when Maggot gave birth to Tambaka's egg and they had learned how to weave a bed of flower-down and petal-film on which to lay it. It had been Bee's own hands and the delicate fingers of Minti who had gathered all this, the meaty paws of Gumbiya being far too clumsy and imprecise. Minti and Gumbiya gently lifted the egg and placed it on its bed.

Bee pushed herself forward and wrapped her arms around the egg, feeling the heartbeat within. She was in a swoon for a moment, drunk on the joy of new motherhood, when she noticed something.

'Hang on a moment, that's not *my* heartbeat plus the baby's. There's three, mine plus two in the shell. Gumby, we've got twins,' she grinned with great satisfaction. Gumbiya, still feeling a little awkward and not knowing what to do, let his anxieties be swamped by his love for his darling Bee and the pride of new fatherhood.

'Well, don't just stand there like a spare groom at a wedding, bring all the swaddling-down we prepared, and Mint, we're going to need double-sized to wrap it, so get hunting!'

* * *

'Did we miss anything?' Ant and Ninka popped into view just as Dusaka and Tingri ambled up the path.

'I was trying to keep this quiet and not have any fuss made,' Bee grumbled.

'Fat chance,' Ant floated up to the nest to get a closer look. 'The kinnari rumour-mill is a great wonder in the universe. By the way, where's Maggot?'

'She was on a visit to see you in the Thirty-three, but that was a few Moons ago, by human time.'

'We just missed them then. Never mind.' Ant leant in closer and asked, 'May I?' Wishing to touch the shell she politely asked first.

'Course,' Bee replied, holding the egg as well. Ant gently smoothed her hand over the shimmering surface, feeling the warmth and the texture of the colours. It was mysteriously rich in fragrance.

‘Smells more kinnari than yakkha,’ Ant commented.

‘That’s a big relief, eh?’ Minti smirked.

Gumbiya did feel a little offended at this but discreetly checked his armpits for odour and realized Minti’s jibe was quite fair, after all.

Dusaka had appeared by now as well; he drew close, Tingri in hand. He held her up to the nest so she could get a good look. She sniffed and emitted an appreciative rumble from her chest. She heartily approved and admired the beauty of these new-born beings, still in their shell.

‘It’s a double yolker,’ Minti helpfully informed them all. ‘Twins are on the way but we don’t know how many Moons there will be until hatching...’ she trailed off, realizing she was speaking for Bee and Gumbiya, who were actually the parents, and that they could explain things for themselves.

‘We tried to find another kinnari-yakkha couple to get some tips,’ Bee began.

‘But there ain’t bin such in ‘undreds, or fousands of sun-turnin’s, not in these parts any road,’ Gumbiya joined in.

‘It will be a full five Moons until the hatching, I reckon,’ said Dusaka. ‘You can hear the heartbeats already but the babes will take their time to develop.’ His advice came from a place of experience, as far as everyone was concerned, so they took it as fact that in five Moons the hatching would happen and the new twins would appear.

* * *

Dusaka and Tingri met the three elderly villagers at the edge of the forest. He greeted them as old acquaintances. The leader of the group was stooped and she walked with the aid of a staff, there was a grey-haired man beside her and a similar woman on the other.

They approached Dusaka and bowed respectfully, each of them wearing a slightly puzzled expression.

‘Greetings,’ Dusaka smiled warmly through his beard, ‘it has been close to a thousand Moons since we last met.’ The three nodded in agreement.

‘Yes, we remember, but how are you still the same age? You look now just as you did when we were all small children.’

The man spoke up, ‘She would carry me on her shoulders, as I was the smallest.’

‘My name is Dinka,’ the leader said, ‘and this is Loni, she doesn’t say much these days.’

As if to deliberately belie her friend, Loni then spoke, ‘We smelled a fragrance; it wafted through the village. We remembered. It was not the same but we knew, we thought what it must be. So we came. And here *you* are too. Are we right? Is there another deva-egg that has been birthed in this forest?’

These were more words than Loni had uttered in half a year, which underscored the rare nature of what was happening.

‘You’re quite correct,’ said Dusaka, which Tingri confirmed with a bark. ‘Another egg has just been birthed.’

Dinka looked at the ground. ‘We know that you invited us to give blessings to the last egg. There are only three of us left alive now and,’ she breathed deeply, half-concealing a sob, ‘now I do not know if we deserve to be able to see and touch this new arrival. You see... we...’ She found it hard to continue.

Loni picked it up. ‘We took a bribe and we lied, sir. That’s the long and the short of it.’

Dinka gathered her strength, ‘It was you we lied to, Venerable Sir, I told you we saw the baby being carried away, off into the trees by invisible beings. That was not true. It was a group of fine ladies, dressed in foreign clothes and with strange accents. They found the babe all alone in the nest and took it to be abandoned – or at least they hoped it was. They saw us, picking up sticks like we usually did each day, and one of the ladies, she beckons me over and shows me a gold *kahapana* – I never seen gold in a coin before – and she says, “We think this baby has been abandoned here so we are going to take her and look after her. Just in case there is a mother or a father who comes back for her, just in case, I will give you this gold if you promise to tell them you saw the child being carried away by yakkhas or by some invisible creature. Are you good at telling stories? And can you keep a promise?” She held up the coin in front of me.

‘They looked like posh people and they were holding the baby proper, like they knew what to do, and that they really liked her and wanted her. I were dazzled by the coin, and proud of how I could tell a good story to keep out of trouble, so I took the coin and kept my promise and lied. I have always felt bad. We never heard what come of the little one. Where she was took. Nothin’...’ Her words petered out, looking at the ground she leant on her staff, waiting for a sharp reprimand from Dusaka.

Tingri barked, more at her human companion than at the three elderly villagers, as if to say, ‘Go on, say to them what you should!’

‘More than eighty Rains have passed since that day. Even though it was an unskilful thing to have done we all make mistakes. The fact that you have “always felt bad about it” is, I’d say, a good thing. It’s painful to bring to mind but that’s a good pain. It shows you really have a pure heart, but one that got dazzled one day when you were young. How old were you then?’

‘Bout eight Rains, I s’pose.’

‘Tingri, did you ever hear of an eight-year-old child who never made a mistake?’ She yipped and snuffled repeatedly, which they all realized was her way of laughing uproariously.

‘See, we all make mistakes. You’ll be pleased to hear that, even though the babe was not given the best life up in the north when she was young, later on, for twenty Rains, she was the Queen of Kosala, married to the great King Pasenadi; after that she went to live a simple life in a monastery and, even better, she got reunited both with her father and her mother. It took a long time, relatively, but she is very

content and happy these days, and her mother, the kinnari who you could not see, lives with her. So, all's well that ends well, eh? You can forgive yourselves now; *please* forgive yourselves. I hold no grudge at all that you lied to me and, by the way you *can* tell a good story because you did fool me at the time.' Tingri concurred with a sniff.

'Now, would you like to meet and bless the new egg?'

* * *

'Look, stranger, the great ocean lies over yonder,' the ancient druidess led Krishna, even longer in years than her, along the path from the village of stone and wattle-walled crofts with their thick thatched roofs. His feet had carried him thus far and he was less than half a league from the western shore – the end of the known world as people spoke of it. Here the language was of the Gaels and the Celts, some of which he had picked up in his wandering in Gallia, but they had their own language here as well which was deeply musical and filled with soft throaty rasps and sonorous vowel-sounds. This he had learnt none of yet, except for *pigyn hendaid*, which apparently meant 'Great-grandfather Magpie', which was the name by which the villagers had addressed him on the previous day, when he had arrived here, on account of the blackness of his skin and the whiteness of his bristles.

Their feet trod the well-worn path to the clifftop, behind them walked a couple of the youngsters from the humble hamlet, entrusted with looking out for these two holy people. It was easy for a wind to pick up, blowing in from the sea, that could catch a billowing robe and carry such stick-thin old-folk over the edge in a finger-snap.

When he had first arrived in the area he had been mistaken for a rich lord since his alms-bowl of iron – now with him for over fifty Rains – was an item of great rarity and numerous smiths in the towns and villages alike were eager to handle it, admiring the craftsmanship of the seams and the burnt, protective coating. Bronze and copper, tin and gold and silver bowls were familiar but this hard dark iron was more tricky to work, for the smiths in these parts at least. They were impressed.

Krishna had learnt how to explain that he was in fact a monk, of an order in the far east, a *samana*, a shaman, a wanderer, he found at least one of these terms would stick, and then he would explain, as best he could, that where he came from, far away – usually holding out a hand to indicate his dark skin – this metal was commonly used, and crafted in this way, and was not a luxurious possession. He had also learnt how to say it could not be bartered for. He was sure his days were numbered now, he had lived one hundred and six Rains, he reckoned, but he would still need to eat for the foreseeable future and he needed his alms-bowl for that.

The path led to the edge of the cliff. The roaring waters of the ocean, spreading to the endless horizon, raced to the rocky beach below, wave after wave – Krishna was transfixed.

Next to him the druidess raised her voice to compete with the rush of the sea. 'The light leaps for us here,' she pointed out the coruscating sparkles that filled the surface of the waters on this clear blue afternoon, a pathway to the sun scored out in restless patterns of light and wave.

'Stand stable here,' she firmed her stance in the sharp breeze that had the tang of sea-scent, her youthful attendant drawing to her side, fearful she might receive a sudden tug:— The holy woman *would* stand dangerously close to the edge.

'Stand, and silent be, so that, through the channels of your ears, may wander like a river, the swaying sound of the sea: *SWN Y MOR, SWN Y MOR.*'

She was no longer speaking the dialect they had been using and this sounded like her own tongue. Krishna's eyes grew wide, open to the wind and the infinite vista of the ocean. What she had just said sounded like '*Sûn úh mōhr.*'

'What did...? What were those words you just spoke?' He turned and gazed at the mage, her long grey hair whipping wildly in the squalls. He was transfixed and unsure if his ears had deceived him.

She broke the set of her glance and met his startled look. Still keeping her voice raised, against the wind and the racing tide, 'This is how we say that in our own tongue.'

'Say what?!' Krishna was speaking loudly too.

'“The sound of the sea”, that's what those words mean: “*SWN Y MOR*” – “*SWN*”, which sounds like “soon” means “sound”; “*y*” pronounced “*úh*” is “of”, “*mor*” is “the sea”. We hold the sound to be a sacred quality. It is the primal sound, the sound of the place and matter we are all fashioned from; or so in my faith we hold as true.'

Here, at that small field's ending, where the grey rock dropped to the water's edge. A great light dawned in Krishna's heart.

'She was speaking her own language! Why did I never think of that?!'

The druidess was lost at what he meant. Krishna was now back eighty-eight Rains, in Kosambi. 'She lapsed from our common speech into her own tongue. Dusaka pulled that mind-bending game for so many years that I never asked him, or the Master – I would always forget and then even forget I had forgotten – I needed to find out here, I suppose, to have pondered and explored for myself for fifty Rains or more; what is really the source of happiness, peace and protection – the protection from death itself.'

'I fear you ramble, Holy One, are you well? Are you cold? Do you wish to return to the village?'

Krishna was reeling, 'What, oh, yes. I am very well, very well indeed! We can return to the village. You welcomed me warmly yesterday, may I stay for a while longer?'

* * *

Krishna was taken into the hearts of the local people, his appearance was so strange but his habits so peaceful and respectful, it did not matter at all to the community that they could not understand much of his descriptions of his faith and its tenets.

‘Do good, refrain from harm, purify your heart,’ was his favourite summary and which most of the folk could understand. He even learnt to say it in the local language, instructed by his sagely friend the druidess.

He would walk to the cliffs each day and sit, letting the sound of the crashing waves upon the rocks, and the curl of the wind in his ears, fill his heart. At night he would mostly sit alone and endeavour to recall all that Gavinna had said on that fateful day. He was over one hundred Rains in age but his memory was not gone yet. He revisited the room in his mind, imagined the wounded sage lying there. ‘She said... she said... she said, “The best way to evade the King of Death, to blindfold Mara, to defeat him... is to remember... Listen: *Swn y mor*.”

‘That’s what she said, I remember!’ He said out loud, although he was the only one in his wattle-walled hut. ‘Then, then what?...?’ He searched again, bringing her red-gold and white hair to mind, her burns, the blurred blue inkings on her skin.

‘The sages of the north...,’ retrieving the memories was like digging out a deeply wedged-in splinter. ‘The sages of the north say “Merely turn your hearing round to listen to your genuine true nature, which is the destination of the Path that is supreme. This is a genuine way to break through to enlightenment, this will...”’ He searched in vain, despite having memorized and repeated this many times in his early years in robes, ‘This will... this will... this will lead you to the Eternal, the Deathless, to the Other Shore.’

Yes! That was the message:– Now, what on earth did it mean, ‘Turn your hearing round to listen to your true nature’? And what did that have to do with the sound of the sea?

* * *

The seasons moved on and the spring, with its yellow, blue, purple, red and varicoloured blossoms, moved rapidly to the summer and then the autumn when most of the leaves fell in these northern regions.

The villagers worked hard to store food for the winter, tasks which Krishna helped with to the best of his ability and within the bounds of his discipline. Soon the snows came, at first with a harsh wind from the north, then late in the evening the village became eerily quiet. The snowy blasts had ceased and the air was still once more; the world was muffled beneath its thick white rug. Krishna sat awake while the village slept.

It was very peaceful but he was energized at the same time. ‘So quiet,’ he said to himself, then noticed that there was a sound – the swaying sound of the sea – but here in his little hut and in his head – it was an inner sound and he realized he had heard it before in rare moments, wandering through the channels of his ears, no, not

through his ears, *inside* his ears. “*Swn y mor*” the sound of the sea is what we hear inside, when there is silence outside. I had completely forgotten what Gavinna said about listening – all I could think of was that stupid “Sooner! More!” idea.’

‘Turn your hearing round, to listen,’ he was now understanding it, ‘to your genuine true nature.’ He sat, opening his heart to the presence of the ringing silence, the roaring energetic peacefulness within. The more he listened the brighter his mind became and he saw that with this listening there was a happiness, a peace and a letting go of fixation on the sights, sounds, feelings, colours and activities of everything around him and the thoughts within him. It made his mind alert and heedful.

The words of the Master, which he had uttered about Samavati, after the torching of the seraglio, ‘The mindful never die.’ Krishna realized, ‘If the heart no longer clings to the unstable and impermanent, it awakens to its true nature which is unborn, undying, the Deathless. If we stop attaching to what we are not, then what remains is revealed, and it is what we truly are. This is the Dharma. The mind, the heart is Dharma, not a person.’

Krishna sat through the night, letting this realization soak through his being. The great mangala, the protection guaranteed to guard against death was, after all, this inner sound. He *had* heard it before. When the Master gave an inspiring talk it was even louder than the crickets of the forest night, at other times too, when the world went quiet; so it had been with him all the time but he never knew.

‘What a fool! Again!’ The centenarian Krishna was laughing at his own dim-wittedness once more. ‘I had the great mangala within me all the time and I never knew, like a diamond someone had sewn into your clothes that you carry around, a precious gem, but you have no idea that you own it.’ He smiled broadly, alone in his hut in the snow, wrapped in sheepskins and woollen blankets. ‘So all I have to do is keep listening to this inner sound, the great mangala, and the King of Death will not find me.’ It was too good to be true. He lay down to rest, his heart aglow.

It *was* too good to be true. As this train of thought resolved itself in Krishna’s mind Mara was listening in:– ‘Living beings,’ he mused, ‘are *so* gullible.’ This was one of his favourite saws; his heart too was aglow but with malign intent.

* * *

Vasabha was glad to hear that dear Kesini had been given a proper funeral and that the Elders of their monastery had attended and carried out the ceremonies with full pomp. She had been a friend to all and a fine example over the more than forty Rains that they had lived there.

Since she had passed on Vasabha made more and more journeys with Maggot and Ambaka, visiting different realms and meeting old friends where they could. Maggot’s skills were increasing so they were able to reach higher and higher realms of the devas. This meant, back at the monastery, people had become used to Vasabha’s absences of many years and they knew her physical appearance belied her actual age. After some of their journeys, even though the intention might have

been not to linger too long, sometimes twenty or thirty Rains went by in the human world. Young girls who had become novices when Vasabha had arrived, aged less than forty, were now bent and wrinkled while Vasabha still looked in her sixties. She was well-known for this strange attribute and was treated with great love and respect, and awe by many on account of it.

‘Half-kinnari, you know,’ was the whispered refrain whenever the subject came up.

* * *

‘There’s someone I’d very much like to see again, but we’ll need to make it very brief indeed, Maggot said to Vasabha one day.

‘Who’s that?’

‘Khujjuttara. Long ago the Master said she had reappeared in the Aviha Brahma Realm. Do you think we would be able to visit her there?’ To Maggot’s surprise it was the often passive Ambaka who chimed in at this suggestion.

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea, considering the way time passes for us when we make these visits.’ She was not used to speaking up these days but this was an important thing to get across. ‘I’m slowly getting used to deva life and how things work. For some people, like the Master and a few others, they can go up to the Brahma Realms and then come back with not much time having passed in the Human Realm, as when the Master visited the brahma god Baka. It doesn’t work that way for us less liberated beings, exactly why, I don’t know.

‘I have heard that one day and one night in the Realm of Brahma is 8,640,000,000 human years, so, even to be there for a finger-snap would mean that everything dear Vasabha knows and loves in this human world, including her own body, will have turned to dust by the time we got back. Please let us *not* do this; one second there would be one hundred thousand years here in the human world – it’s not a good idea.’

Ambaka was speaking with more passion and assertion than she had about anything for a long time. Both Maggot and Vasabha were taken aback, fully heeded her words, and were slightly chilled by the mistake they had nearly made.

‘Thank you!’ Vasabha reached out and embraced her former sister. ‘It’s you looking after me now – bless you!’ She leaned into the hug, filled with the heart-warmth of Ambaka’s golden radiance.

* * *

At that very moment, relatively speaking, the being who had been Khujjuttara was in a state of transformation. Her life in the human world had come to an end and she was now in the process of spontaneously appearing in the Aviha Brahma Realm. After her last breath there had been no sense of time passing – or indeed any of the usual reference points of being located anywhere, or there being a centre to

the experience of knowing the present reality – and all sense of ownership, or any kind of thingness, was gone. There was nothing to relinquish as the heart realized that no thing had ever been present that could have been owned in the first place. There was peace, freedom and total ease.

As she manifested in this new realm, it was with the realization that there was no spiritual work left to do; ‘what had to be done had been done’. As the Master had said, she had ‘realized enlightenment in the interval’, in the intermediary state between one life and another. She was fully awake, in all ways.

She looked around, surveying the landscape that stretched infinitely before above, below and all around her. She rolled her shoulders, out of long habit, but the feelings that arose were utterly new to her – she was comfortable! She looked down and took in the shape of her brahma-body. She held out her new, radiant and elegant hands before her, turning them with amused wonderment; she straightened her posture and a deep, bright flow of peace and joy arose in her heart.

‘Ooh, no back pain... and look, look at all this.’

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Notes & References

PART I

Chapter 1: The Hell of Molten Copper

1) p4:– *poured the molten metal down her gullet*: The ‘Hell of Molten Copper’ is mentioned by the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha in his list of many types of hell, in Ch. 5 of *The Fundamental Vows of Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha*. The act of having molten copper poured down one’s throat is quoted in ‘Hinayāna Doctrinal Cosmology’ in the book *The Imagery of the Cosmological Buddha* by Angela Falco Howard, p9. Even King Yama, the ‘judge of the dead’, is said to be subject to such tortures: ‘[A] huge cauldron full of molten copper follows the king wherever he goes ... A giant hell warden grabs the king and fastens him down with hot irons; the king’s mouth is kept open with a hook and molten copper is poured down his throat,’ (*ibid.* pp9-10).

2) *ibid*:– *her body had been made quite whole again*: The immediate regrowth of flesh after it has been cut off or destroyed by some other means in the hell realms is a fairly common occurrence; for example in the Śīlakatta Hell (the 9th Auxiliary Hell Realm), are those who have killed fish and sold them in a market, ‘The yama guardians then stab them with lances and harpoons, cut them with butchers’ knives and fillet them so that their flesh can be lined up for sale... After that, their bodies come back together, just as they had been before. And all of this happens over and over again.’ From *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p76.

3) p6:– *It was the Buddha*: In classical Buddhist iconography of the Six Realms, there is a Buddha depicted as appearing in each Realm, with an appropriate skilful means in hand, e.g. a vina in the Deva Realm, a bottle of nectar in the Hungry Ghost Realm, etc.

4) p7:– *She was disappearing*: An account of the Buddha Gotama’s spiritual career begins with a similar act of self-sacrifice, long before his life as the brahmin Sumedha and making the Bodhisattva vow with the Buddha Dipankara, ‘four incalculable periods and a hundred thousand kalpas ago.’

The Sūtra On the Wise and the Foolish, Story No. 63.

Thus I have heard: One time, the Buddha was in the Jetavana Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika’s Park, in the country of Śrāvastī. At that time, the monks had completed their summer retreat and went to visit the Buddha, paying their respects and inquiring about his well-being.

The Buddha, with a compassionate heart, comforted them and asked, ‘Have you stayed in peace without suffering?’ His heart was full of tender compassion, showing deep concern and empathy.

Seeing this, Ānanda said to the Buddha, ‘World-Honoured One, your compassion and special care are truly profound. Is this compassion extended to those far or near?’ The Buddha replied, ‘If you wish to know, I will tell you. Long ago, beyond measure, in countless aeons, there were two criminals in hell, being driven by the guards to pull an iron cart. Their skin was stripped off and made into yokes for the cart, and they were beaten with iron rods, forced to run without rest, east and west. ‘One of them was weak, and as the guards pushed him, he would fall to the ground, get up, and continue, completely exhausted, near death. His companion, seeing his suffering, gave rise to compassion and pity for him. He pleaded with the guard, “Please allow me to pull the cart alone in his place!” ‘The guard, in anger, struck him with the rod, and he died instantly, being reborn in the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven. ‘Ānanda, you should know that the one who showed compassion in hell was me. At that time, while enduring punishment in hell, I first gave rise to this compassionate heart. From then until today, I have never abandoned compassion for all beings, and that is why I joyfully practice and extend compassion to everyone.’ At that time, Ānanda, hearing the Buddha’s words, was filled with joy and followed the teaching.

The Sūtra on the Wise and Foolish [賢愚經] (*Chin Hsien-yü-ching*) is a sūtra that was translated into Chinese in 445 CE by Hui-chüeh and others. It contains sixty-two Buddhist tales, or sixty-nine in a separate extant edition. According to *A Collection of Records Concerning the Tripitaka*, the catalogue of the Buddhist canon compiled by Seng-yu (445–518), the bhikṣu T’an-hsüeh, Wei-te, and six other monks went westward from north-western China to Khotan on the southern edge of the Taklamakan Desert to seek Buddhist scriptures. They happened upon a great Buddhist ceremony that was held once every five years at a monastery. There they heard the learned monks expound the Buddhist scriptures and rules of monastic discipline in the language of Khotan. T’an-hsüeh and the others translated and recorded the lectures in Chinese. Later they returned from Khotan and, upon reaching the region of Turfan, compiled the lectures given by the monks in Khotan as a single sūtra, which is known as *The Sūtra on the Wise and the Foolish*.

It was translated from Chinese into Mongolian and into Tibetan, and it is included in the Tibetan Kangyur. It was translated from the Tibetan to French, in 1842, by Philippe-Édouard Foucaux; into German, by Isaak Jakob Schmidt in 1843; and it was translated from the Mongolian into English by Stanley Frye, in 1981.

Chapter 2: Forbidden Fruit

- 1) p8:– *I’m a kinnari*: Kinnari are a class of earth-devas. They feature extensively in *Mara and the Mangala I: The Killer*
- 2) ibid:– *it’s not against the rules – at least I’m pretty sure it’s not*: Eventually the Buddha did establish this detail of the Vinaya rule entailing ‘defeat’ for a monk, i.e. ‘now at that time a certain monk indulged in sexual intercourse with a female naga... a yakkhini... this is an offence involving defeat’ (*Book of the Discipline I*, pp57-8); also, it is the same ‘whether it is a young female naga or a kinnari’ (N1, VA 279-ThigA 225). These are the subclauses of Defeat Rule 1.
- 3) p9:– *that is what society expects*: A philosophy similar to that expounded by Krishna’s father Kamanita, as recounted in *The Pilgrim Kamanita* in Ch. 20: ‘The Unreasonable Child’; especially on p120.
- 4) ibid:– *that urge towards enlightenment, is the life-pulse of the universe*: This passage is adapted from D.T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism I*, p75, quoted in *Silent Rain*, p86, note 1, and in *Rain on the Nile*, p196, note 21.
- 5) ibid:– ‘*Jambu*’. *It’s even there in what you are called*: The word ‘jambu’ is indeed the classical term for the ‘rose-apple’ as in the ancient name for the Indian sub-continent ‘Jambudvīpa’ (Skt) or ‘Jambudīpa’ (Pāli), ‘the Land of Rose-Apples’. The formal name for the tree is *Syzygium jambos*.
- 6) ibid:– *it’s what we call ‘skilful means’, as it has a noble cause in mind*: The Pali for this is *upāya*. In the Southern Buddhist literature the Buddha never tells any outright lies for any reason but he does occasionally allow himself to be misunderstood, without correcting the wrong assumption. This is a major theme of *The Pilgrim Kamanita* and is exemplified on p121 and in note 18 to Ch. 20, pp306-7 (ibid). In the Northern School, outright lies seems to be sanctioned, as in the ‘burning house’ story in the Lotus Sutra.
- 7) p10:– *soon we’ll have a hatchling to think of as well*: As described later, kinnaris lay eggs and are thus known as ‘twice-born’. Although in the Pali Canon they are described as human-like in form and occasionally living as a couple with a human spouse, and having children together (for example, in Jāt 546, the hermit Vaccha and the kinnari Rahavatī and their children) they are sometimes represented iconographically as having a human torso and bird’s legs, and wings attached to their hips. This is plainly a misreading of the texts and an incorrect representation.

8) p11:- *the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods*: In Buddhist cosmology this is the third of the seven Sensual Heavens. In *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Ch. 3, note 8, pp275-5, these are listed in detail. Briefly they are:

1. Bhumma Deva – the earth spirits, e.g. kinnari, tree devas etc.
2. The Heaven of the Four Guardian Deities – the Lokapālā, also their subjects: the kumbandhas, gandharvas, nagas and yakkhas
3. The Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods – Tāvātimsa devā
4. The Devas of the Hours – Yama devā
5. The Heaven of the Contented – Tusita devā
6. The Heaven of those who Delight in Creating – Nimmānaratī devā
7. The Heaven of those who Delight in the Creations of Others – Paranimmitavasavatī devā

9) Ibid:- *those ‘few minutes’ in the Thirty-Three were several seasons long*: In Buddhist cosmology, as in many other mythic systems around the world, time runs at different speeds in different realms. See, for example, *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, note 2 to Ch. 39, p333.

10) p13:- *the nine gems of the Bejaratana*: An auspicious collection of precious stones, understood to bestow power and protection. The nine are: (1) diamond (2) ruby (3) emerald (4) yellow sapphire (5) garnet (6) blue sapphire (7) pearl (8) cat’s eye (9) coral.

11) p. 14:- *even though she did a lot of bad things*: See *Mara and the Mangala I* for the background to this statement; especially Chs. 24 & 25, ‘The Invitation’ and ‘The Iron Skillet’, pp311-45 (2019).

Chapter 3: The Stolen Child

1) p15:- *You haven’t shaved your head yet*: The regularity with which Buddhist monastics shave their heads varies from country to country but most have the custom of shaving before the full moon Observance Day.

2) *ibid*:- *the Recitation*: The Vinaya discipline requires that the whole monastic Rule be recited in a formal meeting on the full moon and new moon days. The 227 rules for monks takes about 45 minutes to recite fluently.

3) *ibid*:- *the Komudi full moon*: This is the full moon of November, the time when the white lotus blooms. Krishna’s mother, Savitri, chose it as a suitable name since he was born

on that full moon day and as his skin was so dark, to name him after the white lotus seemed a skilful way to counter-balance the picture. See *Mara and the Mangala I*, p6.

4) *ibid*:– *You remember everything!*: Ven. Ānanda was blessed with perfect recall. He recited all the Buddha’s sutta teachings at the First Council, after the Buddha’s final passing away.

5) *ibid*:– *become a monk today*: One has to be fully 20 years of age to receive Full Acceptance as a monk or nun, according to Vinaya.

6) *ibid*:– *Ehi bhikkhu*: This is the simplest form of ordination procedure, and could only be used by the Buddha. The process became more complex as the teaching spread but the form used today is as it was by the time the Vinaya was fully established, at the end of the Buddha’s life.

7) *ibid*:– *the Simsapa grove*: A forest outside the walls of the city of Kosambi. It is where the Buddha gave his famous ‘handful of leaves’ teaching, as at S 56.31.

8) *ibid*:– *from my kuti*: A kuti is a small hut that is used as a dwelling place for a Buddhist nun or monk.

9) *ibid*:– *Queen Samavati and Queen Magandiya*: As in *Mara and the Mangala I* and in the Dhammapada Commentary to Dh 21-23; also their story is recounted in *Buddhist Legends Vol. I*, translated by E.W. Burlingame, pp247-293.

10) p16:– *the small Ghositarama forest*: The Ghositarama seems to have been the first monastery of the Buddha’s community that was established inside the walls of a city. It was in a park inside the walls of Kosambi.

11) *ibid*:– *his young dark companion*: Krishna’s skin was extremely dark, hence he was given the nickname ‘Krishna’ meaning ‘The Black One’.

12) *ibid*:– *the pilgrim Kamanita*: As in the book of the same name; see pp117-122.

13) *ibid*:– *the physical necessities that every monk must possess*: These comprise, three robes, alms-bowl, waistband, needle and thread, razor and a water filter.

- 14) p17:- *double-layered sanghati robe*: The *saṅghātī* is intended to be a warmer, outer robe that can be used as a wrap in colder weather. In Thai custom, based on the Vinaya, it is roughly the same size as the *uttara-saṅga* or ‘upper robe’.
- 15) *ibid*:- *the first watch*: This means from six in the evening until ten o’clock. The ‘second watch’ is ten o’clock to two in the morning; the ‘third watch’ is from two to six in the morning.
- 16) p18:- *Where’s my cintamani?*: This is an invention of the author, based on the idea of ‘the wish-fulfilling gem’ or *cintamani-vijjā*, mentioned in the Pali texts such as the Jātaka and at D 11.7. The use it is put to here is included in *Mara and the Mangala I*, p241.
- 17) p19:- *being a warrior yakkha*: The *yakkhā* are a form of celestial demon, belonging to the Realm of the Four Great Kings. Their ruler is King Vessavana, also known as Kuvera, his domain is the Northern Quarter. This Realm is divided into four sections:
Dhataratṭha rules the East and the *gandharvas*.
Virūlhaka rules the South and the *kumbhandas*
Virūpakkha rules the West and the *nāgas*
Vessavaṇa rules the North and the *yakkhas*.
There is more information available about this Realm in *The Buddhist Cosmos* by Ajahn Punnadhammo, pp426-40 and in *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp220-21.
- 18) p21:- *the rukkhā-devas*: The *rukkhā-devas* are tree-spirits, living in and protecting particular trees as their homes. They are members of the Realm of Earth Spirits – *bhumma-devā*.
- 19) *ibid*:- *leave a changeling*: In European folk beliefs a changeling was a fairy child substituted by acquisitive fairy folk for a human infant. They would take the human child and raise it as their own, in the faerie world, under a mountain or in a suchlike location.
- 20) *ibid*:- *use it as a drug*: As in *Mara and the Mangala I*, pp280-89, ‘The Noxious Cave’ and other parts of the book.
- 21) *ibid*:- *that baby would ‘ardly make a marfful*: This is not scripturally accurate; at Jāt 513 it describes a *yakkhinī* stealing new-born princes and ‘crunching and devouring them before the queen’s eyes.’ Also at Jāt 510, after another *yakkhinī* had stolen a new-born prince, she ‘champed and mumbled him like an onion.’

Chapter 4: ‘To Fulfil Desire is Happiness’

1) p23:– *If you weren’t a monk it wouldn’t be a problem*: Buddhist monastics abide by the precepts of not engaging in any kind of sexual activity, with any other beings or even with themselves. Celibacy is the rule for all, whether a novice or fully ordained.

For Buddhist lay people, the standard is to ‘refrain from sexual misconduct’, so sexual relations between consenting adults, where no one is being taken advantage of or deceived, are considered completely appropriate.

2) ibid:– *when he was questioned about his views*: This dialogue between the Buddha and Ariṭṭha is found at M 22 and it is also the basis of Pac #68 (Vin iv 134).

This kind of inappropriate indulgence is also mentioned in the origin story and text of Saṅg #4, (Vin iv 1-2); this was laid down based on the actions of Bhikkhu Udāyin. ‘Should any bhikkhu, lustful, with perverted thoughts, speak in a woman’s presence in praise of ministering to his own sensuality, inviting sexual intercourse thus, “Sister, the highest kind of ministering is this, namely, ministering with this (sexual) act to a virtuous lofty-natured observer of the Brahmacariya such as I am”, this entails initial and subsequent meeting of the Sangha,’ (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli trans.).

3) p24:– *keep remembering ‘Sooner! More!’*: As in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 15, p179.

4) ibid:– *like the Holy Deva Dharani who rose up as a witness*: One of the most popular legends around the Buddha’s enlightenment was that, when Māra’s army would not acknowledge defeat and Māra called his followers to be his witnesses to his claim to supremacy in the universe, the Bodhisattva reached down and touched the earth, to call the Earth Mother, Dharani, to be his witness and to vouch for his genuine supremacy. A version of this story is found in many late accounts of the Buddha’s life, such as the *Buddhavaṃsa* and the *Lalitavisatara*. A very readable account is found in *Oriental Mythology*, by Joseph Campbell, pp21–22.

5) ibid:– *Didn’t he have a deva friend too?*: As found at S 1.20

6) p25:– *so they would have to squeeze by you*: This incident involved Udāyin and was the basis for Saṅg #2 and #3, (Vin iii 119 and Vin iii 127).

7) ibid:– *but Udayin too*: As above, Udāyin was the cause of the establishment of numerous Vinaya rules, see for example *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, p376, §2.

8) ibid:– *that is when the self realizes the highest Nirvana*: This passage is found at D 1.3.20.

- 9) *ibid*:– *To fulfil desire is happiness*: This statement comes from Jāt 423, ‘Teacher, the following of desires is happiness,’ *Jātaka Stories, Vol III*, p278.

- 10) *ibid*:– *Great is the joy of sweet desire*: This is found in Jāt 459, *Jātaka Stories, Vol IV*, p74.

- 11) *ibid*:– *I have no need of monkish blessings*: This is found in Jāt 529, *Jātaka Stories, Vol V*, p131.

- 12) p26:– *being attended by deception, intentional false speech violates the reality of things*: This is found in Jāt 431, *Jātaka Stories, Vol III*, p296.

- 13) *ibid*:– *she propositioned me at the hot springs*: This series of events is described at S 1.20.

- 14) *ibid*:– *One whose banner has been lowered*: This passage occurs at M 22.30. The original contains more similes that allude to a lessening of sensual desire: ‘Bhikkhu this bhikkhu is one whose shaft has been lifted, whose trench has been filled in, whose pillar has been uprooted, one who has no bar, a noble one whose banner is lowered, whose burden is lowered, who is unfettered,’ (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.).

- 15) p27:– *What matters it, O breeze*: This is a poem by Mir Taqi Mir (1723-1810), quoted by Ahmed Ali in *City of Djinnns*, p65, by William Dalrymple, HarperCollins.

- 16) *ibid*:– *Kinnari lovers were known to have wept for seven hundred years*: In Jāt 504 this story is told, of beings who later lived as King Pasenadi and Queen Mallikā. Mention of this is found in the notes of *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, note 35.

- 17) *ibid*:– *or the kinnari Chanda*: *ibid.*, same note, but re Jāt 485.

- 18) *ibid*:– *they might tend the child in a nest*: This scenario is found in the story of ‘Little Wild Rose’ in *The Crimson Fairy Book* ed. by Andrew Lang (Longmans, Green & Co., 1902, 1980) pp93-107. Also note the Oxford pub ‘The Eagle and Child’ where the Inklings (J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Owen Barfield and Charles Williams) would meet.
 The supanna is a giant eagle-like bird, also known as a garuda.

- 19) p28:– *a day and night in the Thirty-Three was one hundred years in the human world*: As described at A 8.42.

20) *ibid*:- *you can go in there and think it's just a day*: This structure of things is informed not just by the traditional cosmology of Buddhism but also by many European and other Asian legends and fairy tales. For example the story of Oisín, being taken to the 'Land of Youth', Tir na N'og, by its queen, where 'what he thought was seven days was three times thrice seven years back in County Clare.' Also for example, the story of King Herla, as recounted by Walter Map in the late 12th Century, in his book *De Nugis Curialium*. The story of King Herla is recounted in a comprehensive review of the phenomenon in folklore which can be found in *The Science of Fairy Tales*, by Edwin Sidney Hartland (Walter Scott, 1891), in Ch. 7, 'The Supernatural Lapse of Time in Fairyland', pp178-180 & p234.

21) p29:- *Little King Lhak*: The name is both a derivative of Virulhaka, King of the Kumbhandas, and 'Little King Loc' in the story *L'Abeille* by Anatole France, and retold in 'The Story of Little King Loc' in *The Olive Fairy Book*, ed. by Andrew Lang, (Longmans, Green & Co., 1897 and 1928), pp43-63.

Chapter 5: The Uninspiring Monk

1) p31:- *addressing Udayin about how misguided he had been*: This incident formed the basis for the Saṅghadisesa rule #2 and similar incidents with Ven. Udāyin were the basis for Saṅg. #3 as well. Needless to say, Krishna's presence in the scenario is an addition by the author.

2) *ibid*:- *and then to let go of attachment to the pleasure we feel*: This is the opposite of what is stated by the Buddha at M 22.9. With respect to the idea of experiencing sense pleasure without attachment he says: 'Bhikkhus, that one can engage in sensual pleasures [e.g. sexual intercourse] without sensual desires, without perceptions of sensual desire, without thoughts of sensual desire – that is impossible,' (Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.).

3) *ibid*:- *the scanty virtue and wisdom of the narrow-minded*: This phrase is borrowed from the Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra, where a 'superior' view to that of the perceived-as-small-minded Śrāvaka is espoused. For example:

Then Vimalakīrti told Śāriputra and all the other Śrāvakas, 'Venerables, you may come and eat of the food of the Tathāgata. It is ambrosia infused with great compassion. Do not eat it with a narrow mind for if you do so you will not be able to digest it.'

But some Śrāvakas thought, 'How can such a small amount of food feed everyone in this great assembly?'

The transformation-bodied Bodhisattva said, ‘Do not use the scanty virtue and wisdom of a Śrāvaka to measure the immeasurable merit and wisdom of the Tathāgata! The four oceans might dry up but this food cannot be exhausted.’

Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra 10.104

- 4) p32:– *how he led his half-brother Nanda to full enlightenment*: The story is found at Ud 3.2.
- 5) *ibid*:– *crowds of apsaras, nymphs with feet as delicate as doves*: The Pali term for these beings is *accharā kakūṭapāda*. ‘*Apsarā*’ is the Skt for ‘*accharā*’. They are celestial musicians and dancers who abide in the Tavatīṃsa Heaven. See e.g. S 1.46, Jāt 182, as well as Ud 3.2.
- 6) *ibid*:– *as soft as the breasts of doves*: This phrase is borrowed from the poem *To a Lady Seen From the Train*, by Frances Cornford.
- 7) p33:– *thoroughly convincing examples he gave*: This is an echo, or more accurately a mirror image, of the advice given to Krishna’s father, Kāmanīta, in Ch. 20 of *The Pilgrim Kāmanīta* – ‘The Unreasonable Child’.
- 8) *ibid*:– *that the old seeress Gavinna had spoken of*: This is a reference to *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, p335.
- 9) p34:– *a substantial group of monks walking with him*: This was the usual way that the Buddha travelled – always on foot and accompanied by a large group of monks. From time to time he walked with just one attendant monk, such as Ud 8.7, and very rarely, all alone, such as at M 128.5-6.
- 10) *ibid*:– *any negative actions by body speech or mind*: This ceremony is regularly practised 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 when it will be useful to ‘clean the slate’ and to acknowledge any hurt that might have been caused.
- 11) *ibid*:– *apprenticed to him, in ‘dependence’*: A monk or a nun is expected to ‘take dependence on a teacher’ (‘*acariya*’ in Pali), for at least the first five years of their monastic training. This is so that they have a responsible mentor and teacher for this formative period, just as a seamstress, a baker, a carpenter, a riding instructor etc. would be apprenticed to a mentor for, say, five to seven years to learn their craft.

12) p35:– *should not be getting ahead of the Elder*: A standard that is maintained in strict monasteries, especially of the Southern Tradition, is that when walking together the senior always walks in front.

13) ibid:– *Assaji and Punabbasuka*: These two badly behaved but influential monks resided at Kīṭāgiri, seemingly for a long time. They are mentioned as the cause of Saṅg #13, where the story is related much as recounted here. It is found at Vin. iii 179-82. The Buddha comes to give them advice as recounted in the Kīṭāgiri Sutta, M 70.

The two Elders were also known as members of the notorious ‘Group of Six’ (*chabbaggiya*) monks who were responsible for the laying down of numerous training precepts by the Buddha, on account of their unruly behaviour and attitudes. The other members were Mettiya and Bhummajaka, who were based in Rājagaha, and Panduka and Lohitaka, who resided at the Jetavana.

NB This ‘Assaji’ is not to be confused with ‘the enlightened Elder Assaji’ who was one of the original five disciples of the Buddha. They are very different people but, ironically, they shared the same name.

14) ibid:– *a pattern of yantras*: ‘Yantra’ is a Skt word for a symbolic pattern or matrix of letters, numbers and symbols, used since ancient times in India and South-East Asia to act as a protective charm or to bestow particular powers or enchantments. Yantras are also used as meditation objects or symbols of spiritual truths.

The game referred to in this passage of the story is translated by I.B. Horner as ‘they played a game of stepping onto diagrams’.

15) p36:– *his bowl was half-concealed by his robe*: This is one of the stipulations of the Vinaya for monks and nuns going on alms round in villages and towns.

16) p37:– *he was walking at an even pace*: Similarly, monastics are encouraged to walk ‘neither too fast or too slow’ when on alms-round. Likewise, in the Brahmāyu Sutta (M 91.10), it describes how the Buddha ‘walks neither too quickly or too slowly’.

17) ibid:– *those who go about in his name are not following his True Path*: Again, this story is all based directly on the origin of Saṅg. #13, although neither the monk or the faithful lay-disciple are named in the Vinaya text, (see Vin iii 179-82).

Chapter 6: The Encounter at the Well

- 1) p38:– *all daughters, who now lived in their new family homes*: It is still the custom in India for a newly-married couple to reside in the husband's home.
- 2) p39:– *after extensive astrological research had been made*: This echoes the process of finding a new wife for Kamanita, in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Ch. 14, pp83-86.
- 3) p40:– *regular applications of madayantika*: This is henna, or camphire, which is still used today in these regions of Northern India and Pakistan.
- 4) p42:– *he bowed three times*: This is the traditional way of formally greeting elder monastics, in both the Southern and Northern traditions. The customary way of doing this, in the Southern Buddhist world, is to kneel down then bring the hands, palms together, to the forehead, then to bow the head to the ground, with the forehead just between the two hands. This is repeated three times. After the third bow the hands, palms together, are brought to the heart.
- 5) *ibid*:– *Sariputta, ever the dialectician*: One of the most significant qualities of Ven. Sāriputta was his analytical ability and he was named by the Buddha as supreme in this respect. It was also one reason why he was called 'Dhammasenapati' 'The Marshal of the Dhamma'. There are numerous discourses and dialogues of Sāriputta that demonstrate his skill in both understanding and teaching; he was given the recognition of being '*etadaggami mahapaññānami*' meaning 'foremost among those who possess wisdom'.
- 6) *ibid*:– *and they take steps to cater for it*: As found re the combative factions of the Kosambi monks, coming to stay at the Jetavana: 'How should they be accommodated for lodging, Venerable Sir?!' 'Lodge them secluded from each other,' (Vin MV 10).
- 7) *ibid*:– *less-than-fully-enlightened like you and me*: Ven. Ānanda is being generous here! Whilst he was an *anāgāmi* (a Non-returner) at this point Krishna was still on the very preliminary stages of the path, before Stream-entry.
- 8) *ibid*:– *I was concerned*: Ānanda was the great conciliator of the Sangha, always looking to reduce difficulty and conflict. For example, his request to the Buddha to allow women to be ordained as nuns (A 8.51, Vin CV 10), also when Vacchagotta, the wanderer, asked some questions and the Buddha remained silent (at S 44.10).

9) *ibid*:– *his penetrating gaze and quiet yet daunting authority*: Mahā-Moggallāna was the Second Chief Disciple, after Sāriputta. He was known for his extensive psychic powers. There are very few discourses attributed to him.

10) *p43*:– *followers of Assaji and Punabbasuka to leave Kitagiri forthwith*: This closely follows the account in the Vinaya (Vin iii 179) when the Act of Banishment was carried out. The Pali word for this is ‘*pabbājaniyakamma*’. This event was also the cause for the Buddha establishing the Saṅg #13 – re not disputing Sangha acts that have been validly carried out.

11) *ibid*:– *I won’t have to wander its lanes at this time of the day*: Monastics go to the village or town in the morning to receive alms-food. By the end of the day and evening – if the Sangha members are keeping the Rule – they will not be accepting offers of food and, since the evening is usually the time of day when people engage in pleasure-seeking and amusements after the working day, it is not advised for monastics to be spending time in such inhabited areas, such ‘wrong resorts’ (*micchagocāra*) are to be avoided.

12) *ibid*:– *would you be kind enough to give me some of your water?*: This story is very well known but it is not found in the Pali Canon. One source is the Sārdūlakarṇāvadāna of the Divyāvadāna (Ch. 33). There have been several Chinese and Tibetan translations of this, starting in the Second Century CE. Western renditions of the story have been made by Eugène Burnouf, in his seminal *Introduction to the History of Indian Buddhism* (1844); an English version can be found in the Katia Buffetrille and Donald S. Lopez translation (Chicago University, 2010) on pp22-25.

Paul Carus published a briefer version in *Buddha, the Gospel*, (1894) in a chapter entitled ‘The Woman at the Well’. Interestingly it was also a major theme of the prospective opera, by Richard Wagner, called *Die Sieger*, (*The Victors*), which was sketched out in 1856 but never completed, although doctrinal elements from it can be found in his great musical drama *Parsifal*.

Most of the Divyāvadāna has been expertly translated into English by Andy Rotman (*Divine Stories*, Vols. 1 & 2, Wisdom Publications, 2008, 2017) but for some unknown reason, even though he states in the Introduction to Volume 1 (p4) that the Sārdūlakarṇāvadāna chapter will be included in Volume 2, it has not been, with the brief comment in the Introduction to Volume 2 stating merely that ‘the stories not translated in this collection are mostly available elsewhere’ (p x). This is disappointing.

A derivative version of the story is the linchpin of the Shurangama Sūtra, a Chinese text. In it a girl, only referred to as ‘Matangi’s daughter’ sees Ānanda on his alms-round and falls in love with him. She asks her mother to put a spell on him, via a mantra of the Kapilas, and he is about to break his Precepts with her when the Buddha intervenes by reciting the Shurangama Mantra, to counteract the Kapila region’s mantra. Ānanda swiftly

comes to his senses and the Buddha then gives him instruction on the mind and the nature of perception. See *The Shurangama Sutra*, Vol I, pp36-37 and pp132-142 (Ch. 4, 'Ananda's Fall'), pub. DRBU/BTTS, 2003.

13) p44:– *I did not ask you for your caste but for water*: When entering the monastic order of the Buddha all caste and social rank are put aside, and caste laws no longer apply. This was portended in a vivid dream before the Buddha's enlightenment, where different coloured birds came from the four quarters and alighted at his feet, where they all became of one colour. This represented the four castes becoming equal in the Sangha (A 5.196). Additionally, water is the only consumable that a monastic can ask a layperson for, according to the Vinaya, as in Pac. #40.

14) p45:– *that woman's name is Khujjuttara*: She was the lay-woman disciple of the Buddha acknowledged by him as having the keenest wisdom and being foremost in learning. She was also physically challenged by a deformity of her back (which gave her her name 'Bent in the upper parts'). The only book of the Tipiṭaka that is attributed to a lay person is the Itivuttaka, 'As it Was Said', being her recollections of the Buddha's teachings in Kosambi. She plays a major part in the story of *Mara and the Mangala I*.

15) ibid:– *an obhāsa-dhārā of the Buddha*: This is a 'light-body' projection that the Buddha was able to send forth, also known as a 'transformation-body': a kind of hologramic presence that he occasionally used to offer teachings with when he was physically distant. It is mentioned in the commentarial literature as often used when teaching nuns who were alone in retreat. There is a whole chapter recounting twelve such incidents in the book *The Enlightened Nuns from the Time of the Buddha*, Ch. 5, by Ven. Panadure Vajira Silmatha, ed. by Ajahn Candasiri and the author, Amaravati Publications, 2024.

16) p46:– *a subject of King Dhatarattha*: Dhataratṭha rules the East and the gandharvas; as above Ch 3, note 17.

17) ibid:– *the invigorating perfume, amatagandha*: This invention forms a major part of the story of *Mara and the Mangala I*, p190 ff.

Chapter 7: Matanga's Devotion

1) p48:– *not cross nobody's shadow*: According to the ritual observances of the brahmins, not only should they never touch a low caste person, they should never even let such a

person cross their shadow – see *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 21 note 9. In the *Mātaṅga Jātaka*, Jāt 497, the Bodhisatta was called *Mātaṅga*, and was of the *caṇḍāla* caste. The daughter of a rich merchant, on the way to a picnic in the park with her friends, happened to see *Mātaṅga* so she ‘washed her eyes with perfumed water’ and cancelled the picnic. Her friends, annoyed at the loss of the free food and liquor, then beat *Mātaṅga* blaming him for their loss.

2) *ibid*:– *humble lay devotees, upasika and upasaka*: these two Pali terms are used in reference to all lay female and male disciples respectively. The word literally means ‘One who sits close by’.

3) *ibid*:– *to help with any needs along the way*: When going on long ‘*tudong*’ walks in a large group like this, in the Thai forest tradition at least, it is not uncommon for a few lay devotees to participate in the journey, both for their own spiritual enrichment and to help with practicalities along the way. A single monk or nun, or a small group, would often travel with a lay supporter of the same gender, in a similar fashion. See *Tudong – The Long Road North* (1984) by the author.

4) *ibid*:– *between the River Gomati and the River Sarayu*: These are known today as the River Bomti or Gomati, and the River Sarju or Sarayu. They meet at the town of Bageshwar, in the present day State of Uttarakhand.

5) p49:– *holdouts at Kitagiri*: The detailed story of how the emissaries came from the Jetavana to *Kīṭāgiri*, and the unreceptiveness of the monks there, is found in the origin story of *Saṅg* #13. The account of the Buddha himself coming to see those ‘hold-outs’, and endeavouring to offer them guidance, is found in the *Kīṭāgiri Sutta*, M 70.

6) *ibid*:– *She would chat with him*: The precepts that govern conversation and social contact between monks and women, and nuns and men, are quite detailed. In the customs of travelling in a group like this, such conversations would only be considered suitable when there was an informal time, (perhaps walking through a broad pasture or through a park, where the group would not have to walk in a narrow line), or at a rest stop with other monks or lay men close by and in earshot.

7) *ibid*:– *we’re on probation for a bit*: The Buddha had already established many rules that the *Kīṭāgiri* monks had transgressed – the *Saṅg* #13 rule being the last one in that category. The monks having repeatedly come into physical contact with women, with lustful intent, transgressed *Saṅg* #2, and having engaged in flirtatious speech they had broken *Saṅg* #3

and Saṅg #4. It is likely that they broke Saṅg #1 as well, which prohibits masturbation, but no mention is made of that in the Vinaya origin story or in the Sutta.

Since Krishna and the other monks desirous of rehabilitation now acknowledged the faults that they had made, this entailed a formal loss of status and exclusion from some Sangha events a) for the period of time for which the offences were concealed and then b) an additional six days of extra-strict observance. After all that is completed then there would be a ceremony, with at least twenty monks present, in which the monks who had transgressed would be fully reinstated. The three stages are called: *parivāsa*, *mānatta*, and *abbhāna*.

8) p50:– *like a goat that's had all the bad luck of the village tied to it*: This is the literal 'scapegoat', a custom found in various forms in many traditional communities, even today. A good example can be found in the Bible, Leviticus 16:21-22: 'Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat and confess over it all the iniquities and transgressions of the Israelites, whatever their sins, putting them on the head of the goat; and it shall be sent off to the wilderness through a designated man. Thus the goat shall carry on it all their iniquities to an inaccessible region; and the goat shall be set free in the wilderness.'

9) ibid:– *I can even read and write*: As described in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 13, p142.

10) ibid:– *it's a long story*: Viz. the whole story of *Mara and the Mangala I*.

11) p51:– *he was known as a Non-returner*: This is the third level of enlightenment. The first is Stream-enterer (*sotāpanna*); the second is Once-returner (*sakadāgāmi*); this third is *anāgāmi*; and the fourth is full enlightenment (*Arahant*). An *anāgāmi* has fully let go of all ill-will (*byāpāda*) and lustfulness (*kāma-rāga*).

12) ibid:– *thirty-seven Rains before taking on robes*: Ven. Ānanda was part of a group of Sakyans who went forth into the Sangha in the second year after the Buddha's enlightenment, when he went to visit the place of his early life, Kapilavatthu. With Ānanda there were five other Sakyan princes – Bhaddiya, Anuruddha, Bhagu, Kimbila and Devadatta, as well as Upāli who had been their barber. As an aspiration towards humility, being vauntingly proud Sakyans, they invited Upāli to Go Forth first, so he would always be senior to the rest of them, as now former princes.

13) p52:– *a completely new song*: This phrase is borrowed from *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Ch. 36, p213.

14) *ibid*:– *Three is enough, Matanga*: Customarily, in the Buddhist tradition, when paying respects to an Elder or senior one bows three times – once for the Buddha, once for the Dhamma and once for the Sangha. In some traditions the practice of extensive repeated bowing is found – for example the 100,000 prostrations that form a part of the ‘preliminary practices’ of *ngöndro* in the Tibetan field of training.

Also, when in a state of exultation and grateful reverence, after his realization of enlightenment, it is said that Ven. Ajahn Mun Bhuridatto, ‘wept as he thought of how he finally came upon a pool of crystal-clear, wondrous tasting water. He had reached Nong Aw (“a pool of understanding”), that sparkling pool of pure Dhamma that the Lord Buddha and his Arahant disciples encountered and then proclaimed to the world over 2500 years ago. Having at long last encountered it himself, he tirelessly paid heartfelt homage, prostrating himself over and over again to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. Should people have seen him then, tears streaming down his face as he prostrated over and over again, surely they would have assumed that this monk was suffering immensely, shedding tears so profusely.’ *Venerable Ācariya Mun Buridatta Thera – A Spiritual Biography*, by Ācariya Mahā Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, Bhikkhu Dick Sīlaratano trans., Forest Dhamma Publications, 2010.

15) p54:– *soft chords on vinas*: The vina is a seven-stringed instrument known as ‘the Indian lute’ or ‘mandolin’. It is akin to the sitar of today, although somewhat smaller.

16) *ibid*:– *endless interchanging melodies... into the heights*: This passage is borrowed from *The Silmarillion* by J.R.R. Tolkien, Ch. 1, pp3-4, ‘The Music of the Ainur’, pub. HarperCollins, 2022.

17) *ibid*:– *banners flying from the turrets and pinnacles*: This description of the Gandharva Realm is derived in part from *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, Reynolds and Reynolds trans., University of California, Berkeley (1982).

18) *ibid*:– *the assembly hall, the sala*: A *sālā* is any large, usually open-sided, building used for gatherings of various kinds, spiritual teachings and meditation being among them. The French word for a room or a hall, ‘salle’, ultimately derives from the same Proto-Indo-European ‘sel’ meaning ‘human settlement, village, dwelling’. The Latin ‘cella’ meaning a cell, the Greek ‘kalia’, meaning a hut, and the Old High German ‘halla’, meaning a hall, are all related.

19) *ibid*:– *the Master’s voice is so clear*: One of the characteristics of the Buddha was not only that he had ‘a Brahmā-like voice, like that of the karavika bird’ (D 30.1.2) but also that, ‘The speech that issues from his mouth has eight qualities: is distinct, intelligible, melodious, audible, ringing, euphonious, deep and sonorous. But while his voice is

intelligible as far as the audience extends, his speech does not issue out beyond the audience,' (M 91.21).

20) p55:– Four asankheyyas and one hundred thousand kalpas ago: An asankheyya kalpa is 10^{140} years, according to H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil – much longer than the age of our current known universe (1.37×10^{10} years)!

This account of the brahmin Sumedha making the Bodhisattva vow with the Buddha Dipankara, is found in the Buddhavaṃsa and the Apadāna. A curiosity of the history of Amaravati Monastery in England is that Ajahn Sumedho chose the name for the monastery without being aware of this story. A regular kalpa, by some reckonings, is roughly seventeen million years.

21) ibid:– *They who forsake the truth ... the reality of things*: This passage is found at Jāt 431, Jātaka Stories, Vol III, p296.

22) ibid:– *I picked up a water dipper ... tell a deliberate lie*: These passages come from M 61.3-6, 'The Advice to Rahula at Ambalaṭṭhika'.

23) p56:– *the underlying tendencies, the anusaya*: These are mentioned in various formats and contexts in many places in the Pali Canon. The full set of seven are listed at M 18.8, 'The Honeyball Discourse'.

24) ibid:– *The mind can be influenced by*: The Pali terms for these seven are: rāga; paṭigha; diṭṭhi; vicikicchā; māna; bhava-rāga; and avijjā.

25) ibid:– *said 'Sādhu!' three times, with a single voice*: It is customary in the Southern Buddhist world to express approval of a teaching by all the assembly responding in this way. The word 'sādhu' means 'it is well' or 'I approve!' Saying it three times is also part of classical Buddhist style, to make sure the meaning and intentions are clear to the speaker and the hearer.

Chapter 8: Kapilavatthu – The Citadel of the Sakyans

1) p57:– *The Jetavana – Jeta's Grove*: The story of the purchase of the Grove from Prince Jeta is found at Vin CV 6.

2) ibid:– *She had come from a humble background ... that very same day*: The story of how Mallika met King Pasenadi and became his queen that same day is found at Jāt 415.

3) p58:– *We have had disputes from time to time*: Such as at M 87.5, where a disagreement ends with, ‘Be off Mallikā, away with you!’ And in another she berates him thus, ‘You are a simpleton, Your Majesty. You may have an abundant supply of food, you may feast upon viands flavoured with all manner of sauces and curries cooked by the bucketful, you may rule over two kingdoms, but all the same you have very little sense.’ This is found in the commentary to Dhp 60, in *Buddhist Legends*, Vol. 2, E.W. Burlingame trans., p113.

4) *ibid*:– *No monks are available to come*: The majority of the story here comes from the preamble to Jāt 465, in *The Jātaka*, Vol. IV, p91ff. In the original there is no connection made with the fact that Queen Mallikā had not borne a son, it was just to cement relations with the Sakyans. The story also forms the Commentary to Dhp 47.

5) *ibid*:– *put on a diet by the Master*: This account is found at S 3.10. The Buddha’s advice to him, having arrived ‘huffing and puffing’ after having eaten ‘a bucket-measure of rice and curries’, was:

*‘When a man is always mindful
knowing moderation in the food he eats
his ailments then diminish:
He ages slowly, guarding his life.’*

(Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

6) *ibid*:– *hands in añjali*: This is the Pali term for the gesture mentioned above, in Ch. 6, note 4; it means ‘the hands brought palms together, at the heart or raised to the forehead’.

7) p60:– *eight or nine leagues*: The term ‘league’ here is being used as a loose translation of the Pali word ‘yojana’. This was reckoned, by some accounts, as the distance an oxcart could travel comfortably in one day. This is about eight to ten miles or twelve to sixteen kilometres. The distance from Sāvattthī to Kapilavatthu was about sixty miles or just shy of 100 km. NB A ‘league’ has been commonly defined as about three miles but this measure varies, as does the *yojana*.

8) p61: *you have to guess whether the person is lying or not*: The British TV programmes ‘Call My Bluff’ and ‘Would I Lie to You?’ are good contemporary parallels to this.

9) p63:– *a cheerful one-handed maid named Kesini*: This character was introduced in *Mara and the Mangala I*, in Ch. 23, p295, as a helper and servant of the seeress Gavinna.

10) p64:- *How kind of you to let me come*: These words are borrowed from the film *My Fair Lady*, a musical about the transformation of the flower-girl Eliza Doolittle into one who can pass as a duchess. The film loosely follows the original play *Pygmalion*, by George Bernard Shaw, (1912), which in turn is based upon the ancient Greek/Roman myth of Galataea and Pygmalion, where the latter is a sculptor who falls in love with a statue he has made. The gods smile upon him and bring the statue to life, as Galataea. An account of this is found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Book 10.

11) *ibid*:- *in her finery*: The stage direction in *Pygmalion*, at a comparable point in the plot, reads: 'Eliza, who is exquisitely dressed, produces an impression of such remarkable distinction and beauty as she enters that they all rise, quite flustered,' (*Pygmalion*, Act 3).

Chapter 9: A Bride of the King

1) p67:- *would never use anything but their right*: This custom still pertains in many parts of the Middle East and Asia, particularly with respect to eating food and giving an object to someone else – to give with the left hand would be insulting.

2) *ibid*:- *just one hand, having lost the other in a tragic fire*: This is referring to *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 23, pp295-308.

3) *ibid*:- *right hand and forearm burned off*: Unfortunately this kind of prejudice still is found in the world today. It is based on a misunderstanding of karma and its results, according to the Buddha's teaching, and also on more deterministic and rigid folklores of other religions and cultures. The Buddha does sometimes refer to the results of actions deriving directly and obviously from the action that has been performed (e.g. at M 135) but he also points out how those results can ripen at unpredictable times and in unpredictable ways (e.g. at M 136). This is to say that there is no *fixed* result of an intended action; precisely how and when it will ripen is complex and not calculable.

Similarly, the precise causes of every specific experience cannot be fully pinned down – notably the structure of each present moment's field of perceptions, how the experience of an individual's 'now' is shaped, depends not only on the patterning of intended actions of the past (*kamma-niyāma*) but also on the laws of physics and chemistry (*utu-niyāma*), the laws of biology (*bhija-niyāma*), the laws of psychology (*citta-niyāma*) and the laws that govern the structure and process of reality itself (*Dhamma-niyāma*).

4) p70:– *Mara, the Lord of Lies*: Māra is the personification of death and delusion in Buddhist cosmology his name actually meaning ‘death’. He appears in the title of this book, and its predecessor, (*Mara and the Mangala I*). There are a vast number of occasions in the Pali Canon where Māra is depicted as appearing in order to seduce, tease or threaten, or quietly influence an individual’s thoughts and actions, for example at SN 3.2, S 4.1-25, S 5.1-10, M 49.5-31, M 50.1-31. In almost every case a deception is directly intended, to encourage a person, or a deity, to see things not as they really are, or to encourage unskilful and worldly actions – hence the title used here ‘The Lord of Lies’.

According to Buddhist cosmology there are five Māras or five aspects of that single delusional and destructive influence, one associated with each of the five *khandhas*:

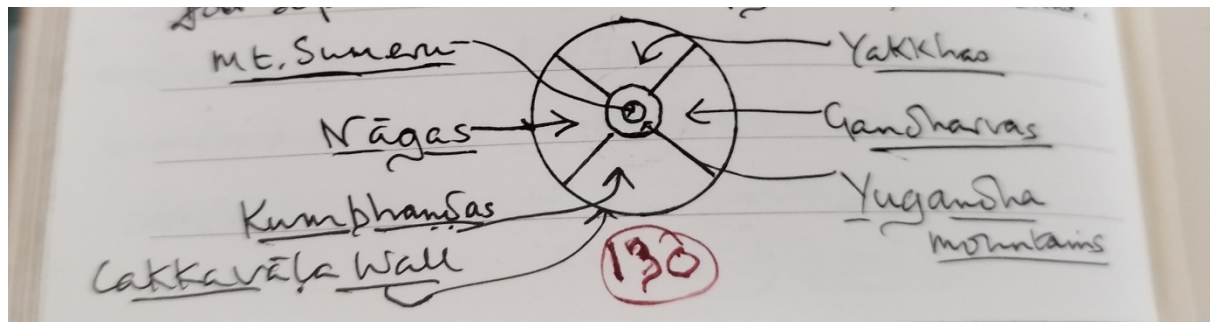
- 1) Maccu Māra – physical death – this mode is related to ‘material form’.
- 2) Kilesa Māra – defilements – this mode is related to ‘feeling’.
- 3) Khandha Māra – identification with the body and personality, the five *khandhas* – this mode is related to ‘perception’.
- 4) Abhisankhāra Māra – attachment to thoughts and opinions, emotions and choices – this mode is related to ‘mental formations’.
- 5) Devaputta Māra – identification with bright and wholesome states – this mode is related to ‘discriminative consciousness’.

Lastly, one of the ways that Māra is addressed in the suttas is ‘Kinsman of the Heedless’ or ‘Cousin of the Negligent’, ‘*Pamatta Bandhu*’ (e.g. at SN 3.2 and S 5.1). This well describes his nature, being deeply related to heedlessness, unawareness, ignorance. As the Buddha phrased it in the Dhammapada:

Heedfulness is the path to the Deathless
Heedlessness is the path to Death.
The heedful never die,
The heedless are as if dead already.

Dhp 21

5) p72:– *the border with the Yakkha Realm*: the topography of the Realm of the Four Great Kings, or the Guardian Deities is described, in *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, Ch. 6, pp218-23. The Realm is considered to be roughly circular with Mount Sumeru at the centre, surrounded by the Yugandha Mountain Range. The four separate realms occupy each quarter thus:



6) p73:- *The Tavatimsa devas ... and kumbhandas*: this passage refers to events in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, p368.

7) p74:- *sit in a howdah*: This is a canopied seat for riding on the back of an elephant. The mahout, the guide and handler, would sit on the neck of the elephant.

8) pp74-5:- *Jetavana ... the nuns monastery - the Visakharama ... the Eastern Park Monastery*: These three were the principle Buddhist monasteries close to Sāvatthī. They were established by the Sangha and their supporters, after having been offered to the Buddha by his great laywoman disciple Visākhā and the great layman disciple Anāthapiṇḍika.

In the scriptures the residence for the community of nuns was not referred to by a name; the author has taken the liberty of giving it one here. The term that is used for the place in the Pali Canon is simply '*bhikkhū-passaya*' meaning 'the residence of bikkhūīs.' Since the great lay-woman disciple Visākhā was a supporter of the nuns as well as the monks (e.g, see Vin MV 8) and since she donated the Eastern Park Monastery at Sāvatthī (the Pubbārama), and since no donor is named (to the author's knowledge) for the bhikkhūni monastery, the name seems appropriate to use here.

9) *ibid*:- *caused the whole city of Savatthi to be decorated*: This description is from the preamble to Jāt 465, 'The Bhadda-Sāla Jātaka'.

Chapter 10: Prince Jeta's Grove

1) p76:- *prohibited from performing marriages by their Rule*: This stipulation is still observed today in many Buddhist countries. It derives primarily from Saṅg #5 which forbids a monk to act as a go-between. The principle of monastics not getting involved in any way with romantic and/or marriage partnerships in the Buddhist tradition is thus different from the Christian traditions wherein a marriage conducted by a priest is considered a holy sacrament. In the Buddhist view of things it is entirely up to an individual or couple as to how they form their relationships and social commitments.

Wholesomeness and honesty are naturally encouraged, along with simplicity and modesty, but how people choose to bond, or separate, is not the domain of the renunciant monastic community. This kind of division of roles described here pertains in, for example, Thailand – where a brahmin priest carries out the wedding and the Sangha bless it afterwards.

2) *ibid*:– *to bless their union as well*: This kind of chanting is called ‘*paritta*’ or ‘protection’.

3) *ibid*:– *and repeat it all*: This is how the sutta collection called the Itivuttaka was composed, (see Ch. 6, note 14, above).

4) p77:– *made their way out of the city in the mid-morning*:” Sāvattthī was right beside the River Aciravatī, (now known as the River Rapti and which has since changed its course), while the Jetavana was about one mile away to the south of the city. Nowadays the two places are referred to as Saheth-Maheth, the former being the Jetavana site and the latter being the ancient city. The banks of the old city walls, and its gateways, as well as the remains of many buildings in the Jetavana, are still in evidence today. They are protected by the Archaeological Survey of India and are visited by thousands of pilgrims annually.

5) *ibid*:– *a roaring sea of silvery sound brimmed in her hearing*: This sound is known, in the Vedic tradition, as ‘*brahma-nada*’ or just ‘*nada*’, meaning ‘the divine sound’ in Skt its presence can be used as a meditation object. See *Inner Listening* by the author; there is, seemingly, a significant appearance of it in *The Shurangama Sūtra* as well, in Ch. 3, (p256 of the BTTS/DRBU ed., 2009).

6) p78:– *had washed their alms-bowls*: One of the standard forms of daily practice for Buddhist monks and nuns, and also spelled out in the Vinaya rules, is that immediately after finishing the morning meal, the alms-bowl should be washed, dried and put away tidily. Monastics have few possessions, and are encouraged not to be attached to worldly things, but the few things they do have are to be taken care of in a thoughtful way.

7) *ibid*:– *the Gandha-kuti*: The Gandha-kuṭī is the name of the Buddha’s dwelling place, it means ‘the fragrant chamber’ and was said to have a delightful natural perfume owing to the presence of the Buddha. It was not scented by flowers, scents or incense. The site of the Gandha-kuṭī at the Jetavana is the central focus of pilgrimage there today.

8) p80:– *two hundred and fifty gold kahapanas every year*: A *kahapana* was worth one sixth of a troy ounce of gold. At gold prices today those fifty gold pieces would be worth about £16,000.

- 9) *ibid:- Prince Malabhari:* Prince Mālābhārī is mentioned as a deva prince in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, in the Commentary to Dhṛp 48.
- 10) p81:- *Lake Anotatta:* The name means, literally, ‘No Heat’. It is likely to be Lake Manasarova, close to Mount Kailash, in Western Tibet, by modern reckonings.
- 11) p84:- *the Tusita Heaven:* In Buddhist cosmology this is the fifth of the seven sensual heavens. It is two above the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven. The name means ‘The Heaven of the Contented’. The time scale here is such that a single day and night is equivalent to four hundred years in the Human Realm – hence the need for our trusty protagonists to make a very short visit there.
- 12) *ibid:- an interview with the Lord Maitreya:* The Pali form for the name is ‘Metteyya’. According to Buddhist mythology all Buddhas spend their last lifetime as a Bodhisatta, before their birth in the Human Realm and full enlightenment, in the Tusita Heaven.

Chapter 11: Together Forever

- 1) p86:- *I should be prepared for separation:* One of the ‘Five subjects for frequent recollection’, as recommended by the Buddha for both monastic and lay disciples, is: ‘All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.’ It is found at A 5.57. It one of the most frequently recited recollections in the countries of the Southern Buddhist world.
- 2) *ibid:- if a couple ... generosity and wisdom:* This advice is given by the Buddha to his elderly disciples Nakulapitā and Nakulamātā who were concerned that they might not be able to share a life after the present one. The passage is found at A 4.55.
- 3) *ibid:- “reappearance through aspiration” ... lead to you being born there:* This passage is found at M 120. These pieces of advice were indeed given by the Buddha but it is important to bear in mind that they were given in the context that no birth can be permanent, and that ending rebirth is recommended!
- 4) *ibid:- this is for one who is virtuous:* This elaboration on the theme of willed ‘reappearance’ is found at A 8.35.
- 5) *ibid:- one who is virtuous succeeds because of purity:* This comment is from the same sutta as the preceding quote.

- 6) *ibid:- kanavera reds*: Ant's proper name is Sugandha-Kanavera. This red flower is *nerium odorum*, a type of oleander.
- 7) p87:- *cared for by older sisters and an occasional aunt*: This type of shared childcare is still very common in rural Asia.
- 8) *ibid:- What shall his name be?*: This whole passage on the naming of Prince Viḍūḍabha is from the preamble to Jāt 465.
- 9) p89:- *I undertake the Precept to refrain from lying*: The Five Precepts, as the standard form of skilful conduct as advised by the Buddha for lay-people, are:
- 1) I undertake ... to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.
 - 2) I undertake ... to refrain from taking that which is not given.
 - 3) I undertake ... to refrain from sexual misconduct.
 - 4) I undertake ... to refrain from lying.
 - 5) I undertake ... to refrain from consuming intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness.
- 10) *ibid:- One who meditates ... a real brahmin*: This passage is Dhṛp 386.
- 11) p90:- *a lump of palm-sugar*: This is a simple and common sweet in South and South-East Asia. It is made from the sap of the palm tree. A close but distinct equivalent is *jaggery*, made from the sap of sugar-cane.
- 12) *ibid:- sympathetic joy*: This is one of the Four Sublime Abidings, or *Brahmā Vihārā*. They are:
- 1) *Mettā* – loving-kindness, a radical acceptance.
 - 2) *Karuṇā* – compassion, empathy.
 - 3) *Muditā* – sympathetic joy, delight at the good fortune of others.
 - 4) *Upekkhā* – serenity, equanimity, even-mindedness.
- 13) *ibid:- the city of Lord Indra ... golden turrets filled the view*: Many aspects of the description of the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven here come from *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp223-9, and *The Buddhist Cosmos*, pp446-7, by Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo.
- 14) p91:- *she was supposed to be betrothed to him*: In the original story, in the Commentary to Dhṛp 48, the corresponding deva partner of Prince Mālābhārī, is unnamed.

15) *ibid*:– *while you are dancing ... beyond all human forms*: These verses come from the ‘Stories of the Heavenly Mansions’ the *Vimāna Vatthu*. The translation here is based on that of I.B. Horner; it is found at Vv 3.10.

16) *ibid*:– *the mañjusaka tree*: This is a celestial type of tree, found in the *Tāvatiṃsa* Heaven. It is mentioned at this quoted passage, from the *Pāricchattaka Sutta*, and in various Commentaries.

Chapter 12: A Kanavera Falls

1) p92:– *celestial flowers – mandarava*: This is the flower of the Coral Tree, in the *Tāvatiṃsa* Heaven, with the earthly counterpart being *Erythrina fulgens*. The blossoms are mentioned at D 16.5.2.

2) *ibid*:– *her gossamer robes seemed more sombre*: The five signs of dying for a deva of the *Tāvatiṃsa* Heaven are:

- 1) The flowers in their abode wither and have no fragrance;
- 2) The garments they wear appear dull and drab;
- 3) They are no longer happy; sweat and scurf seep out from their armpits;
- 4) The seats and cushions upon which they sit and lie seem to be hot, hard and rigid;
- 5) Their bodies become withered and dim and do not emit radiance as before; they become tired, suffer discomfort in their hands and feet, and become restive.

3) *ibid*:– *there’s nothing I can do about it*: It is said that: ‘Some kinds of devatā live, play and enjoy themselves ... and forget to eat their food; and those devatā then die. Even if they forget to eat just one breakfast, or only one meal like that, they are not at all able to retain or bring back their life; and this is true even though, at a later time, they eat a hundred meals. This is because the flesh of the devatā is weak.’ *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* Ch. 6, p241.

4) *ibid*:– *the deva-life ... was coming to an end*: The lifespan of a *Tāvatiṃsa* deva is said to be 1000 celestial years. This is equivalent to 36,000,000 human years, see *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, Ch. 6, p240.

5) p93:– *My end is approaching fast*: Again, in *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* it states: ‘In the case of the devatā who have merit there are five signs that appear seven days before they reach the limit of their lifespan and pass away (p242) ... As for the devatā who have less merit, they simply live and pass away’ (p243). The conditions Ninka is

experiencing are a mixture of the effects of merit – having lived generally skilfully, and the effects of her demeritorious deception at the last.

6) *ibid*:– *Take your disgusting, shit-covered hand ... cut off*: In Asia and the Middle East the left hand is considered the ‘toilet hand’ used for cleaning after defecating. Its use is thus generally avoided when handling food.

7) p94:– *a previous life of the Buddha when he had been a deer*: This refers to Jāt 483.

8) p95:– *a high speed tabla player*: A tabla is a small Indian drum, played with the fingers and the heel of the hand.

9) p98:– *Everything depended on how she focused now*: The effects of intention and resolution in directing a rebirth have been noted above (Ch. 11, notes 2, 3, 4 & 5). In addition, the passages at S 55.21 & .22, being dialogues between the Buddha and his cousin Mahānāma, are significant.

Mahānāma, as a ruler, is concerned that, should he die suddenly (say by accident), his mindfulness being muddled by concerns with affairs of state, then where would he be reborn? Would that confusion and preoccupation at the last moment have a negative effect? The Buddha reassures him, ‘Do not be afraid, Mahānāma, your death will not be a bad one ... When a person’s mind has been fortified over a long period of time by faith, virtue, learning, generosity and wisdom ... their body will break up at death but their mind will go upward, rise to distinction. Just as if you immerse an earthenware pot filled with ghee in water, then break the pot, the shards of clay will sink but the ghee will rise to the surface,’ (S 55.21).

PART II

Chapter 13: The Group of Six

1) p101:– *chatting in the sala or under the trees*: For a bhikkhu to have a conversation with a woman, if he does not have a male chaperone, he should not sit down with them in a secluded or screened place (Pacs ##44 & 45) and he should not speak more than five or six sentences of Dhamma teachings with that person (Pac #7). Thus, sitting for a general conversation in a public area is quite acceptable.

- 2) p102:– *helping to carry the Elder’s bowl and robes*: It is part of a monk’s duty, when receiving visitors, to offer to carry their things and to find suitable lodgings for them.

- 3) *ibid*:– *Panduka and Lohitaka ... Mettiya and Bhummajaka ... Assaji and Basuka*: The three pairs of Elders were the leaders, who thus gave their name to ‘The Group of Six’. All six were originally based in Sāvattihī but at certain times they gravitated to different monasteries, as above, Ch. 5, note 13.

- 4) *ibid*:– *that barber Upali*: The Ven. Upāli was the memorious elder monk who was called upon, at the First Council, just after the Parinibbāna of the Buddha, to recite all the rules of the Vinaya Discipline. Ven. Ānanda was the one who recited all the sutta teachings. Ven. Upāli went forth at the same time as the Sakyan princes and had been their barber, (see above, Ch. 7, note 12).

- 5) p103:– *these lesser and minor training rules ... lead only to anxiety, bother and confusion*: The Group of Six were the cause of many training rules being laid down by the Buddha. This one relates to Pac #72.

- 6) *ibid*:– *a cowherd ... killed when one of them playfully tossed a rock off the Robber’s Cliff*: This relates to one of the stories associated with Par #3, the deliberate taking of a human life. Since there was no intention to kill, it was deemed a minor offence.

- 7) *ibid*:– *a man ... was persuaded to kill himself*: Again this is related to Par #3. In this case it was deemed an offence entailing Defeat – that is to say, a disrobing offence. As that member of the Group of Six was the ‘first offender’ i.e. the rule had not been established when he caused the suicide, the offender not subject to disrobing.

- 8) *ibid*:– *sadly died when tickled*: this relates to Pac #52.

- 9) *ibid*:– *no punitive act could be carried out against any of them*: In order for the possibility of schism to be reduced it is forbidden by Vinaya for a quorum of Sangha members (i.e. four) to carry out a legal act against another quorum. This relates to Pacs ## 79 and 80.

- 10) *ibid*:– *too many robes*: This relates to Nis Pacs ##1 and 7.

- 11) *ibid*:– *going to a free food distribution centre too often*: This relates to Pac #31.

- 12) *ibid*:– *The Group of Seventeen ... teasing and bullying*: This relates to Pacs ##52, 17 and 77.

13) p104:– *at the first touch of the razor ... his great awakening was actualized*: The account of the enlightenment of young Dabba the Mallian can be found in *Thera Apadana*, Ch. 43, #25, also in the *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, Vol II, by G.P. Malalasekera, published by Pali Text Society, p1059.

14) *ibid*:– *A wealthy householder in Savatthi ... she bowed and left them to it*: This story is based on the background to Saṅg #8.

This is also where the story is found of Dabba assigning lodgings and guiding monks through the dark paths at night-time with his luminous finger: ‘When monks arrived at night, he entered the fire element and assigned dwellings with the help of that light. Monks even arrived late on purpose, hoping to see the marvel of Dabba’s supernatural powers.’

15) p108:– *The nun, Sister Mettiya, was possessed by the Evil One*: This is an invention of the author. In the original Vinaya text the Buddha orders Mettiyā to be expelled. This is commented on as a very unlikely and historically problematic act by I.B. Horner, the translator of the text. She notes: ‘This is, I think, clear evidence of monkish gloss. In every case of supposed wrong-doing the Lord has always asked the supposed wrongdoer “Is it true?” and has never condemned anyone without first hearing what he has to say. It is so noteworthy as to be suspicious: Where a woman is involved she is given no chance to exculpate herself to the Lord.’ See I.B. Horner, *Women Under Primitive Buddhism*, published by Routledge & Sons., 1930, pp266-7.

In the centuries after the Pali Canon was composed many people have criticized, and complained about, the treatment of the bhikkunī Mettiyā, as recounted in the Vinaya text. According to the ancient Commentary, her expulsion was one of the controversial points dividing the bhikkhus in the Abhayagiri Vihāra from those in the Mahā Vihāra, in the former capital of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura.

16) *ibid*:– *the shepherd boy ... who threw a rock and injured ... Vidhura*: This incident is mentioned at M 50.20-21, ‘The Rebuke to Māra’.

17) *ibid*:– *the member of the Brahma Baka’s Assembly ... warned me not to disrespect his Brahmā lord*: This incident is mentioned at M 49.5, ‘The Invitation of a Brahmā’.

18) *ibid*:– *she was not in her right mind at the time*: This is a standard ‘exclusion’ clause at the end of the analyses of most Vinaya rules; if the person was ‘mad’ or ‘the first wrong-doer’ – i.e. the one who caused the rule to be first established – then ‘there is no offence’.

- 19) *ibid:- protect her mind from the Evil One:* The whole section entitled the ‘Bhikkhuṇī Saṃyutta’ of the *Connected Discourses* – a collection of ten discourses, all relate incidents of Māra coming to test and threaten, tempt or otherwise harass ten different nuns, see S 5.1-10. They all are very aware of these attacks, and by whom they are being made, and all dispel Māra’s challenges by wisdom, mindfulness and fortitude. Each of these suttas ends with, ‘Then Māra the Evil One, realizing, “The Bhikkhuṇī So-and-so knows me,” sad and disappointed, disappeared right there.’
- 20) p109:- *Vinaya is the life of the religion:* The Pali for this phrase ‘*Vinayo sāsana āyu*’ was inscribed in stone at the entrance to the original *sīma* boundary at Cittaviveka Monastery, West Sussex, when the *sīma* was created in 1981 for the first ordinations of monks by Ajahn Sumedho. The more complete quotation is: ‘*Vinayo nāma sāsana āyu, vinaya ṭhite sāsanaṃ ṭhitari hoti,*’ meaning: ‘The Vinaya is the very life of the Dispensation of the Enlightened One, as long as the Vinaya endures, the Dispensation endures,’ (Samantapāsādikā 3.13).
- 21) *ibid:- the teachings of the Buddhas who established the patimokkha training rules lasted long:* This is mentioned in the Vinaya; the description is quoted in detail in the origin story of Par #1, Vin. I 3, *Book of the Discipline*, Vol. I, I.B. Horner trans., pp14-17.
- 22) *ibid:- the Group of Six, Udayin, Arittha, Sudinna, Thullananda, Sundarinanda:* these were all monks and nuns who were the cause of many Vinaya rules being established.
- 23) p110:- *defaming Dabba with this flimsy legal pretext?:* This derives from the origin story to Saṅg #9, although the incident cited there took place in Rājagaha, near the Vulture Peak, rather than near Sāvattihī.
- 24) p112:- *the Lost Princess of Taxila:* As mentioned in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 20, p252.
- 25) *ibid:- She had been bringing flowers ... since she was a small child:* This story is based on the Commentary to Dhṛp 48; the heroine of the tale there being called Patipūjikā.

Chapter 14: ‘Avoiding the Master!?’

- 1) p114:- ‘*Bhikkhus, I eat at a single session*’: This passage comes at the beginning of the Bhaddāli Sutta, M 65.2. Krishna’s name and story has been substituted for the bhikkhu Bhaddāli in the story.

- 2) *ibid*:- *members of the Sangha can eat one part of the day's food early ... later in the morning*: This is adapted from M 65.3.

- 3) p115:- *We shall eat in the morning, the afternoon and the evening*: This is adapted from the Kīṭāgiri Sutta, M 70.4.

- 4) *ibid*:- *Why make such a to-do out of a mere trifle?*: This is adapted from the Laṭukikopama Sutta, 'The Simile of the Quail', at M 66.7, where Ven. Udayin is surprisingly enthusiastic about the new restrictions on eating.

- 5) *ibid*:- *The Blessed One tells us to abandon the more sumptuous of our two meals ... benefit and well-being*: This is adapted from M 66.4-6.

- 6) *ibid*:- *They had lost their way*: This is adapted from M 70.24.

- 7) p116:- *Better to be afflicted in body, not in mind*: This is from the discourse to Nakulapita, an aged disciple of the Buddha, at S 22.1.

- 8) *ibid*:- *Bad Monk*: This is referred to in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 8, p78. The Pali word is defined in the PTS Dictionary thus: 'Dūsaka - corrupting, disgracing, one who defiles or defames; a robber, rebel.'

- 9) p117:- *the sacred thread, the yajña pavita at their upanayana ceremony*: This is indeed a ritual event for brahmin boys only.

- 10) p118:- *A true dvija*: This is the term for the egg-born as well as brahmins in Indian lore. The word is composed of 'dvi' meaning 'two', and 'ja', from 'jāti', meaning 'birth'.

- 11) p120:- *the Tusita Heaven*: The name means 'The Heaven of the Contented'; this indicates some of the causes of the devas of that realm not to be interested in events and beings outside their sphere of experience. The Lord Maitreya is the exception!

- 12) p121:- *Every minute here is a day gone by*: This is a very rough approximation; the definition in the suttas is that 'For the Tusita devas, a single night and day is equivalent to four hundred human years ... the lifespan of those devas is four thousand such celestial years,' (A 8.42).

13) *ibid*:– *holding a flaming sword*: The figure of guardian devas holding swords is not just found in the biblical world but also in the Pali tradition. In Jāt 422, where the telling of the first lie is recounted, it states: ‘There was a king named Mahāsammata ... He reigned over the kingdom of Ceti ... he could walk aloft and pass through the air, he had four angels, in each of the four quarters to defend him with drawn swords ... At the moment when he uttered this lie, the four angels said they would guard such a liar no longer, threw their swords at his feet and disappeared.’ *The Jātaka*, Vol. III, pp272-3.

14) *ibid*:– *Oh rest ye, fellow travellers, ye need not wander more*: This line is adapted from the last line of *Song of the Lotus-Eaters* by Alfred, Lord Tennyson: ‘O rest ye, brother mariners, we will not wander more.’ This line is the inscription on the gravestone of the author’s mother as she related strongly to its sentiments in her last months.

15) p122:– *Discrimination is consciousness ... no Buddhas*: The lines were spoken by the Bodhisattva Maitreya to the monk Han-Shan Te-Ch’ing (1546-1623) in a dream. He was one of the three ‘dream elephants’ (*nāgas*) or ‘most illustrious monks’, during the final years of the Ming Dynasty. He is particularly renowned for reviving the Ch’an school of Buddhism in China.

The dream in question occurred in the thirty-third year of his life. He saw his body ascend into the highest realms. In his dream there is an immense chamber and in the very centre he sees what appears to be a Diamond Throne. The chamber remains distant until he realizes that, ‘The clean and the unclean are only created in the mind’; when he grasps that, the chamber comes closer. He is led to Lord Maitreya and is then told that, ‘Discrimination is consciousness ... no Buddhas.’ Once he is told this by Lord Maitreya, his ‘body and mind suddenly became void – and at that moment he thoroughly understood the difference between consciousness and wisdom.’ Adapted from *The Mystical Visions of Master Han Shan* Ch. 44, by Steven Todd Kaster, from *The Taboric Light* website.

16) p123:– *Rare it is in the world*: This is based on the observations listed at A 1.333-347 and, more briefly, at A 6.96.

17) p124:– *encouragement towards simplicity, fewness of needs*: For example, the Buddha’s advice to Mahā Pajāpati Gotami at A 8.53.

18) *ibid*:– *This robe is being made for the Blessed One*: This passage is based on M 65.6.

19) p125:– *may you forgive my transgression*: This derives from M 65.10.

- 20) *ibid*:– *I knew, when I surveyed your mind, ‘This misguided man does not heed the Teaching, he does not listen’*: These passages come from M 65.32 and from M 70.24.
- 21) *ibid*:– *You were empty, hollow, a wrong-doer*: This passage derives from M 65.12.
- 22) *ibid*:– *one day, in the far future, he will know*: As in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Ch. 44, p258, when Kamanita has been born as a long-lived brahma god.
- 23) p126:– *When the kindly Queen ... you must do*: This prophetic verse is included in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, p355.
- 24) *ibid*:– *There is no ‘teacher’s closed fist’*: This refers to the tradition, in some spiritual circles, for teachings to be restricted deliberately, some principles and practices only being accessible to certain initiates or an inner circle. In D 16.2.25, ‘The Discourse on the Buddha’s Last Days’, the Buddha specifically states that he never operates in this way, ‘I have taught the Dhamma, Ānanda, making no “inner” and “outer”’: The Tathāgata has no “teacher’s closed fist” with respect to various teachings and practices.’ As the translator Maurice Walshe notes on this: ‘A famous statement, implying that there is no “esoteric” teaching in Buddhism, at least as originally taught by the Founder.’ An example of a tradition that does use the “closed fist” is found in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Ch. 10, pp57-60, and in note 1 for that chapter, p287.
- 25) p127:– *Devadatta, the Master’s cousin*: He was one of the Sakyan princes who left the home life along with Ānanda and others (see Ch. 7 note 12, above). His father was the brother of Queen Mahā Māyā, the Buddha’s mother; his mother was Amitā. His sister was Princess Yasodhara, also known as Rahulamātā, who was the Buddha’s wife, before his Great Renunciation. Devadatta was thus brother-in-law as well as a cousin to the Buddha.
- 26) *ibid*:– *the ‘bitter practices’, the dhutangas*: These are thirteen practices allowed by the Buddha for his disciples whereby they could sharpen and polish their practice, without resorting to the extremes of self-mortification. The thirteen include such as: only eating once a day; only eating food received on alms-round; only using three robes; sleeping under trees instead of in a building; only sleeping sitting up, i.e. never lying down. The word ‘*dhutaṅga*’ literally means ‘a method used for shaking things off’.

Chapter 15: The Ambitions of Devadatta

1) p128:– *Like the Buddha he had been a prince ... uncle to ... Rahula too*: All this description of Devadatta is according to the Pali Canon.

2) p129:– *Devadatta got up from his seat*: The account of this challenge to the Buddha, and the suggestion by Devadatta that he take over the leadership of the Sangha, is found at CV 7.3.1 The Pali for ‘a gob of phlegm’ is ‘*khelāpaka*’. The original phrase the Buddha used in this exchange was ‘*chavassa khelāpakassa*’ – ‘*chava*’ meaning ‘vile, low, miserable, wretched’. PTS Dic. p275.

3) p130:– *There are five changes I wish to propose*: These five are listed at CV 7.3.14-15. In the original text it is spelled out that Devadatta’s explicit intent in proposing these five changes was to create a rift, a schism in the Sangha. He was aware that austerity impresses the public so it would be a wedge to help break up the community.

Some of his co-conspirators were indeed named: Kokālikā, Katamorata-tissaka, Khandadevī-putta and Samudadatta.

4) *ibid*:– *What qualities do you see in me*: This passage is adapted from M 77.8-9, ‘The Greater Discourse to Sakuladāyin’.

5) p131:– *Let those who wish to*: This all comes from CV 7.3.15.

6) *ibid*:– *However, there are attributes my disciples respect*: This passage is paraphrased from M 77.10-38. The last of the categories listed (‘the ways to develop wholesome states’) is comprised of many subsections that the sutta describes in detail, such as: 1) The Four Foundations of Mindfulness; 2) The Four Right Kinds of Striving; 3) The Four Bases for Spiritual Power; 4) The Five Faculties; 5) The Five Powers; 6) The Seven Factors of Enlightenment; 7) The Noble Eightfold Path; 8) The Eight Liberations; 9) The Eight Bases for Transcendence; 10) The Ten *Kasiṇas*; 11) The Four *Jhānas*; 12) Insight Knowledge; 13) The Mind-made Body; 14) The Kinds of Supernormal Power; 15) The Divine Ear; 16) The Ability to Read the Minds of Others; 17) The Recollection of Past Lives; 18) The Divine Eye; 19) The Destruction of the Outflows (*āśava*).

7) p132:– *Hiri and Siri, the asura sisters*: These two played a significant role in *Mara and the Mangala I*, pp319-79. The *Kalakanja-asura* are mentioned at D 20.12; they are described as ‘terrible to see’. They are also described in *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp107-8. The parents of Hiri and Siri were Queen Sujā, an asura, and King Indra, a deva, so they were of mixed celestial ancestry. See also, Ch. 24, note 6 of *Mara and the Mangala I*.

- 8) *ibid*:– *the capital city, Masakkasara*: The description of its appearance can be found in *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, pp223-5.
- 9) *ibid*:– *Pharusaka Park*: This is named as being to the south of Masakkasāra in *The Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p224. Similarly the Nandana Grove is described as being to the east of the capital on the same page.
- 10) p133:– *he and I might be of equal age by birth*: They were of similar age, as there are stories of them competing in sports and other contests, but they were not said to have been born on the same day as the Buddha and Ānanda were.
- 11) *ibid*:– *his battlefield voice*: Like the Buddha, in his early life as a Sakyan prince, Devadatta had much military training. It is debatable as to whether either of them, or the other princes who became great Elders – Such as Ānanda, Bhaddiya, Anuruddha, Bhagu and Kimbila – ever went to war and fought in battles. As they were all in their 20s and 30s by the time they went forth this seems likely (by the standards of the social situation of the time) but no mention is made either in the suttas or the commentaries, to the author’s knowledge at least, of any of the great Elders ever fighting in a war or even a skirmish.
- In one commentary, however, Devadatta is mentioned as ‘having the strength of five elephants’ (SA 62), this is the *Sāratthappakāsinī*, the ancient commentary to the *Samyutta Nikāya*.

Chapter 16: Matanga’s Offering

- 1) p135:– *Matanga on a mat an arm-span away*: The monastic rule dictates that a monk and a woman, or a nun and a man, should not share the same sitting place like a bench or small mat, but should have a clear separation between them, being on different seats or mats. In addition, Pāc 44 & 45 specify that a bhikkhu should not seat himself together with a woman on a screened seat, or in a completely private place, like a closed room.
- 2) *ibid*:– *I brought her into the Jetavana on a handcart*: In the era before smooth roads and tracks, and wheelchairs, being pushed in a handcart, like a larger, level-based wheelbarrow, was a convenient way for those who cannot walk to get around, with the help of family and friends. The author witnessed this in N.E. Thailand, with a 90-year-old devotee of the International Forest Monastery, Mae Ohn, brought the mile from her home in such a cart – called a ‘*roht-sukh*’ in the local dialect.

3) p136:– *the scheme that Devadatta and his group hatched*: In the Pali scriptures it is a group of ‘wanderers of other sects’ who hatch this plot, and it is the wandering nun Sundarī, who was ‘exceedingly beautiful and fair to look upon,’ that was the one who was caused to visit the Jetavana often and who was taken advantage of to fulfil intentions of the plot.

In the scriptures there are two main accounts of this incident, at Ud 4.8, and in the Commentary to Dhp 306, the first verse of ‘The Hell Chapter’ of the Dhammapada. In the Udāna version all the Buddha’s monks are criticized for the act without the Buddha himself being implicated; in the Dhammapada Commentary the Buddha is personally blamed, as Sundarī was encouraged to tell those she met on the way, ‘I have spent the night alone with the monk Gotama in the perfumed Chamber,’ (*Buddhist Legends, Vol. III, p190*).

4) p138:– *Devadatta, ... had ingratiated himself with Prince Ajatasattu*: This incident is recounted at CV 7.2.1. It is also the case that, according the Pali Canon, the many attempts by Devadatta to a) take power b) kill the Buddha and c) divide the Sangha in a schism, took place around Rājagaha, not Sāvattihī.

5) *ibid*:– *he was easily old enough*: Prince Viḍūḍabha was being hopeful here; he is about six years old at this point in this story.

6) *ibid*:– *Great King, the lay-devotee Matanga ... has gone missing*: In the original narrative, this exchange is found at Ud 4.8 and in the Commentary to Dhp 306, (*Buddhist Legends, Vol III, p190*).

7) *ibid*:– *the Maha-upasika Khujjuttara*: This was an informal title given to the significant lay disciples of the Buddha. ‘Mahā’ means ‘great’; ‘upāsikā’ means ‘female lay disciple’.

8) p139:– *his agents skilled in detection and undercover activities*: At Ud 6.2 King Pasenadi asks the Buddha if any of a motley group of wanderers and ascetics that have passed them by are Arahants. The Buddha responds by saying one has to a) live together with b) engage with c) look how they go through adversity d) be in discussion with a person, in order that their accomplishment can be known. The King then tells the Buddha, with respect to the ‘wanderers’ who just passed by, ‘These men, Venerable Sir, are my spies, my scouts, returning after checking the countryside. Once they have scrubbed off the dirt, trimmed their hair and beards and put on clean clothing, I will reward them with their pay and the perks of the job.’

9) *ibid:- Khujjuttara was deeply sorrowful... but did not give rise to anger:* As one who had reached the level of Non-returner – the third of the four levels of enlightenment – she was no longer subject to feelings of passion or anger, *rāga, dosa* and *vyāpāda*.

The sadness she felt is echoed in the description by the Buddha, at S 47.14: ‘This assembly appears empty to me now that Sāriputta and Moggallāna have passed away, have realized final Nibbāna.’

10) p140:- *the Master could never act in the way he was accused of:* At A 9.7 and 9.8 it is stated how it is impossible for an Arahant to deliberately take life or engage in sexual intercourse of any kind.

11) *ibid:- This uproar will not last long:* Again, this is a quote from Ud 4.8.

12) *ibid:- The liar goes to hell ... acts are vile:* This is Dhp 306.

13) p141:- *dark azure eyes:* Mentioned at D 31.1.2.

14) *ibid:- the female lay disciple he had publicly named:* The Buddha made declarations about the accomplishments of his disciples, both monastic and lay. These are all listed at A 1.188-267. The Pali for the title given to Khujjuttarā was ‘*Aggabāhussuta*’.

15) p142:- *dear friend and kalyanamitta:* This means ‘spiritual friend’. It is most famously defined by the Buddha at S 45.2, where he states, in response to Ānanda having declared that ‘*kalyāṇamittatā* is half of the holy life.’

‘Not so Ānanda, not so. This is the entire holy life, Ānanda, that is good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.’

16) p144:- *Not like yer usual human:* The observation that humans usually have a bad smell, in the perceptions of devas, is mentioned in *Acariya Mun Bhuridatta – A Spiritual Biography*, by Acariya Maha-Boowa Ñāṇasampanno, p132: ‘In the scriptures it says that devas do not like to be near humans because of their repugnant smell. What is this repugnant odour? If there is such an odour, 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 the Dhamma.’

Chapter 17: Scandal in Savatthi

- 1) p147:– *The court was convened*: It is clear that there were formal judicial procedures in the time of the Buddha and in those regions. For example, at Par #2 in the Bhikkhu Pāṭimokkā, court cases over property and objects are mentioned several times, see *The Buddhist Monastic Code, Vol I*, pp54, 64 & 72. In the Bhikkhūṇī Pāṭimokka the nuns are explicitly forbidden to launch a legal case against any householder or wanderer, this is Saṅg #1 in the Bhikkhūṇī Pāṭimokkā. Lastly, at A 10.176, it is mentioned that, ‘If called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of relatives, to a guild meeting or royalty, if asked as a witness, “come and tell what you know”: if they don’t know, they say “I don’t know”; if they know, they say, “I know”.’
- 2) p148:– *dress in an unadorned and modest fashion*: The custom then, as now in the Southern Buddhist countries, is to wear white, or white and black, undecorated clothing when visiting monasteries or attending Dharma teaching events, such as retreats. Customarily the body is also kept covered, from neck to ankles and wrists, by such plain clothing in order to maintain modesty.
- 3) ibid:– *within the monasteries ... any caste, any station in life*: In Buddhist monasteries, rank and social power are put aside. The illiterate villager might thus sit beside, or even in front of, a regional governor or a local wealthy matriarch. Not always(!) but often this is the case.
- 4) ibid:– *Sukhavati*: Means ‘The Abode of Happiness’.
- 5) ibid:– *Sattuka and Kalidanta*: Sattuka was the name of a bandit that was spotted on the way to his execution by the laywoman Bhadda-Kuṇḍalakesā – ‘Bhadda with curly hair’. She fell in love at that first sight of Sattuka and begged her father to bribe the guard and let her marry him. Sattuka later hatched the idea to take her jewels and push her off the Robber’s Cliff but, through quick thinking, she turned the tables and pushed him off instead. She became an Arahant nun eventually, being acknowledged (ironically) as ‘foremost in swift intuition’. Her story is found at Thig 107-11. ‘Kalidanta’ means ‘Black-tooth’.
- 6) p150:– *The words would not come*: Devadatta had already lost his previously extensive super-normal powers, as evidenced at CV 7.2.1: ‘As soon as the thought that “It is I who ought to lead the Bhikkhu-Sangha” arose in his mind, Devadatta was deprived of his psychic powers.’ So this blockage is more because of fear of his teacher than from Devadatta’s super-normal interference.

7) p151:- *according to your own discipline*: This is indeed the case, as spelled out in the Bhikkhu Pāṭimokka. See, for example, Par #3, in *The Buddhist Monastic Code, Vol I*, pp79-94.

8) *ibid*:- *Accordingly, you will go through the city*: This description is based on the commentary to Dhṛp 306, as found in *Buddhist Legends, Vol III*, p191.

9) *ibid*:- *Who, kindly, did not try to chat with him*: This approach was used and expounded by the late Barry Kapke, also known as Kondañña, who was a Buddhist massage therapist and body-worker in the San Francisco area. The three principles of his method were:

- 1) Don't push, just use the weight of your own body;
- 2) Don't try to help, but don't turn away;
- 3) Don't diagnose, just be aware.

For more on these approaches, see *Don't Push Just Use the Weight of your own Body* by the author, Amaravati Publications (2016).

10) *ibid*:- *a low, cord-strung bed*: This is called a '*charpai*' in India. It is commonly used all over the sub-continent.

11) p152:- *manussa ... puggala ... Manussa Realm*: These terms are standard usages from Buddhist psychology and cosmology. The Manussa-loka is one of the Five (or sometimes Six) Realms, the others being: the Deva Realm, the Animal Realm, the Hungry Ghost Realm, and the Hell Realm. The extra 'sixth' is that of the Asura Realm, the Angry or Jealous Gods.

This last Realm has an ambiguous nature, sometimes being considered a sub-set of the Deva Realm and sometimes seen as part of the Unfortunate Realms, constituted by the Animal, the Hungry Ghost and the Hell Realms; see for example, *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, p49.

12) p154:- *Elders such as Maha-Moggallana*: The Buddha's second Chief Disciple, after Sāriputta. Mahā-Moggallāna was the foremost in psychic powers, after the Buddha himself. When blasted by a fiery *nāga*, Nandopanada, and surviving, the Buddha declared that only he himself or Mahā-Moggallāna would have been able to withstand the dragon's flame. The story is found in the Mahavaṃsa 35.4, 'The Taming of Nandopanada'.

13) *ibid*:- *I have a good memory*: Like Sāriputta, Ānanda had no psychic powers but possessed many other noble attributes. For example, Ānanda was 'foremost' in: 1) Those who are learned; 2) with a good memory; 3) with a quick grasp; 4) those who are resolute; 5) being a personal attendant.

- 14) *ibid:- He chooses not to intervene:* That said, on occasion the Buddha would detect some ripening spiritual potential in someone, that appeared in his meditation, and then he would show up close to where they were living and then see how things unfolded. Examples of this process are with Āṅgulimāla, at M 86, and with the brahma god Baka, at M 49; similarly, in the Dhammapada Commentary to Dh 203, (in *Buddhist Legends, Vol III*, pp64-76), it describes how the Buddha, ‘perceiving that [a certain poor man] possessed the faculties requisite for the Fruit of Conversion’ i.e. Stream-entry, went all the way from Sāvattihī to Ālavi, which was nearly 140 miles, just to help that one poor farmer, who had lost an ox, who had arrived at the teaching venue but not had something to eat, and was consequently weak.
- 15) *p155:- Krishna lost his ability to see us:* As in *Mara and the Mangala I*, he regained these after leaving the knacker’s yard, at the end of Ch. 20, p261.
- 16) *p156:- The Master came here two sun-turnings after the enlightenment:* This is according to the generally accepted timeline of the Buddha’s life. The First Rains he spent in the Deer Park of Isipatana, near Varanasi; the Second Rains he spent at the Bamboo Grove, near Rājagaha after which he responded to the invitation, brought by Kāḷudāyī, to visit Kapilavatthu. This is described at Thag 527-33.
- 17) *p157:- Please forgive me:* The exchange here is still followed to this day in the Southern Buddhist world, as a way of clearing the slate after any length of time spent together, or even as a gesture of respect on an Elder’s birthday or such significant occasions.
- 18) *ibid:- the Tathagata works by allowing:* As above, in note 14 of this Chapter. Good examples of this ‘three warnings’ mode, that were ignored and with painful consequences, were with Bhikkhu Nāgasamāla, on the road to Rājagaha, (at Ud 8.3) and with Meghiya in the Mango Grove (at Ud 4.1). These stories are found in *The Life of the Buddha*, pp79 and 130-32.
- 19) *ibid:- He has wedded his heart to:* As mentioned at S 17.31-36; these six suttas describe how ‘dreadful are gain, honour and praise ... Because his mind was overcome by gain, honour and praise, Devadatta: 1) provoked a schism in the Sangha; 2) his wholesome root was cut off; 3) his wholesome nature was cut off; 4) his bright nature was cut off ... Just as a plantain, a bamboo or a reed yields fruit to its own downfall, so Devadatta’s gain, honour and praise gave rise to his own downfall ... Just as a wild dog becomes even wilder when bile is sprinkled on its nose, so too as long as Prince Ajātasattu goes to attend on Devadatta ... only decline can be expected of Devadatta with respect to wholesome states, not growth.’

20) *ibid*:– *When we see our transgressions as such*: This statement is made numerous times by the Buddha. For example, at M 140.33, which, incidentally, is the sutta that forms the opening *mise-en-scène* for *The Pilgrim Kamanita* – the chance encounter between the Buddha and a wanderer who had gone forth in the Buddha’s name, on his own initiative, but who had never met the Master previously.

21) p158:– *Gayasisa, that is where I shall reside*: This was indeed where Devadatta departed to when he had caused the schism. The story is found at CV 7.4.1, also in *The Life of the Buddha*, pp269-71.

Chapter 18: Krishna’s Change of Heart

1) p159:– *malas tangled about his neck*: a ‘mala’ is a rosary garland. In the Buddhist world such a rosary most commonly has 108 beads or stones, this being considered an auspicious number.

2) *ibid*:– *Maha-kasapa ... famous for ... personal standards of renunciation*: Amongst the list of those disciples ‘foremost’ in various qualities, Mahā-Kassapa was named as: ‘Foremost among those who expound the ascetic practices,’ (A 1.14.1).

3) *ibid*:– *Devadatta having received great amounts of royal patronage*: This is mentioned, for example, at S 17.36, ‘Now on that occasion Prince Ajātasattu was going to attend upon Devadatta morning and evening with five hundred carts [full of offerings], and an offering of food was conveyed to him in five hundred pots.’

In the Canonical records, Devadatta was not known as especially ascetic until he proposed his Five Points.

4) p160:– *Devadatta only raised those points in order to split the Sangha*: This is mentioned in the story at CV 7.3.14, and recounted in *The Life of the Buddha*, pp266-69.

5) *ibid*:– *the big lie*: An approach most famously, in Europe at least, and tragically employed by the Nazi Party and its predecessors, to stigmatize and oppress Jewish people. ‘The Jewish question’ or ‘the Jewish problem’ was widely promulgated as an idea in the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, culminating in the mass slaughter of Jewish peoples – along with countless others in similarly oppressed groups – prior to and during the Second World War.

6) *ibid*:- *Yes, he has a back that pains him*: This is referred to in many places in the Pali Canon. For example, at M 53.5, where it states, ‘Then, when the Blessed One had instructed, urged, roused and encouraged the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu with talk on the Dhamma for much of the night, he said to the Venerable Ānanda, “Speak to the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu about the disciple in higher training who has entered upon the Way. My back is uncomfortable so I will stretch it.”’

The Pali for the latter phrase is ‘*Piṭṭhi me āgilāyati*’. It is also found at: A 10.67, A 10.68, D 33.1.5, S 35.243 and at CV 7.4.2 when Devadatta mimics the Buddha with unexpected consequences.

7) *ibid*:- *Twenty-seven Rains have passed since she gave the prophecy*: As in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, p355.

8) p161:- *Sense-desire ... ill-will, views and opinions ... doubts, the conceit of identity ... desire for defined being ... ignorance*: These are the seven Latent Tendencies or ‘*anusaya*’ in Pali. In that language they are, in the same order: 1) *kāma-rāga*; 2) *paṭigha*; 2) *diṭṭhi*; 4) *vicikicchā*; 5) *māna*; 6) *bhava-rāga*; and 7) *avijjā*. These are unskillful habits of mind that can ripen as ‘defilements’ (*kilesa*), and then lead to the ‘outflows’ (*āśava*) and the ‘floods’ (*ogha*), where those tendencies take shape as even more intense and destructive unwise speech, action and attitude.

9) *ibid*:- *Upon a time*: This whole narrative comes from Jāt 422, it is found in *The Jātaka*, Vol III, pp272-76.

10) *ibid*:- *The First Age*: In Buddhist mythology, during the time after the beginning of a new universal period, as beings appear in the material world, they have very long lifespans. For example an ‘Incalculable Aeon’, mentioned as the lifespan of Maha-Sammata, is 10¹⁴⁰ human years. (See above, Ch. 7, note 20).

This account is an abbreviated, and slightly adapted, version of Jāt 422, the English translation by H.T. Francis and R.A. Neil having some apparent inconsistencies.

11) p165:- *His head slipped below the earth*: In the original story, King Apacara met a much more dramatic end after the seventh lie: ‘Then the earth opened and the flames of Avīci [Hell] leapt up and seized him.’

12) *ibid*:- *various sprites*: Such beings are, for example, mentioned at Ud 4.4, where Ven. Sāriputta compliments his friend Ven. Mahā-Moggallāna’s advanced psychic powers, ‘Wherever you saw a yakkha, I could not even see a mud sprite. The Pali for this being is

‘paṃsupisācaka’; ‘paṃsu’ meaning ‘dust, dirt or soil’ and ‘pisāca’ being ‘a sprite, an imp or goblin’. They are also mentioned in a list of different types of entities at D 2.20.

13) p168:– *their breath had natural invigorating, curative powers*: As in *Mara and the Mangala* I, Ch. 23, pp300-01.

14) ibid:– *There are these two extremes*: This passage is indeed adapted from the ‘Discourse on Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma’, the Buddha’s first discourse, (found at S 56.11) and it is indeed frequently recited in the monasteries, temples and in homes of the Southern Buddhist world.

15) p169:– *Ananda, being quick on the uptake*: As above, Ch. 17, note 13.

16) ibid:– *He offered it with both hands to the Master*: In Asia this is the customary, polite way for a junior or younger person to present an object to an elder, a senior, or by a host to a guest.

Chapter 19: Pujika’s Delight

1) p171:– *a small village, called Katara*: In current times this village is called Katra, it is in in Uttar Pradesh, near the town of Balrampur.

2) ibid:– *the monastery of the female community was close to the walls of Savatthi*: After the rape of the Arahant nun Uppalavannā, the Buddha stipulated that the bhikkunīs should not live in forests but should establish their dwellings close to the centres of population, for safety of the women’s communities. The story of that tragic incident is found at Vin iii 35, in *The Book of the Discipline, Vol I*, pp53-4. The prohibition against living in the forest is found at CV 10.23, *The Book of the Discipline, Vol V*, pp384-5.

The site of the *bhikkunū-pasaya* – the nun’s monastery close to Sāvattthī – is reckoned to have been close to the eastern gate of the city, not too far from the Eastern Park monastery, donated to the monks’ community by the great lay-disciple Visākhā. See above, Ch. 9, note 8.

3) ibid:– *Pujika had made it her daily custom*: Most of the following scenario is derived from the story of Patipūjikā, as found in the commentary to Dhṛp 48, as above.

4) p172:- *palm-toddy*: This is an alcoholic drink derived from the sugar of the palm tree. It is still very popular in South and South-east Asia today.

5) *ibid*:- *the green rice to come in the Rainy Season*: In North-east Thailand this, the very first ripe heads of the rice-crop, are made into very popular sweets. It is called ‘crazy rice’ – *kau mau* – because the desserts are so delicious that mindfulness is easily lost and one eats far too much of them.

6) *ibid*:- *She’s a veritable Sita*: Sitā was the famously faithful wife of Rāma in Indian mythology. She remained loyal to him in the midst of great challenges until the end. The Rāmāyaṇa recounts the details of the tale.

7) p173:- *he was able, somehow, to draw himself in*: This ability to reduce one’s impact on the people one is with is referred to in Chapter 10 of the novel *Bel Canto*, by Ann Patchett. One of the characters, Carmen, who initially disguised herself as a youth, demonstrates this ability.

She taught him how to get from place to place in the house in plain sight of everyone and yet no one saw them because she was teaching him to be invisible. It was learning humility, to no longer assume anyone would notice who you were or where you were going. It wasn’t until she began to teach him that Mr. Hosokawa saw Carmen’s genius, because her genius was to not be seen. How much harder that would be for a beautiful young girl in a house full of restless men, and yet he found that she drew almost no attention at all. She had managed to pass as a boy, and, more impressively, had managed to make herself utterly forgettable after she had been revealed as a beautiful girl. When Carmen walked through the room without wanting to be seen, she hardly moved the air around her. She didn’t sneak. She did not dart to hide behind the piano and then a chair. She walked through the middle of the room, asking for nothing, keeping her head level, making no sound. In fact, she had been teaching him this lesson since the day they were first in the house together, but it was only now that he could understand it.

8) *ibid*:- *Friends, I went to the Blessed One*: The following is mostly derived from CV 7.4, and as recounted in *The Life of the Buddha*, pp268-72.

9) *ibid*:- *ola leaf*: A kind of long, thin palm leaf that, when dried, was used for making manuscripts and documents in South and South-east Asia for many centuries.

10) *ibid:- monks who were expert reciters*: The division of a monastery into sub-sections in this way is mentioned in the origin story to Saṅg #8, where the assigning of lodgings is described thus:

Then the venerable Dabba, the Mallian, being so chosen, assigned one lodging in the same place for those monks who belonged to the same company. For those monks who knew the Suttantas he assigned a lodging in the same place, saying: “These will be able to chant over the Suttantas to one another.” For those monks versed in the Vinaya rules, he assigned a lodging in the same place, saying: “They will decide upon the Vinaya with one another.” For those monks teaching Dhamma he assigned a lodging in the same place, saying: “They will discuss Dhamma with one another.” For those monks who were musers [meditators] he assigned a lodging in the same place, saying: “They will not disturb one another.” For those monks who lived indulging in low talk and who were athletic he assigned a lodging in the same place, saying: “These reverend ones will live according to their pleasure.”

The Book of the Discipline, Vol. I, p273, I.B. Horner trans., PTS, 1949.

11) *ibid:- the Vajjian Confederacy*: This country was an ‘aristocratic republic’ or ‘tribal league’ rather than a kingdom. Its capital was Vesāli.

12) *ibid:- more than a hundred of them*: In the Pali original it states there were five hundred but this is a very generally used term to mean ‘a lot’, as ‘10,000’ is often used in Chinese texts.

13) *ibid:- The patimokkha had been held*: This is the collection of main rules, 227 for the monks, 311 for the nuns, established in the Buddha’s time; attendance is indeed compulsory for all resident monastics. It is the one regular ceremonial procedure that is non-negotiable re participation throughout the monastic year.

14) p174:- *At Gayasisa, some Moons later*: As above, this scenario is derived from CV 7.4.

15) *ibid:- Dharma seat*: A raised and usually broad seat so that the one expounding the Dharma can sit with their legs folded and be above the assembled group who have gathered to listen. It serves the same purpose as a pulpit in a Christian church.

16) p175:- *the lion’s posture*: This is the manner in which the Buddha rested and he encouraged his students to use, in order to maximise mindfulness when sleeping. It is to: ‘lie on the right side, placing one foot on the other, mindful and with full awareness, setting in mind the time for waking.’ It is mentioned, for example, at D 16.4.40, A 3.16.3, A 4.37.4 & A 4.246.3.

17) *ibid:- a master of eloquent and analytical speech:* In the list of ‘foremosts’ Ven. Sāriputta is mentioned first. He is named as the monk disciple, ‘foremost among those with great wisdom’.

18) *ibid:- the path to Stream-entry ... full fruition of that stage:* The four levels of enlightenment, in the Buddha’s scheme of things, are each divided into two: ‘*magga*’, being on the ‘path’ to that level, and ‘*phala*’, realizing the ‘fruit’ of that level. This structure is the source of the phrase, in the daily chanting, of the qualities of the Sangha Refuge, ‘The four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings.’

19) *p176:- a vigorous walk of about twenty days:* The distance from Gayasisa to Sāvattthī is about 310 miles or 500 km.

20) *ibid:- He will inevitably go to the states of woe:* In the Buddha’s teaching he names five ‘heinous acts’ which, if carried out intentionally, necessarily lead to a stint in the hell realms. The five are: 1) Killing your mother; 2) Killing your father; 3) Killing an Arahant; 4) Shedding the blood of a Buddha; and 5) Deliberately causing a schism in the Sangha. They are listed, as the ‘five lesions’ at A 5.129, the word for this being ‘*parikupā*’ meaning ‘something with an irritating nature, like an old wound’. The term ‘*ānantarika kamma*’ is more common, meaning ‘grave deeds that bring as their immediate result a rebirth in hell’. The five are also mentioned at A 6.87 & A 6.94.

21) *ibid:- The great Arahant Elders Uppalavanna and Khema:* These two great beings were the equivalent, on the women’s side, of Sāriputta and Mahā-Moggallāna – foremost in wisdom was Khemā, and Uppalavaṇṇā in psychic power.

22) *p178:- hundreds of devas gathered:* This scenario is, again, derived from the commentary to Dh 48, as found in *Buddhist Legends, Vol II*, pp52-4.

23) *p179:- We haven’t seen you since morning:* This is the ending of the story which forms the Commentary to Dh 48. It is notable that, almost uniquely in Buddhist cosmology and mythology, a being passes away, lives another life and then comes back to their previous place of birth with full knowledge of their history and also with the same physical features. We take this as the poetic license (although, of course, it might have happened that way!) of the author of the Dhammapada Commentary and we are happy to use the same mythic pattern here.

Chapter 20: Prince Vidudabha Visits his Ancestral Home

- 1) p180:– *Vidudabha had been pestering his mother*: This long scenario is all based on the Commentary to Dhp 47, as found in *Buddhist Legends*, Vol II, pp37-52.
- 2) *ibid*:– *the King had appointed Vidudabha as commander-in-chief of the army*: In the original the King does this when his son is no older than seven(!), see *Buddhist Legends*, Vol II, p43.
- 3) p182:– *five gold kahapanas*: At gold prices today those five gold pieces would be worth about £1600. A hefty sum indeed for a single job. (See above Ch. 10, note 8)
- 4) p183:– *made offerings both before and after the mealtime*: The offerings made in the Southern Buddhist monasteries before the meal and after would be both food and other items, such as cloth, or oil for lamps. If it's the occasion of a special blessing such as this there would usually be a richer variety and abundance of offerings.
- 5) *ibid*:– *He seemed to be consciously attuning*: This is the way that Dhamma talks are offered in the Southern Buddhist world, particularly in the Thai forest tradition. Talks are not prepared but are, ideally, spontaneous and are a genuine *desana* (Hindi: *darshan*) a 'demonstration' or embodiment of Dharma, arising from the speaker's mind and informed by the assembled attendees' moods, natures and levels of understanding.
- 6) p184:– *the things we customarily take to be who ... we are*: This passage is based upon the principle first expounded by the Buddha in the 'Discourse on Not-self', found at S 22.59, and MV 1.6.38-47, as in *The Life of the Buddha*, pp45-7. There are comparable teachings found in many other places.
- 7) *ibid*:– *on account of ignorance*: this is '*avijjā*' in Pali. It means 'not being aware' 'not seeing the reality clearly' rather than the English usage that has the meaning 'not possessing certain information'.
- 8) *ibid*:– '*I am*' is a *conceiving*: This passage is based on M 140.31, the sutta is the 'Discourse on the Exposition of the Elements'. (See above, Ch. 17, note 20).
- 9) *ibid*:– *is there a self?*: This passage is based on an encounter of the Buddha with Vacchagotta, an adherent of another group of wanderers, who regularly came to ask questions of the Buddha. Eventually he left his original community, became a bhikkhu and

realized full enlightenment (M 73.26). The silent response of the Buddha, and Ānanda's follow up questions, are found at S 44.10.

10) *ibid*:– *The Master does this sometimes*: The Buddha treated questions on the teachings in four different ways; they were

- 1) Questions deserving a straight answer;
- 2) Those that need their terms defined before they can be answered;
- 3) Those that are best responded to by a counter-question;
- 4) Those that should be put aside.

This list is found at A 4.42. Of the questions 'to be put aside', Buddha spoke eloquently of his reasoning for this at M 63.8, the 'Shorter Discourse to Mālunkyaṇputta', and in the famous 'handful of leaves' teaching, found at S 56.31.

11) p185:– *It is time now*: this is an extremely common way for the Buddha to close a discussion or teaching, such as at M 89.20, M 145.6 and S 44.1.

12) *ibid*:– *the King wanted to marry her off to Prince Ajatasattu*: The marriage between Vajirī and Ajātasattu is mentioned in commentarial and later literature (e.g. at Jāt 285, Jāt 492 and in the Commentary to Dhṛp 325, in *Buddhist Legends, Vol III*, p77) but is never mentioned in the Pali Canon's suttas or Vinaya texts. Ajātasattu was King of Magadha by the time the marriage was said to have occurred.

13) *ibid*:– *self-view and the threads of conceit*: 'Self-view', 'sakkāya-diṭṭhi' in Pali, is the first of the Ten Obstacles to Enlightenment (*saṃyojanā*); 'the conceit of identity', 'asmi-māna' in Pali, is number eight on the list. It is only completely let go of at the realization of Arahantship.

14) p186:– *Brave but slowly wise, thus we hail our hero*: This phrase comes from the 'Prologue' of Wolfram von Eschenbach's epic *Parzival*, composed in Middle High German in the first part of the 13th Century.

15) *ibid*:– *If... when asked, 'Is there a self?'*: Again, as above, this comes from S 44.10.

16) p187:– *at the death of the body, an existent being is utterly annihilated*: The Buddha elucidates this point also at M 22.37: 'I have been misrepresented baselessly, vainly, falsely and wrongly by some *samaṇas* and brahmins thus: "The Samaṇa Gotama is one who leads astray; he teaches annihilation, the destruction or the extermination of an existent being." As I am not; and I do not proclaim this, I have been misrepresented ... both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the ending of suffering.'

17) *ibid*:– *When a being is enlightened, where do they reappear, after the death of the body?*: This passage is derived from another encounter of the Buddha with Vacchagotta, at M 72.16-19, the ‘Discourse to Vacchagotta about Fire’.

18) p190:– *lammergeiers*: Also known as ‘bearded vulture’, *Gypaetus barbatus*. They have a wingspan of roughly 2.5m and are scavengers rather than killers. The prince need not have been afraid.

Chapter 21: The Prince’s Fury

1) p194:– *hobs and brownies*: A ‘hob’ is defined as ‘a kind of sprite’; the name is related to the more familiar word ‘hob-goblin’. It has been speculated that J.R.R. Tolkien’s name for the ‘hobbits’ was informed by this word and the actual word ‘hobbit’ is indeed found in archaic materials. It appears in a book called *The Denham Tracts*, (published in 1895 but written decades earlier by the Yorkshire tradesman Michael Denham), referring to accounts of witchcraft dating back to the sixteenth century. There are, mentioned there in a list, such beings as: ‘Boggleboes, bogies, redmen, portunes, grants, hobbits, hobgoblins, brown-men, cowies.’

A ‘brownie’ is, similarly, an old word meaning: ‘A benevolent spirit or goblin, of shaggy appearance, supposed to haunt old houses, esp. farmhouses, in Scotland, and sometimes perform useful household work while the family were asleep.’ O.E.D.

2) p195:– *Prince Vidudabha was received with splendid and colourful ceremony*: This scenario is based upon Jāt 7, Jāt 465 and the Commentary to Dhp 47, as found in *Buddhist Legends, Vol II*, p44.

3) p198:– *The embassy’s visit only lasted a few days*: As above, this is based upon Jāt 7, Jāt 465 and the Commentary to Dhp 47, in *Buddhist Legends, Vol II*, p44.

4) *ibid*:– *Viraja by name*: In the original story, the soldier who goes back to retrieve his sword (or spear, as in Jāt 465) is not named.

Chapter 22: The Attack on the Sakyans

1) p201:– *but not by you, slave-son!:* In the original story, found in Jāt 7, Jāt 465 and the Commentary to Dhp 47, *Buddhist Legends, Vol II*, p44, it is said that the King, ‘degraded her from her rank and also degraded her son Viḍūḍabha,’ ‘to the condition of slaves.’

The scenario that follows is informed, as before, by these same texts.

2) p203:– *kings and princes regularly consorted with any low-class girl they pleased:* This practice, which is recognized as egregious behaviour today, was extremely widespread in the ancient world as well as, unfortunately, up to modern times.

3) ibid:– *You will be kept in the palace dungeons:* In the original story Vāsabhakkhattiyā is not imprisoned.

4) p204:– *they made their way to the Jetavana:* In the original story the Buddha came to them rather than they going to him: ‘Some few days later the Master came to the palace and took a seat.’

5) ibid:– *have you considered how fickle the matters of birth and rank are?:* This same issue is explored in *Mara and the Mangala I*, in a discussion between the Minister Ghosaka and a young Samavati, in Ch. 10, p103.

6) ibid:– *a brahmin pandit called Pokkharasati:* This passage is based upon D 3, the ‘Ambaṭṭha Sutta’.

7) ibid:– *Known as Kanha:* The name has been left in the Pali original. The Sanskrit would be ‘Krishna’ so, to avoid confusion as well as to be faithful to sources, it has been kept as per the sutta.

8) ibid:– *the yakkha Vajirapani hovered above the head of the youth:* The Buddha, and any of the enlightened ones, would never wish harm upon any being, however, it is recognized that certain actions taken, intended to harm a virtuous being, or as in this case, not respond to a direct question when put three times by a Buddha, there will necessarily be a negative consequence. In the scriptures this is called ‘being burnt by the recluse’s fire’, as in the dialogue between the Buddha and King Pasenadi found at S 3.1.

9) ibid:– *he gave her his signet ring:* This story is from Jāt 7, the ‘Kaṭṭhahāri Jātaka’, it is found in *The Jātaka, Vol I*, pp27-29.

This arrangement is reminiscent of the ring given by King Dushyanta to Shakuntala, in the Indian legends of the *Mahabharata*, who had similarly enjoyed a brief relationship and then were parted. In that story Dushyanta is caused to forget Shakuntala and then she loses the ring on the way to being reunited with him. It had been dropped in a pool of water and then swallowed by a fish. A fisherman chanced to find it, the ring is produced, and Dushyanta acknowledges their son, who was Bharata, who grew up to 'conquer the world'. The story is found both in the *Mahabharata* and in the *Abhijnana-Shakuntalam*.

A modern equivalent is found in Thailand where a young country-woman, having had a liaison with King Rama II, the King reputedly gave the young woman a silver belt he was wearing and told her, 'If you have a son, bring him to me at the palace.' She did and the boy was adopted and raised in the monastery, and became one of the most eminent monks in Thailand, the preceptor and teacher of King Rama IV.

10) p205:– *a true warrior faces greed, hatred and delusion*: The Buddha consciously transformed the goal of his birth family – warrior nobles – to be spiritual rather than military. He still used the language of battle regularly, however, when describing spiritual endeavours. For example, before his enlightenment he declared, affirming his intent to realize complete liberation, 'I fly the banner that denies retreat,' SN 442.

In the Thai forest tradition 'the warrior heart' is often used as a phrase to describe the attributes of the dedicated spiritual practitioner.

11) *ibid*:– *a true brahmin is pure of heart*: This is spelled out repeatedly in Ch. 26 of the Dhammapada; for example in verses 385, 386, 388, 391, 393 and 396-423.

12) *ibid*:– *a true craftsperson*: As described at Dh 80, and at M 86.18:

*'Conduit-makers guide the water,
Fletchers straighten out the arrows,
Carpenters shape the timbers
Wise people seek to train themselves.'*

13) *ibid*:– *we too renounce all caste*: The Buddha was resolute in not allowing the caste system to have any influence on ordination. Thus one can be born into any family and still be eligible to join the monastic order. Those in robes do not observe any caste distinctions, thus a person's seniority only depends upon the years they have spent in robes.

14) *ibid*:– *I will reinstate the Prince*: In the original texts both the Queen and the Prince have their states restored by King Pasenadi, following the encouragement of the Buddha.

15) *ibid*:– *you got torched in that fire*: As described in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 23, ‘The Perfumed Holocaust’, pp293-304.

16) p206:– *I was proud to sacrifice myself*: In the Buddha’s teaching he did not praise the sacrifice of one’s physical being for the sake of lofty ideals, or out of mistaken judgements.

This did not just relate to dying for spiritual causes but one important aspect of this principle is that, in this, he was also going against the warrior-noble ethic of an assumed virtue to dying in battle, regardless of one’s mind-state. Such values, of dying gloriously in war have had a strong influence in many societies, ancient and modern; for example, in ‘Horatius at the Bridge’:

*And how can man die better than facing fearful odds,
For the ashes of his fathers, and the temple of his Gods.*

Thomas Babington Macaulay

When asked, by a soldier called Yodhājīva, if it’s true that if one like him dies in battle he will go to the ‘heaven of the battle-slain devas’ the Buddha tells him this is a delusion (S 42.3) and the destination is likely to be one of the lower realms.

Despite this discouragement clearly being the case in the main nikāyas of the Pali Canon, the voluntary relinquishment of one’s life for the sake of others does appear in some post-Canonical stories. For example, the Bodhisattva lived as a hare that threw itself on a fire to provide food for a supposed brahmin, who was actually Indra (in Jāt 316, *The Jātaka*, Vol III, p37). Another well-known example is ‘The Hungry Tigress’, the first story in the Jātakamāla, written by Aryaśura around the 2nd Century CE. In this story the Bodhisattva sees a starving tigress with cubs at the bottom of a cliff. He throws himself off, to die close to her, in order to provide food for them all.

17) p207:– *my uncle, General Bandhula*: Again, this follows the scriptural accounts, in Jāt 465 and Commentary to Dhp 47, in *Buddhist Legends*, Vol II, pp45-49.

18) p208:– *King Pasenadi had been sick at heart*: This is mentioned in Jāt 465 and in the Commentary to Dhp 47, but not at the related passage at M 89, ‘The Discourse on Monuments to Dhamma’. In the latter text the town near where the Buddha stayed is called Medaḷumpa.

19) *ibid*:– *went up to the door, coughed and knocked*: This is the standard way in which visitors approached not only the Buddha’s kuti but it is also how monastics announce their presence at another’s door today. It is found, for example at D 3.1.9.

20) *ibid*:– *the five Symbols of Royalty*: These are mentioned in a footnote in *The Jātaka*, Vol IV, p80.

21) p209:– *great mountains ... closing in*: This motif is mentioned, in part, at S 3.25, with reference to the imminence of ageing and death of King Pasenadi.

His escaping to a place of refuge, having been deposed, is reminiscent of many tales of such vanquished kings. For example, Charles I, after defeat at the Battle of Naseby, on June 14th, 1645, sought refuge at the humble Anglican religious community of Little Gidding. T.S. Eliot refers to this in one of his *Four Quartets*, also entitled *Little Gidding*: ‘If you came at night like a broken king’.

In the scriptural accounts Queen Mallikā did not outlive the King but rather passed away before him.

22) p210:– *separated Prince Jeta’s head from his shoulders*: This is mentioned in *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, p963, quoting *Life of the Buddha* by A.L. Rockhill (published by Kegan Paul). p121.

23) p211:– *her fearless little sister*: as mentioned regularly in *Mara and the Mangala I*.

24) *ibid*:– *our wise friend can walk past all guards*: Dusaka displayed this kind of talent in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 14, pp 155-7.

25) p213:– *train her in deva-vision*: This is called the ‘*dibbacakkhu*’ in Pali, ‘the divine eye’. Dusaka first taught this to Krishna in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 15, pp169-71.

Chapter 23: The Buddha in the Shade

1) p215:– *her murderer*: In their previous lives, as Samāvatī and Māgandiyā, Māgandiyā was responsible for the fire that killed Samāvatī, as described in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 23, pp293-308.

2) *ibid*:– *bodhi tree, with its sparse leaves ... instead of the deep cool shade of the agèd banyan*: The story of the Buddha’s attempted intervention, and his choice to sit in the scanty shade of the tree in Sakya, is described in the Commentary to Dh 47. It is found in *Buddhist Legends*, Vol II, pp37-52.

- 3) p216:– *that was something your father neglected to do when we met*: This refers to the opening scenario of *The Pilgrim Kamanita* and particularly to Chs. 18-20, pp107-22, (2017).
- 4) p219:– *How has this weakness taken you?*: This is adapted from Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of the Bhagvad Gita, Ch. 2, 'The Book of Doctrines'.
- 5) ibid:– *Do not become a coward, Arjuna*: This is from an alternative translation of the same passage, by Ramananda Prasad.
- 6) p220:– *the worshipful Vajashravas*: This is a character invented by Karl Gjellerup for *The Pilgrim Kamanita*. He features particularly in Ch. 10, 'Esoteric Doctrine', pp57-60 ,where he expounds on a theme similar to that stated here.
- 7) p222: *my grandmother was an animal!?*: In Jāt 481 a king, frustrated that a pair of captured kinnaris will not sing and dance for him, demands that his staff, 'Kill these creatures and cook them, and serve them up to me.' He asked for one to be cooked for his supper and the other for breakfast the next day. In *Mara and the Mangala I* , Ch. 26, p367, one of the protagonists, Pitipuppha, muses, about Bee, 'How could a dumb animal like her ever dare to implicate royal devas ... she's practically half plant.'
- 8) p223:– *The Tathagata has exercised his influence three times*: See above, Ch. 17, note 18.
- 9) ibid:– *All the warriors of Kapilavatthu*: These passages follow closely the narrative of the Commentary to Dhṛ 47, *Buddhist Legends, Vol II*, pp50-52.
- 10) ibid:– *His heart was closed to any moral sensitivity*: Kilesa-Māra, around whom this collection of plots is woven, is the embodiment of the *kilesas* = defilements. These are listed as: Greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), delusion (*moha*), conceit (*māna*), views (*diṭṭhi*), skeptical doubt (*vicikicchā*), sloth (*thīna*), restlessness (*uddhucca*), shamelessness (*ahirika*), lack of a fear of consequences (*anottappa*). This list of ten is not found in this exact form in the suttas but can be summarized as this group from various sources. 'Shamelessness' and the 'lack of a fear of consequences' are the *kilesa* referred to here as indicating being 'closed to any moral sensitivity'.
- 11) p225:– *We won't be possessed by the son of a slave-girl*: In the *Dictionary of Pali Proper Names*, p877, the author notes:

'According to Chinese records, Viḍūḍabha took five hundred Sakyan maidens into his harem, but they refused to submit to him and abused him and his family. He ordered them to be killed, their hands and feet cut off, and their bodies thrown into

a ditch.’ From *The Romantic Legends of the Buddha*, S. Beal, published by Kegan Paul, ii, 11f.

In ancient Egypt, the hands of enemies who had fallen in battle were cut off as war trophies and for the practical purpose of accurately counting the casualties.

Chapter 24: Reunions

1) p228:– *He was a sincere and dedicated disciple of the Master*: This close and beneficial relationship is evidenced in many places, for example: M 89 (which is the ‘Monuments to the Dhamma’ discourse, coincidentally given at the time Pasenadi lost the throne), and the twenty-five suttas of the ‘Connected Discourses with the Kosalan’ S 3.1-25.

2) *ibid*:– *at the local shrines*: Such *cetiya* were frequently visited by both the Buddhist Sangha and many adherents of other faiths, although it is rare for it to be mentioned in the Pali Canon what deity or being those shrines were dedicated to. Examples abound – just near Vesālī alone there are mentioned the: Udena Shrine, Gotamaka Shrine, Saltambaka Shrine, Bahuputta Shrine, Sārandada Shrine and the Cāpāla Shrine (in D 16.3.44-47).

3) *ibid*:– *King Pasenadi had had a number of other, so-called ‘minor wives’*: The first three of these wives are mentioned in the texts; the ‘sister of King Bimbisara’, named Vimalā here, does not seem to be named in the suttas and commentaries. Kosaladevī was indeed the name of Pasenadi’s sister and Queen of Magadha.

Ubbirī’s new-born child died and this caused her to leave the palace life and become the Buddha’s disciple. She became an Arahant. Her verses are found at Thig 51-2. Somā and Sakulā were sisters; they are mentioned at M 90.3.

4) p229:– *to appoint Queen Mallika as Royally Anointed Regent*: These titles, and indeed the regency, are an invention of the author.

5) *ibid*:– *The Princess ... as yet unmarried*: According to the commentaries and the Jātaka, Princess Vajiri was given, by her father, in marriage to Ajātasattu (in Jāt 283 & Jāt 492).

6) p232:– *to live on the Eight Precepts*: This is the standard framework of conduct for anyone living in a monastery of the Southern School of Buddhism. Exceptions can be made (usually allowing working staff to eat in the evening) but the Eight Precepts is the general basis for life in any monastery.

- 7) *ibid*:– *Sister Khema*: She was the Arahant nun recognized as ‘Foremost amongst nuns possessed of great wisdom’ – *mahāpaññānaṃ aggā* (at A 1.236)’ On one occasion she gave teachings to King Pasenadi (at S 44.1); her verses of enlightenment are found at Thig 139-44.
- 8) *ibid*:– *Oh, what bliss!*: This expression is borrowed from the account of the ex-ruler of the Sakyans, Bhaddiya, on having renounced the throne and entered the monastic life (at Ud 2.10).
- 9) p233:– *a lot of layers of resultant karma*: This is called ‘*vipāka*’ in Pali. Often when the word ‘karma’ is employed in common usage, it is meant to mean ‘*kamma-vipāka*’ i.e. ‘intended action and its result’.
- 10) *ibid*:– *when he had been a child in the garden in Ujjeni*: See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 15, pp169-71.
- 11) *ibid*:– *Let go of the past*: The advice given here is a combination of ‘The Discourse on One Fortunate Attachment’ (M 131.3) and the frequently given instruction on learning from our mistakes and transgressions, such as at M 140.33.
- 12) *ibid*:– *visible world, invisible world*: In the Buddha’s teaching he defined ‘the world’ as ‘The eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind.’ The ‘world’ is thus taken to be the world of our experience, rather than the external objects like the planet and the stars, (see S 35.116).
- 13) p235:– *he clapped his huge hands together*: This method is informed by a monk who once told a group of young Buddhists whom he was guiding for a class, ‘I guarantee you will learn to levitate, but you’ve got to keep your eyes closed.’ Once he was sure everyone there was complying, he pulled an oogah horn out of his bag and set it off in the room. All the participants succeeded in levitating but a few took some time to recover. It was intended to be a lesson in perception – *saññā*.
- 14) p236:– *evil counsel*: This is the translation of the name ‘Mordred’, who was the equally ill-starred son of Morgan le Fay and King Arthur, who brought about Arthur’s death and the breaking of the Round Table.
- 15) p237:– *Checking to see there was water*: Such duties in preparing the Dhamma seat before a teaching are still carried out today, although electric fans are now ubiquitous in contrast to the paddle-like, classical ones used in electricity-free locations.

- 16) *ibid*:– *Evam – thus it is*: This is a classical way to close a Dhamma talk. However, this form of formally ending a teaching is not found in the Pali Canon.
- 17) p239:– *The great lay disciple Visakha*: She was one of the great patrons of the Sangha in Sāvattthī and the region. She built the Monastery of the Eastern Park and donated it to the Sangha, as well as having provided substantial material support, on a smaller scale, as described at Vin i 290 and MV 8.
- 18) p240:– *For what reason would you pay honour*: This dialogue is based on the exchange between the Buddha and the sick monk Vakkali, shortly before his realization of Arahantship and his death (at S 22.87).
- 19) p241:– *the Aviha Brahma World*: This is the lowest of the five Pure Abodes, being high brahma realms that only Non-returners are born into. The other four are, in ascending order: *Atappā, Sudassā, Sudassī, Akaniṭṭhā*. For more information on these realms, see *The Buddhist Cosmos*, by Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo, 3:6:17-20, pp660-72 in the 1st edition.
- 20) *ibid*:– *She realized Arahantship even before she reappeared there*: There is an interesting set of similes given by the Buddha on the different types of Non-returner (at A 7.55). Of the seven different grades, from the quickest to enlightenment to the slowest, the first three are all described as ‘realizing Nibbāna in the interval’. Khujjuttarā is presented as being amongst these quickest ones. The imagery he uses is of ‘an iron bowl, when heated all day and is struck, a chip which is red-hot might fly off’.
- 21) *ibid*:– *She was foremost*: This refers to the Buddha’s naming her as *bahussutanaṃ* – the most excellent of his lay women disciples in terms of analytical knowledge.
- 22) p242:– *Patient with my inability to forgive*: This is derived from the title of a Dhamma talk, given by Ajahn Sumedho in 1995.
- 23) *ibid*:– *Like the Bodhisattva Gotama*: The story this refers to is found at Jāt 66, ‘The Story of the “Sign of Gentleness” Birth’, in *The Jātaka, Vol I*, pp161-64.
- 24) *ibid*:– *to the Himavant*: A legendary forest stretching over a large region of the south-facing Himalayan mountains.

Chapter 25: Lone Wanderings

- 1) p243:– *thereby breaking one of the Precepts*: The seventh of the Eight Precepts is, ‘I undertake the Precept to refrain from entertainment, beautification and adornment’. Thus any use of perfume, jewellery, make-up and suchlike are not allowed for monastic residents and those adhering to the Eight Precepts.
- 2) *ibid*:– *it was Magandiya*: See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 21, pp268-9.
- 3) *ibid*:– *it also reminds you that life is very uncertain and undependable*: The active contemplation of the fabricated and fragile nature of the body was regularly recommended by the Buddha. This is to support non-identification with the body and the appreciation of the fundamental Law of Uncertainty in nature. See, for example A 5.57, the 'Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection.
- 4) p244:– *flow of floral delight*: For a description this action, see *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 23, pp300-1.
- 5) *ibid*:– *the profound lessons she had learned*: See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 23, pp294-307.
- 6) *ibid*:– *Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless*: This verse is Dhp 21. The lengthy ‘Story Cycle of King Udena’ is the commentary to this verse. It is the longest entry in the Dhammapada Commentary.
- 7) *ibid*:– *forest chickens*: These are ubiquitous in India, South-east Asia and China. The most common ones are Grey Jungle fowl – (*Gallus sonneratii*) and Red Junglefowl (*Gallus gallus*).
- 8) *ibid*:– *kukals*: This common bird is also known as ‘crow pheasant’ (*Centropus sinensis*). It has a very deep, sonorous, distinctive call.
- 9) p246:– *defer to the Mahasattva*: A Mahāsattva is a great Bodhisattva who has been on the path for a long time. Examples would be the Bodhisattvas Maitreya, Avalokiteshvara, Mañjushrī, Samantabhadra and Ksitigarbha.
- 10) *ibid*:– *One who is invited to share reflections*: These criteria are mentioned at A 8.16 and CV 7.4.

- 11) *ibid*:– *If some samana or brahmin asks you*: This dialogue is derived from S 22.85 and 22.86, and the Buddha’s interactions with the bhikkhus Yamaka and Anuradha, respectively.
- 12) *ibid*:– *the amulet you gave me*: See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 15, pp177-9.
- 13) p247:– *That prophecy*: See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, p355.
- 14) *ibid*:– *the Eternal Youth, Sanat Kumara*: This is a brahma god who is known by this name on account of his ever-young appearance. He is one of the few brahma deities who follows the teachings of the Buddhas. He is mentioned at D 18.17-29, M 53.25, and S 6.11.
- 15) *ibid*:– *The sickness continued for many Moons*: The narrative beginning here, about Devadatta’s last days, is derived from the Commentary to DhP 17. It is also found at CV 7.4.
- 16) *ibid*:– *Siddhartha had always been the favourite*: This was the Buddha’s name, customarily only used up to the time of his renunciation of palace life.
- 17) p249:– *made it intrinsically impossible for them to meet*: There were a number of occasions in the Buddha’s life, or qualities of the natural order that were named, where the Buddha stated in this categorical way: ‘It is impossible, it cannot be.’ This situation with Devadatta is one example. There are many listed at A 1.268-95, as well as other examples in the Pali Canon.
- 18) p250:– *Surama, who looked disconsolate*: Surama is not a Canonical figure but an invention of the author. Here his mood echoes the ‘Stanzas of Disappointment’ uttered by Māra, after he has failed to fool the Buddha (as at S 4.24 & SN 446-49):

*‘Step by step for seven years
 I have followed the Blessèd One.
 The Fully Enlightened One, possessed
 Of mindfulness, gave me no chance.
 A crow there was who walked around
 A stone that seemed a lump of fat;
 “Shall I find something in this?
 And is there something tasty here?”
 He, finding nothing tasty there,
 Made off: and we from Gotama*

*Depart in disappointment, too,
Just like the crow that tried the stone.'*

Full of sorrow he let his vina slip from under his arm; and then the unhappy demon vanished.

Now when Māra, the Evil One, had spoken these Stanzas of Disappointment in the Blessed One's presence, he left that place and sat down cross-legged on the ground not far from the Blessed One, silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum and with nothing to say, scraping the ground with a stick.

(Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli trans.)

The figure of Surama represents one of the two main ways that Māra appears to operate, this is by him manifesting a living being's form as a disguise, for example as a *nāga* (at S 4.6), as a farmer, (S 4.19) or as a huge elephant (S 4.2).

The other main way that Māra influences things is by entering the minds of already existent beings, such as Muñca in this story or, in the Pali Canon, (at S 4.18), where he persuades the villagers not to give alms; or when he enters the mind of a certain youth who then hurls a stone at the attendant of the Buddha Kakusandha, Ven. Vidhura, injuring his head (M 50.21); or when he influenced the mind of one of the Assembly of the brahma god Baka, and then the whole Assembly (at M 49.5).

19) p251:– *three-striped palm squirrels*: These are common in India (*Funambulus palmarum*). In Indian myth the stripes are taken to have been caused by the hero Rāma who stroked its back with three fingers after a squirrel helped him to build the bridge to Lanka.

20) ibid:– *long ago, Goddess Nü-wa*: This opening part of Dusaka's chanted tale is derived from *The Story of the Stone* by Cao Xuequin, Ch. 1, David Hawkes trans. (published by Penguin Classics).

21) p253:– *Like that of Yeshe Tsogyal*: See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 20, pp254-5.

22) ibid:– *Even the Bodhisattva Gotama*: The following narrative is derived from Jāt 66.

23) p256:– *His duty as a grateful student*: In the texts of monastic discipline, the Vinaya, it describes the duties a teacher has towards their students and, in turn, the duties the student has with respect to their teacher. Amongst these are: 'If the preceptor is bordering on an offence then, speaking himself, the student should warn him.' (MV 1.25.10); 'If wrong views have arisen in the preceptor, the student should dissuade him from them.' 'If the preceptor has committed a serious offence, and is resistant to correction by the Sangha, then the student should consider, "How then can the preceptor be persuaded to conduct

himself properly, subdue his bad behaviour, mend his ways so that he can be rehabilitated?” (MV 1.25.20-22).

24) p258:– *the famed Cauldrons of Youth*: This narrative is derived from the Russian fairytale ‘Ivan – Young of Years, Old of Wisdom’, in *Vasilisa the Beautiful*:– *Russian Fairy Tales*, Dorian Rottenberg trans., Progress Publishers, (1966), Moscow.

25) p259:– *AN APSARA OF THE WATERS*: Rhamba, one of the characters of this story, is an apsara, as is her brother Salassa. The most ancient descriptions of apsara portray them as water nymph-like beings (e.g. in the Rigveda). They were originally female spirits of the clouds and waters. The speciality of dancing came later.

26) p260:– *That inner voice*: As above, see note 18 for this Chapter. In a comparable fashion, the murderer Anna Marie Hahn wrote in her prison letters to the Cincinnati Enquirer, in December 1938, shortly before her execution in the electric chair: ‘I don’t know how I could have done the things I did in my life.’

27) p261– *THIS WORKS FOR THE VIRTUOUS*: This principle is mentioned in a variety of places in the Pali Canon such as at A 8.35, where the Buddha speaks about: ‘Eight kinds of rebirth on account of generosity’. He describes how, after having made offering food or lodgings, robes etc., that person may set their mind on being reborn amongst wealthy householders, devas of the various levels, up to the Brahma Realms.

‘If they set their mind on that thought, keep to it firmly and foster it, then after the death of the body they will be reborn in the realm according to their wishes. This, however, I declare is only for the virtuous, not for the unvirtuous ... Because their hearts are free from unwholesome passions, the heart’s desire of the virtuous succeeds.’

The scenario with the cauldrons is reminiscent of the test Sitā gave herself in the *Rāmāyaṇa*: After Sitā has been rescued from Lanka by Hanuman, Rāma asks to have her brought to him. She is exceedingly happy to see him at last and to be reunited. Rāma, however, is cold towards her and speaks to her cruelly.

He announces to her, and to everyone else, that he cannot accept her as his wife after she has spent such a long time in another man’s company – ‘in Ravana’s lap’. Astonishingly, and heartlessly he tells her that the only reason he actioned Hanuman to rescue her ‘... was to save my own honour.’

Sitā proclaims her virtue, her maintenance of the brahmachariya vows, her unwavering devotion to Rāma and her innocence. To prove her virtue she asks Lakshmana to light a fire. She walks into the fire and emerges unscathed – even the lotus in her hair is unscorched. There is sweat upon her brow after the ordeal but this largely due to her indignation about the whole procedure.

Rāma, somewhat unconvincingly, then claims that he had known that she was innocent all along but had wanted her to prove it to the world.

28) p262:– *The precious few items a wandering forest monk might need*: A forest monastic always has to carry their robes, alms-bowl, needle and thread, a water-strainer (to not harm small creatures in natural water supplies), a belt and a razor. In addition, a good water-canteen or gourd, a length of thin rope (to hang and dry robes after washing or just to air them), a small sharp knife and means of making light are all helpful.

29) ibid:– *He had said farewell in gratitude*: It is regarded as a good policy to consciously appreciate the feelings of the beings, visible and invisible that one has shared a place with.

Chapter 26: On the Western Shore

1) p263:– *Jammu, Swami-ji*: This region is in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir of today. The address ‘swami-ji’ is a way that ascetic yogis and religious seekers, renunciants are addressed in India today.

2) ibid:– *Taxila?*: This was an ancient city of great consequence. It is mentioned many times in Buddhist scriptures as a centre of great learning. It is spelled ‘*Takkasilā*’ in Pali. It was the capital of Gandhara. It is to be found today about 20 miles west of Islamabad in Pakistan.

3) ibid:– *River Vitasta*: Today this is known as the River Jhelum.

4) ibid:– *stone-built houses ... layered with wooden timbers*: This is still a method used today, in order to build with stone in regions prone to earthquakes – Jammu, Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh and Kulluta are all of this nature. The stones can slide side-to-side along the horizontal wooden beams, thus enabling the buildings to move without falling.

5) ibid:– *iron alms-bowl ... maintained with great care*: Such bowls are still used today. The surface is protected from rusting by baking the bowl in a very hot bonfire or forge, to form an oxide coating, but this coating can be chipped; the training with respect to the alms-bowl – whether it is iron or steel like this, or of clay or even stainless steel these days – is to treat it as if it was the skull of the Buddha.

- 6) p264:- Bhavatu sabba mangalam, rakkhantu sabba devata: This is the start of the blessing given at the meal-time, customarily in Thailand. It means ‘May there be every blessing, may the devas protect you.’

- 7) ibid:- *Me bhikkhu*, bhikshu: The latter word is the Sanskrit spelling of ‘*bhikkhu*’. This language, and hybrids of it with Pali were often used in North India and the region mentioned in the story here.

- 8) ibid:- *Repaired with woven tree-bark*: This method has been used up to the present time, by forest meditation monks in Thailand.

- 9) p265:- *the paddy-field patterns*: The Buddha asked Ānanda to design a patterning of monastic robes, to easily include smaller and larger pieces of scrap cloth, and to sew them ‘like these rice-fields of Magadha.’ Since that ancient time, this has been the form used for Buddhist monastic robes, up to the present day (see MV 8.12.1).

- 10) p266:- *Keeping the old for patches*: It is common practice, among forest monastics, to salvage what serviceable parts of old robes etc. one can for future repairs as needed. See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 21, pp263-66.

- 11) ibid:- *was quite the philosopher*: As described in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, especially Chs. 9 and 10, pp51-60.

- 12) ibid:- *a bhikkhu of nearly seventy Rains*: The practice in the monastic order is for those younger in years of monastic training to make room for, and offer the highest and most comfortable seat, to any Elders they are with. They should also listen respectfully, as one would expect, to what an Elder has to say.

- 13) p267:- *the ‘highest blessings’ of the Teacher*: This refers to the ‘Discourse on the Highest Blessings’, as recited to Krishna in *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 26, pp365-66.

- 14) ibid:- *Gandhara, Ariana*: This list of names of countries and regions is probably *not* as the locals would have referred to those places in all instances in that era. They are listed, dear reader, with these names for convenience of today’s readership.

- 15) p268:- *tents of hazel-rods*: Such tents are called ‘benders’ in current times and are still in use in communities of Travellers and other country-dwelling folk inclined to simple living. The name ‘bender’ comes from bending cut hazel saplings in the rails of a fence or, in ancient times, in between the upright trunks of close-standing trees, into U-shapes, then

arranging them to form a small, domed chamber. They are draped in blankets and canvas to keep the bell-shaped space warm. The floor is a bed of hazel twigs covered by canvas, skins or rugs, so rodents etc. can move easily underneath and the human occupant is off the cold damp ground. Skins would have been used as well as waxed cloth in former times.

16) *ibid*:– *land of Gavinna and her fathers*: ‘The Land of My Fathers’ is the Welsh national anthem. It was composed by Evan James and his son James James. In Welsh it is called ‘Hen Wlad Fu Nhadan’. See *Mara and the Mangala I*, Ch. 22, p281.

17) *ibid*:– *the Master’s teachings and stories ... to visit the upper realms*: Examples of such visits are found, firstly, at M 49, ‘The Discourse on an Invitation to a Brahma’, where the Buddha pays a call on the Brahmā Baka, to help relieve him of a wrong view, the deity having formerly been a teacher of the Buddha in a previous life.

Another example is found at D 11.67-85, ‘The Discourse to Kevaddha’, where a monk skilled in meditation goes, eventually, up to the Heaven of Maha-Brahmā to ask a question that he cannot answer himself.

In neither instance do the visitors to those upper realms experience extreme passing of time in the human world.

18) *ibid*:– *in your etheric bodies*: This is a Western term for what is known as ‘*sukhumarūpa*’ in Pali meaning ‘subtle body’. Other related terms are ‘*mano-maya-kāya*’ or ‘mind-made body’ and ‘*obhāsa-kāya*’, a ‘body of light’, which the Buddha used to project an image of himself, in order to offer teachings to his disciples in remote places.

In the Tibetan tradition the term ‘*saṃbhoga-kāya*’ has some equivalence to these qualities named in the Pali. It is defined as a ‘body of bliss’ and it is used in celestial manifestations. The ‘*nirmāṇa-kāya*’ means the physical body.

19) p269:– *concentrated on their breath*: This type of meditation practice is common in the Southern Buddhist world. It is called ‘*ānāpanasati*’ or ‘mindfulness of in-and-out breathing’.

20) *ibid*:– *Vasabha and Kesini emerged*: Such deep and extensive times spent in complete absorption are well known, even in modern times; for example, both Great Master Hsu Yün and his disciple, Master Hsüan Hua were well-known to have these abilities. Also Dipa Ma, a lay woman practitioner who lived in Calcutta, was fully capable of such absorptions.

21) *ibid*:– *the two of them sitting face-to-face ... for months*: There is an account, in the Chinese records of one Great Master, describing how ‘the happiest time of my life’ was sitting face-to-face with a monk friend, in samadhi like this, for forty-two days.

22) *ibid:- Kesini had grown some more grey hairs:* As above, (at note 17 of this Chapter) the canonical accounts do not mention an experience of vast amounts of time passing for the physical bodies (*rūpa-kāya*) of those visiting the higher realms in their *sukhumarūpa*, or subtle body.

23) *p274:- Look, stranger:* Several lines in the following passages are derived from the poem *Look, Stranger!* by W.H. Auden, published in 1936 in his book of the same name, later entitled *On This Island*.

24) *ibid:- in Gallia:* The Central European area was not divided up into distinct nation states in the era of Krishna's wanderings. 'Gallia' here roughly refers to the regions of France and Germany in the current age. Folk mostly seemed to live in clans and tribes, some nomadically, in this mid-iron age, pre-historic time.

25) *ibid:- pigyn hendaidd:* This is the modern Welsh for 'great-grandfather magpie'.

26) *ibid:- now with him for over fifty Rains:* This would be a *long* time to look after an iron bowl and to keep it in good condition, whilst using it every day.

27) *p275:- matter we are all fashioned from:* In one Celtic creation myth it states: Once upon a time, when there was not time, no gods or humans walked the surface of the land. But there was the sea, and where the sea met the land, a mare was born, white and made of sea-foam. And her name was Eiocha.

Not far from where the land met the sea, a tree grew, a strong and sturdy oak. On the oak grew a plant whose seeds were formed of the foam tears of the sea. To sustain her, Eiocha ate the seeds, those white berries, and they were transformed within her. Eiocha grew heavy with child and gave birth to the god Cernunnos. So great was her pain in childbirth that she ripped bark from the tree and hurled it into the sea. The bark was transformed by the sea and became the giants of the deep.

Cernunnos was lonely and he saw that the giants of the deep were numerous, so he joined with Eiocha and of their union came the gods Maponos, Tauranis, Tentates and the goddess Epona.

Eiocha soon tired of the land, being a creature of sea-foam, and she returned to the sea, where she was transformed into Tethra, goddess of the deep water, also known as Tethys.

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28) p276:– *Do good, refrain from harm*: This is part of the ‘Rule of Discipline Exhortation’ one of the earliest teachings of the Buddha. It was first given to a spontaneous gathering of 1250 Arahants at the Bamboo Grove, near Rājagaha.

29) ibid:– *The best way to evade the King of Death*: This is the method of meditation described by the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara (Guan Shi Yin) in *The Shurangana Sūtra*, Ch. 3, p256 (BTTS/DRBU, 2009). This method is named there by the Buddha as ‘the easiest way to reach enlightenment’, amongst those described to him by the twenty-five Bodhisattvas who visit him during that particular teaching.

30) ibid:– *within the bounds of his discipline*: The Buddhist monastic Rule forbids the handling, storing or controlling the use of food that one might later consume. One is to be fully dependent on unsolicited free will offerings, that have been out of one’s hands from the get-go.

31) ibid:– *it was an inner sound*: This sound goes by many names in different traditions. See *Inner Listening*, by the author, pp49-57.

32) p277:– *like a diamond someone had sewn into your clothes*: This comes from a parable in the Lotus Sūtra, Ch. 8.

33) p278:– *the process of spontaneously appearing*: This is frequently the way in which beings are described if they have arisen in the Pure Abodes. That such beings appear ‘spontaneously’ means there is no parentage of any kind, they simply manifest, fully grown and cognizant in one of those Abodes.

34) p279:– *the intermediary state*: In Pali this is called the *antarābhava*; in Tibetan such transitional dimensions are known as *bardos*.

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