

There's an ALLIGATOR

in the pool!

There's an
ALLIGATOR IN THE POOL!

*To my most patient students, my harshest critics and
my most loyal fans, my three sons, who unearth the
fun in me, this book is affectionately inscribed. Each of
you makes my world come alive.*

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The creature was 14 feet long and blackish in color, blending into the dark waters in the night. The young alligator slowly approached a man-made island off South Florida.

The alligator had dotted sensory pits along the upper and lower jaws that look almost like beard stubble. These helped the creature detect slight changes in water pressure and thus locate its prey. Until recently these waters were thick with sinewy mangroves and marshes with lilypads. Its old stomping grounds now barren, it sensed land much sooner than expected in its path where earlier there had been none. Confused, it kept circling and circling the waters, looking for food.

Silently it glided near land and lay submerged for a bit among the boats docked there, and, finding nothing to eat, slowly swam away.



CHAPTER ONE

THE HOMECOMING

As the great, northern? gates to the mansion swung open to let the car enter the driveway, the three boys whooped in glee.

“Home at last!” shouted Kyle happily, “we’re home, we’re home,” he repeated, as the car slowly climbed the tree-lined road that led up to the house. “Mom, Dad, we’re home!” shouted the boys.

“Good to see you, Kylie, Mikey, Tony,” replied their mother, kissing them and hugging them warmly.

“Great to see you, boys,” said their father, Dr. Amit Bose, ruffling their hair and embracing them in turn.

“I miss you, at school, Mom, why can’t you come and live there with us?” asked Kyle.

“Oh, honey, I miss you too, but schools don’t allow moms, you know that,” replied Kate. “Isn’t Matron nice to you?”

“Sure, she’s nice, but she doesn’t molly-colly me the way you do,” answered Kyle.

“Molly-colly, what’s that, now?” asked Dr. Bose.

“He means ‘mollycoddling,’” explained Kate, indulgently squeezing Kyle until he ran away laughing. “Where’s Uncle Tarak?”

he asked.

“Uncle Tarak must be at the pool, he’s been preparing it for you since morning.”

“I can’t wait to take a plunge,” said Anthony, the oldest of the three boys. At 13, he was a strapping young lad, and was almost as tall as his father already. He loved outdoor sports and was strong and healthy.

“Me too, can we take a swim first?” asked Michael, looking at his parents.

“Don’t you want to unpack first?” said Kate. “Besides, Louise and Abdul have been busy in the kitchen, making all your favorite things.”

“Umm, I’m hungry already - I hope Abdul has made lots and lots of kebabs for us,” said little Kyle, “and lots and lots and lots and lots of ice cream!”

“Lots and lots of everything,” said Kate fondly. “Now run along to your rooms, freshen up, unpack, and come down to brunch in 30 minutes at the pool side.”

“Here’s Uncle Tarak! Uncle Tarak, Uncle Tarak! How are you?” the boys rushed towards an old man, falling all over him, laughing and shouting all at once.

“Careful, careful, baba, you’ll knock me down, I’m an old man,” Tarak laughed as the boys embraced him all at once.

“What old man, Uncle Tarak, you’re not old,” said Michael.

As soon as Tarak heard these words, he broke into a dance, moving his feet on the spot, flinging his arms in all directions, hopping around with the disjointed graces of a puppet, humming a tune and delighting them with his antics.

Dr. Bose and Kate watched as the three brothers surrounded their grand-uncle Tarak, who was in fact Dr. Bose’s uncle. He was in good physical shape, and loved puttering around the house, trying to fix

things.

Though the house didn't need much fixing, Uncle Tarak made himself useful in the large spacious mansion on the island on the Intracoastal Waterway of Miami, South Florida that his nephew Dr. Bose had recently purchased. A beautiful mansion built in the 1920s, it was an opulent home on a small private man-made island that housed only 25 homes. The two-story, custom-built, Mediterranean-style luxury home was situated on seven acres of land and offered unsurpassed panoramic views of the bay. Dr. Bose and Kate were proud of it.

Dr. Bose was a brilliant doctor and had a large private practice on Miami Beach. As a cardiac surgeon, his schedules were very demanding and his appointment book was always full. He worked hard and took little or no time off from his busy routine. If he wasn't performing operations, he was researching material for his books, or attending medical conferences all over the world where he addressed members of the medical fraternity. Dr. Bose rarely took time off but when the boys came home for their holidays, he made sure he spent time with them and took them on vacations.

Kate ran her own very successful swimwear business on Miami Beach where she had a large opulent office, design studios, and warehouse. She spent her time discussing details of her new collections with the designers. Kate also had to travel all over the world, especially Europe, visiting her exclusive boutiques, organizing fashion shows, seeing to product launches, presenting seasonal collections, visiting African and Asian countries in search of new fabrics, textures, patterns, and designs.

In spite of having a team of department heads, it was Kate who had to keep track of production, shipments, deliveries and payments. Besides all this, she had to meet fashion journalists, appear on television, give press interviews, select models for her ramp shows, and arrange finance.

Earlier Kate ran a similar business on a smaller scale in New York before she met Dr. Bose and they decided to get married and settle in Florida. When the boys came home for their holidays, Kate worked from home, using her laptop and cell phone to manage her

business. Both parents were very fond of their children and loved them deeply, but it was difficult for either of the parents to devote more time to the children.

The boys studied at a boarding school Lauderdale High, located on a picturesque 80-acre campus, five miles from the Atlantic Ocean in South Florida. When school was closed and the boys were home, Uncle Tarak lived with them and kept an eye on them. The arrangement suited them, for he doted on the kids and the parents were glad to have a family member around to watch over the children.

“C’mon, race you upstairs,” said Anthony, sprinting towards the grand circular staircase that led to the upper floors.

“Wait for me,” yelled Michael, following his brother, with Kyle running close behind.

On the first floor was a beautiful formal dining room next to the butler’s pantry. The living room was filled with precious antiques, original European paintings, a wood-burning fireplace, and hand painted murals. The huge, French windows commanded panoramic views of the waterfront, the boat dock, the swimming pool, the water fountains, the formal tropical gardens that had numerous exotic fruit trees, and a lovely, roofed pavilion.

The study was also on this floor, and Dr. Bose had converted it into a comfortable library and den for all of them. Family photos adorned the wall, so did trophies, medals and framed certificates.

“Dad had promised us a home theatre, I wonder if he’s installed it somewhere,” said Michael who was addicted to movies.

“Knowing Dad, he might get it done soon, but not until Christmas,” replied Anthony, peeping into the study on his way up to the second floor where the bedrooms were.

The three of them shared a large bedroom. It was a typical boys’ room. The functional furniture was made of white cedar wood with blue denim upholstery.

“I wonder when I’ll get my own room,” grumbled Anthony. “All

my friends have their own rooms, but I have to share with my kid brothers.”

“Not until you’re sixteen, Tony, you know it,” said Michael. “So just grin and bear us.”

“Okay, let’s hurry up and go downstairs,” said Anthony, pulling Kyle out of bed. “C’mon, smallie, unpack fast and put away your things.”

“Don’t call me ‘smallie,’” answered Kyle, “I’m not so little any more.”

“Okay, okay, hurry up, big boy, before Mom comes up to check.”

The three of them quickly got busy, unpacking their things, putting their stuff away in cupboards and on desks. Soon, their mother dropped by with a maid.

“Juanita, you haven’t met my boys before. This is Tony, this is Mikey, and this is Kylie. Boys, this is Juanita, she’s been with us since a few weeks now, please don’t make her life difficult by scattering your things around. No hurricanes in this room, get it?”

“Got it, Mom,” said Michael, and then added cheekily, “A place for everything and everything in its place,” evidently quoting Kate.

“Well, well, that’s an original one, isn’t it?” smiled Kate. “Now if you’re done, let’s go downstairs.”

“I have kept the towels on the deck-chair, Ma’am,” said Juanita.

“Thank you, Juanita. I’m taking the boys to the patio.”

The four of them trooped down, with Anthony and Michael sliding down the banister, and Kyle holding his mother’s hand as they climbed down.

“Uncle Tarak, tell us a story, please,” said Kyle as soon as he spotted

him.

The old man grinned. "Yes, yes, baba, I'm so happy to have somebody who likes to listen to my stories," said Tarak, glancing towards Dr. Bose, who merely shook his head and looked away. "I'll tell you lots of stories every day, now that you are home."

"Is that a promise?" asked Kyle.

"Cross my heart and swear to die in a cell of dead rats," whispered Tarak dramatically.

Kyle giggled.

Through the glass doors of the gourmet island kitchen, the children could see the chefs busy at the counters, among the appliances. They waved at Louise and Abdul, before going there and meeting them.

"Bonjour, Louise, comment ça va? Good morning Abdul, how are you? Hello everyone," said Anthony, warmly greeting the two chefs and their assistants.

"Bonjour, Antoine, Michel et Kaïle." Louise replied, exaggeratedly using French versions of their names. "Ça va très bien et je suis contente de vous revoir."

"Moi aussi," replied Anthony, "et maintenant nous avons grand faim," he said, indicating their hunger.

"Just because you've been learning French at school doesn't mean you have to show off," rebuked Kyle and Michael. Anthony grinned.

Abdul, a kindly old man, was in the family's service since several years. The boys reminded him of his own children back home, and Abdul went to great lengths to pamper them when they were home, preparing their favorite foods.

"Hello, Abdul, I can't wait to eat some real food," said Kyle, eyeing

the kebabs that Abdul was shaping and placing on a tray. "Are these ready, can I take one?" he asked.

"Not yet ready, but here, help yourself to some warm brownies," said Abdul, pointing to a platter to the right.

"Ummm, delicious" he muttered, sinking his teeth into a warm chocolate-chip brownie.

"Try the apple brownies and the walnut brownies too," said Abdul.

"Lovely," said Anthony and Michael, helping themselves.

"A surprise dessert for all of you later," added Louise.

"I'm dying to know what it is, but don't tell us, we'll wait," said Anthony.

"Will you make kebabs for me every day?" Kyle went up to Abdul and asked.

"Yes, of course," The old chef smiled, delighted at the compliment from the seven-year-old child.

"Boys," their father called out, "take a few laps in the pool before you eat."

"Coming, Dad," they yelled. "Bye, Louise, bye Abdul."

They ran to the poolside, took a quick shower and jumped in. The water felt cool and refreshing. Anthony was the strongest swimmer and raced ahead of them. Soon their father joined them and they frolicked and romped in the water, splashing happily.

"Uncle Tarak, come on in!" said Kyle, but Tarak shook his head.

"Tarak sees a military band playing underwater. There are grenades. Tarak is afraid." Hearing this, Kyle burst out laughing. a "You can be so funny, Uncle Tarak," said Michael, at which their father rolled his eyes heavenward and turned away.

“How’s our swimming champ? Still on the school team, I hope?” asked Dr. Bose, as he caught up with his oldest son.

“Yes, Dad, on the swimming team, the lacrosse team and the baseball team.” answered Anthony.

“Great, Tony. That’s really nice. Call your Mom. Why isn’t she joining us?” said Dr. Bose.

“Mom, come and join us!” yelled Kyle.

“Give me a moment,” Kate called back, slipping into one of the changing rooms.

A few minutes later she emerged, wearing a smart blue-green swimsuit with a scenic pattern.

“You look great Mom, is that one of your own designs?” asked Michael.

“Yes, it is. It’s from my newest collection, the Machu Picchu range.”

“Wow! Machu Picchu, the lost city of the Incas! Is that why you went to Peru a few months ago?” asked Michael, who was the history buff in the family.

“Yes,” said Kate, slipping into the water and joining the boys. “I actually went up to the ruins too. It was awesome, and I think we should all go there for a vacation some day. You will love it, Mikey!”

“What’s a Machu Picchu?” Kyle asked, turning towards Michael.

“The Machu Picchu ruins are one of the most beautiful and mysterious sites in the world,” explained Michael. “It means Old Peak and is high up in the mountains in Peru, and is referred to as the Lost City of the Incas. Machu Picchu is now one of the New Seven Wonders of the World.”

“What do you mean by Lost City?” asked Kyle.

“It was built in the 1400s, then mysteriously abandoned – and then the site was forgotten completely for many centuries! It was only until the early 20th century that an American historian brought it to the world’s attention. It is now a very important cultural site in Peru and is considered a sacred place, because of the Sun Temple and other buildings,” explained Michael while the others heard attentively.

“How did you find it, Mom?” asked Anthony.

“Very beautiful and very inspiring. I went there with two of my apprentices - we went to the local markets looking for fabrics and designs - which was fun too. One of them speaks fluent Spanish, so that really helped,” answered Kate.

“And thus was born the Machu Picchu collection.” kidded Dr. Bose.

“Dad, where will you take us for our next vacation?” Anthony wanted to know.

“How about Egypt? A cruise down the Nile, you would like that, I’m sure.” said Dr. Bose.

“Wow! Egypt - the Sphinx, the Pyramids - that sounds wonderful, Dad,” said Michael, excited already.

“Mom could then have her Egyptian collection,” chuckled Kyle.

“Uh-huh, done that already, the Cleopatra line,” replied Kate.

“So maybe you should think of having a Kylie collection,” suggested Anthony.

“Yes, doesn’t that sound like a fantastic idea?” Kate played along, tickling Kyle under the water. “The Kylie collection, we could print all your drawings on the swimwear. It would be a sell-out.”

“Absolute rave reviews - Kylie, the dormant Picasso,” added Dr. Bose.

“Kylie Minogue,” teased Michael.

“Michael Jackson, you’re bad, you’re bad,” retorted Kylie, pummeling him.

“Who wants to eat now?” asked Kate, signaling to the kitchen staff to bring out their lunch.

All of them scrambled out, dried off, draped their robes and wraps and went towards the table set in the shade. Louise and Abdul had taken great pains to make this a memorable meal. They were first served waffles, flapjacks, & omelets followed by freshly baked muffins and scones.

“Wow,” said Michael, tucking in hungrily. The session in the pool had made them ravenous and they wolfed down the first part of the meal.

Louise soon arrived with some delicious looking platters. “Smoked Salmon Scramble, and Lobster White Corn Ravioli,” she announced, setting them down. “I’m sending next the Tomato Bruschetta, and Spiced Seasonal Fruits,” she patted Anthony’s head on her way back to the kitchen.

“This is simply divine, Dad,” said Anthony munching happily, and sipping on lemonade.

Before long, Abdul sent a large tray heaped with sizzling hot kebabs and as assortment of sauces, dips and chutneys, along with a basket of hot oven-fresh naans and a bowl of butter cubes.

With a flourish, Tarak set it all in front of Kyle and bowed down exaggeratedly. “Your Majesty, the kebabs have arrived. Eat them all. They’re all for you.”

“Uh-oh” said Kyle “I won’t be able to eat them all, but I’ll eat a lot of those, for sure,” he said, putting several pieces in his plate, and placing a cube of butter on a naan. He watched in fascination as the butter melted, before taking a bite.

The boys ate heartily, with evident enjoyment, joking and teasing one another. Their parents were happy to have them at home after so many months. Kate ate some fruit salad, saying nothing, but

just looked at them and listened to their banter.

“God, how I’ve missed them,” she whispered to her husband.

“Me too,” he replied.

“Oh, Amit, how I wish they didn’t have to go to boarding school, I wish I was here at home instead of working,” she said wistfully.

“Katie, don’t start that all over again, we’ve discussed it all before, you know it’s the best arrangement, considering our busy schedules,” Dr. Bose reassured her, “and besides, they seem quite happy, so don’t worry.”

“I’m worried about Kylie, he’s just a baby,” she replied.

“He’ll be okay, trust me,” replied Dr. Bose, “he’s growing up fine.”

“Look, Mom, Uncle Tarak lent me his shades. How do I look?” interrupted Kyle.

“A proper gangster, just like in the movies,” answered his mother, at which the child broke into another fit of giggles.

“Do you like gangsters?” he asked, adjusting the glasses and scowling.

“Only this little one,” she replied, hugging him.

Juanita approached, and wanted to know if she should clear the table.

“Are you done, boys?” Kate asked them.

“Yes, Mom. Dad, shall we fool around in the pool for a while?” asked Michael.

“Of course, but take it easy, you’ve just eaten,” suggested their father.

“We’ll just float or wade,” he replied.

“Ma’am, Louise wants to know when she should send out the deserts,” Juanita asked Kate.

Kate looked towards Dr. Bose. "Give them another half hour in the pool," he replied.

"Right. Okay, Juanita, ask Louise to wait a little bit longer, thirty minutes," instructed Kate.

"Very well, Ma'am." replied Juanita. She stacked the trolley and wheeled it away.

Tarak went and sat by the pool's edge, but the boys urged him to swim with them.

"Come on, Uncle Tarak, join us."

"Old man will fall in and drown, baba," he teased, making frightened faces.

They laughed. The more they laughed, the more he shook in mock terror until they collapsed in mirth.

"Old man very afraid, water boiling hot," he declared.

"Noooo, it's not hot, it's nice and cool," said Kyle resolutely, urging him to dip his feet.

The elderly man gingerly put one toe in the water and recoiled as though the water had scalded his foot. He hopped up and down, shouting in agony. "Very hot, burning hot, hot enough to boil eggs. "Abdul," he faced the kitchen and called out loudly, "You can boil eggs in the pool for tomorrow's breakfast," at which Kyle again burst into giggles.

"You can even cook potatoes, or poach fish in this hot pool. We can draw bath water from the pool henceforth, it will save fuel," he added.

"Can you imagine Louise doing that?" asked Anthony, "dunking a dozen eggs here, and a dozen potatoes there. And Eddie filling pails of hot water and carting them up one by one."

"He sure can keep them amused," observed Dr. Bose, referring to Tarak.

"I know," replied Kate, "if only..." her voice trailed off.

"Don't think about it now," said Dr. Bose. "It doesn't matter, as long as the kids are happy with him and enjoying themselves."

Kate sighed, rubbed some suntan lotion on her arms and legs, adjusted her shades and said she'd steal forty winks while the children were occupied.

Dr. Bose picked up some journals and went through them, reclining in his deck chair. Earlier he had decided to take the boys on vacation somewhere, but it wasn't working out. Taking a week off was impossible for him right now.

Even Kate had told him that she might be invited to have a showing at the Paris Fashion Week later that month, in which case she would need time to prepare for it. It was too important to decline the invitation and it would be foolish of her to refuse to participate.

So, the children would have to be kept amused and occupied at home. Their father had planned on resuming construction of the tree house which they had commenced during the last holidays. It would keep them busy, and the exercise would do them good, he had rightly thought.

"Dad, Mom, wake up, time for some ice cream" the children shouted. Dr. Bose had dozed off too, and he woke up with a start. Kyle saw him and started giggling as usual.

"Is there anything that doesn't amuse you, son?" asked Dr. Bose, pulling him towards him and hugging him. Kyle shook his head, and led his father towards the table.

"Mom, come help yourself," shouted Michael. The boys had already piled their plates with Hazelnut Mousse Cake, vanilla ice cream, and brownies.

"No dessert for me, I'll have a cup of tea," said Kate, accepting a cup of green tea from Juanita. "Thank you Juanita, this is just what I

needed.”

“This is just perfect,” said Anthony, through a mouthful of cake, “let’s go and thank Louise and Abdul.

As if on cue, they saw Louise and Abdul walking towards them.

“Il est vraiment délicieux, ce gâteau. Je vous remercie pour vos efforts,” he said formally, taking Louise’s hand and kissing it.

“You are growing up too fast, mon petit, quite a cavalier already,” chided Louise, but beaming all the same.

“Abdul, everything was so wonderful, as always,” said Dr. Bose, and the boys nodded vigorously.

“Thank you, Sir. Thank you, boys. And what would you like to eat tonight?” he asked.

“Kebabs!” said Kyle at once, and they all laughed.

“No kebabs, but a surprise, nevertheless,” he answered, “now eat your ice creams before they melt.” Saying this, the two chefs went back to their own domain and the boys sat down to finish their deserts, relishing every bite.

“Will you tell us a story now, Uncle Tarak?” Kyle requested. “Or better still - tell us about your days in the Indian army.”

Tarak grew thoughtful and before he could reply, the child was tugging at his sleeve. “Please, Uncle Tarak, you never tell us anything about your own life.”

“Stop bothering Uncle Tarak now,” Dr. Bose said sharply. The boys looked at their father in surprise.

“But it’s true, Dad, Uncle Tarak has never ever told us anything about himself,” Michael and Anthony said in a disappointed tone.

“Enough, now, go on upstairs and rest for a while, boys,” their father told them in a curt voice. They knew better than to argue

with their Dad, so they picked up their things and made off.

“I’ll tell you a story at bedtime, baba,” Tarak called out after them. They smiled and waved back, but there was no enthusiasm in their action.



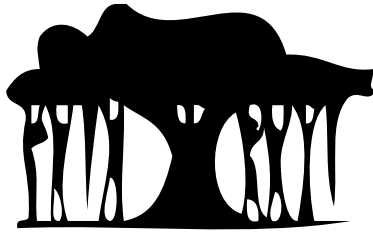
Under the late afternoon sun, an alligator swam silently, a few meters from the bay. Its snout was wide and U-shaped. Because of the wide snout, the alligator could pack more crushing power to eat prey like turtles that constituted part of its diet.

But there were no turtles for it to eat today. Nor had there been for some time.

The poor, dumb thing lay submerged in the water, waiting for a suitable opportunity. After about an hour, it slowly made its way towards another side of the island, towards the deserted community pool. No one on the island ever saw it.

The hungry alligator lumbered along, then climbed out of the brackish waters onto land, and blended in among the bushes.

There it lay, with its jaws shut its lower teeth fitting into sockets in the upper jaw, hidden from view waiting to prey on fish or small mammals.



CHAPTER TWO

TREEHOUSE

In their room, the three boys were extremely quiet. Michael punched his pillow a few times in anger, Anthony kicked his desk and Kyle sulked and lay on his bed.

“Every time, it’s the same thing, we just cannot ask Uncle Tarak any personal questions,” Michael observed.

“I wonder what mystery surrounds him,” added Anthony.

“Dad got real mad at us today,” Kyle said, fingering the edge of his blanket. “He never usually shouts or yells at us.”

“Dad didn’t yell or shout, but he meant us not to pry,” Anthony pacified him, sitting next to him and squeezing his hand. “It’s okay, Kylie, I’m sure Dad has his reasons. C’mon, let’s watch some television.”

They changed into comfortable play clothes and went into the informal living room to watch something on television. They found a movie that interested them and soon got engrossed. Their mother came up to check if they were fine, saw them busy, blew them a kiss from the door and went about her work. She had some phone calls to make and some business to catch up with, so she slipped into her own room to check her emails.

In the meantime, Dr. Bose and Tarak took a walk around the estate and headed in the direction of the unfinished tree house.

“The boys will have to be occupied, so I thought we should resume work on the tree house.”



“Yes, I’ll help them,” said Tarak, “when I was a child, my father built a tree house in the village which he claimed was for his children - me, your Dad, and my sister - but it was really for himself. We enjoyed it, all the same,” he grinned. “The boys will be happy; a tree house is the stuff childhood dreams are made of.”

They reached the spot and saw the incomplete work. To make the tree house safe and secure, a strong foundation had been provided with the help of four poles built around a mature, healthy banyan tree with a strong trunk. The basic structure was sturdy with the four posts as the legs of the tree house. The tree grew out through the center.

The platform provided a secure foundation for the rest of the structure. It was built all around the tree trunk and had diagonal bracing underneath for extra strength, since it was not supported on branches. The platform was level and kept balanced centrally around the trunk to support uneven loads and reduce swaying. The many gnarls and twists of the banyan’s tangled roots provided plenty of places to enjoy some solitude and hide secret treasures.

Dr Bose had insisted on being kind to the earth, so when he had got it erected, he made sure that damage to the tree was limited. He had insisted that natural materials and salvaged wood be used in its construction, and ropes used instead of nails wherever possible. Where ropes could not be used, strong stainless steel screws were to be used, because nails rust, and encourage disease and rot.

The bark was not cut all the way round, nor constricted too tightly with ropes and wires to prevent the tree from being killed. It stood only five feet from the ground, to minimize injury in case of a fall. With energetic boys around, a father could never be too careful.

“Once it is finished, they will feel happy and safe playing here,” remarked Tarak, observing it from all angles. “It shouldn’t be blocked on all sides, it’s better to have an open-air design that will protect the children from the heat but won’t keep them totally enclosed.”

“That’s right,” agreed Dr. Bose. “The whole point of being in a tree house is that you’re in a tree, and not in a house.”

“All that remains to be done is to fix railings around the platform, and the roof. We have to decide on the kind of ladder we need.” Dr. Bose saw the eagerness in Tarak’s eyes.

“No, Uncle Tarak, I won’t be letting you do it, I’ve called the same team, they will be coming tomorrow morning and hopefully they should be able to complete it. Now don’t look so disappointed, it’s more practical to call professionals.”

“You’re right,” Tarak mused. His mind was soon diverted to choosing the right ladder.

“We can have a rope ladder or a wooden one, or wooden steps can be fitted into the tree trunk and used for climbing up,” Tarak thought aloud.

“I think we should ask the boys what they would prefer, and let them decide,” their father said. “They can also have a sign for the tree house which labels it as theirs.”

“Make sure there is a first aid kit handy, have a shelf made under the roof of the tree house and keep it there permanently,” suggested Tarak. In his mind’s eye, he saw one of the lads falling from the tree house.

“Why do you always think of the worst, Uncle Tarak?” said Dr. Bose, smiling at the old man, and leading him back to the house.

A couple of gardeners were tending to the flowers. They smiled and called out a greeting as the two men passed by. Dr. Bose and Tarak walked up to the house and the old man whistled loudly, looking up at the windows of the boys’ bedroom.

Anthony peeped out and spotted Tarak below, in conversation with his father. “What is it, Uncle Tarak?” he asked.

“Come downstairs, and bring your brothers,” Tarak replied.

Soon, the three of them came dashing down, suspecting that Tarak had something to share.

“Yes, Uncle Tarak?” they asked. “Are we going somewhere, Dad?”

“We’re going to inspect the semi-finished tree house,” Dr. Bose answered.

“Can we have a go at it and finish it ourselves?” asked Anthony. “We’ve done some carpentry stuff at the workshop in school.”

“No, son, I don’t think so. I’ve called a professional team, they’ll bring their stuff and complete it tomorrow.”

“Wow, Dad! That sounds great, we can start using it then, I can’t wait until it’s done.” said Kyle. “Our very own tree house! Wow!”

His father laughed at his enthusiasm that was contagious. “The carpenters will be doing their job tomorrow and you can decide on what kind of a ladder you want.”

They reached the tree house and the boys ran towards the semi-finished structure. Anthony shinnied up the pole and Michael followed suit. Kyle tried to copy his brothers but couldn’t go much higher than a couple of feet and slid down laughing.

“We don’t need a ladder, we’ll scale up this way,” said Anthony, looking at Kyle from the corner of his eye and winking at Michael.

“Not fair, not fair,” Kyle said, holding his father’s arm and trying to swing from it.

Tarak held Kyle by the shoulders and shook him playfully. “Since both Tony and Mikey don’t need a ladder, we’ll make one especially for Mr. Kylie. Mr. Kylie can decide what kind of a ladder he wants. Okay?”

“Okay”, said Kyle happily. “I want a tall ladder with big steps, painted yellow, and stuck to the tree.”

“Let me give you an idea of all the possible kinds of ladders you can have, then you may decide,” said Dr. Bose. “You could have a fixed ladder like the one in the garage, with broader steps that can rest against the tree, or you could have a rope ladder dangling from the tree house, or you could even have some wooden steps fixed firmly into the tree trunk.”

“I think a rope ladder would be cool,” pointed out Michael.

“Even the steps in the tree trunk would be great,” suggested Anthony.

“Dad, you said I could choose, and I want a fixed ladder,” declared Kyle emphatically.

His brothers tried to convince him that a rope ladder or steps would be a better idea, but Kyle stubbornly shook his head and added “and I want it painted yellow, bright yellow.” He crossed his arms across his chest and stood there, defying them to make him change his mind.

“I think you chose the fixed ladder just because I wanted a rope ladder and Mikey wanted the wooden steps,” accused Anthony.

“Don’t bully me just because you’re bigger,” said Kyle, looking at his father for support.

“You guys work it out among yourselves, weigh the pros and cons of all three types and arrive at a sensible decision by the time the carpentry team is here tomorrow.” Dr. Bose and Tarak walked back towards the house and upstairs just in time for tea. Kate joined them and asked where the boys were.

“They’re by the tree house, deciding on the best ladder,” said Tarak, helping himself to a sandwich and a cup of tea. “The little fellow will get his way,” he added.

Kate looked at her husband quizzically. “Three boys, three kinds of ladders to choose from,” he explained.

Kate walked towards the table and picked up a cookie while Juanita poured her a cup of green tea. “In about twenty minutes

call the boys inside, and keep their milkshakes ready,” she instructed the maid.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Juanita replied and left the room.

Kate was restless and frowned as she took a sip. “What’s the matter?” Dr Bose asked her. “Problem?”

“I’ll have to go to Paris next week. I just received the confirmation by email.” she replied, looking miserable.

“I know what you’re thinking,” Dr Bose replied. “The boys will be fine, don’t worry, you’ll be back before you know it.”

Kate sighed. “I wish I didn’t have to go, I hate to be away from them during the holidays.”

“Don’t worry, Katie,” said Tarak kindly, “I’ll look after the little one, I know you worry for him.”

“Thank you, Uncle Tarak, sometimes I feel I’m not a good mother,” she replied. “I don’t know what we’d do without you.”

“You go to Paris and call them every day from there, they’ll be fine here, don’t worry,” he reassured her. “This old man will keep an eye on them, and so will Amit, but don’t tell them today, it’s their first day home,” he advised. But he knew that when Kate was in Paris, the boys wouldn’t be here at home.

“All right, I won’t,” she answered, feeling a little better already. “But don’t be too lenient with them.”

This wasn’t the first time Kate, or for that matter even Dr. Bose had reproached him for being lenient with the kids, thought Tarak. He was a permissive uncle, letting the boys do as they pleased, especially when their parents were not home. The boys loved him for this - he didn’t reprimand, scold, or lay down any rules, and he told them the wildest of tales setting their imagination afire. To them, he was an enthralling magician whose mind was a Pandora’s Box - they didn’t know what it would reveal next.

For the parents, though, Tarak's laid-back attitude was a cause of concern sometimes. His laissez faire approach bothered them occasionally, but since they had no other baby-sitting arrangement, they ignored it. That, and something else.

"Here they come," said Dr. Bose as he heard their loud chattering and noisy footsteps.

The three of them trooped in, laughing and talking at the same time, pushing and prodding one another constantly. Kyle sat down close to his mother, while Anthony and Michael dropped down on a comfortable couch.

"We decided that Kylie's ladder will be the best," said Michael. Kyle made the thumbs up sign for victory. "It would be the sturdiest, we agreed. Moreover the rope ladder will make our arms ache if we go up and down the tree house all day."

"The steps fitted into the tree might damage the bark, we thought," Anthony said, "though I found the idea fascinating at first."

"And we'll paint it yellow," said Kyle, triumphantly.

"Then the tree house will also have to be painted yellow to match the ladder, and it might look like a birdhouse," broke in Michael.

"We'll see what the team suggests tomorrow, maybe natural wood will not look too bad either. Shall we wait until tomorrow?" asked their father.

"Yes, Dad, no problem," they replied.

Eddie brought in a large tray bearing three glasses containing milkshakes, a jar of cookies and a plate of sandwiches for the boys.

"A rope ladder wouldn't be a smart idea if Mom and Dad and Uncle Tarak decide to visit us in the tree house," continued Kyle.

"Why, I can climb a rope ladder quite well even today," Tarak pretended to be offended, "I used to climb a knotted rope and rescue damsels in distress from evil demons until very recently," he said

belligerently. That sent Kyle into another fit of giggles.

“And then what did you do with all those damsels, Uncle Tarak?” he asked.

“I didn’t have to buy meat for many days,” he replied in a serious tone.

“What? You mean, you mean you ate them?” asked Kyle incredulously.

“It gave me indigestion for many days. They didn’t agree with me,” he replied. “I should’ve left back the hair and the nails, but I was so hungry,” said Tarak. “Scaling a wall makes one quite ravenous.”

The parents laughed along with their children. Kate marveled at the old man’s imagination. Even Dr. Bose shook his head, wondering how his uncle could invent one tale after another at short notice.

After the boys finished their milk, they wheedled Tarak into telling them a story. “Let’s walk around the estate while I recount a tale,” he said.

He’ll spin another yarn, thought Dr. Bose. He smiled, thinking of the various tales the elderly man told the children, most of them based on mythological accounts from Hindu folklore. Often, he peppered them with modern science fiction and kept the three boys hooked.

“Let’s go sit in the den instead,” suggested Anthony. Tarak agreed and they got up and walked towards the study.

“When the tree house is ready, we can go and sit there for story sessions, would that be okay with you, Uncle Tarak?” asked Kyle.

“I think you’re wondering if this old man can climb up some steps and sit hunched for a couple of hours, am I right,?” he asked Kyle who grinned. “Well, well, we’ll see who clambers up fast, you or me.”

The boys sprawled on the rug, while Tarak sat down in a comfortable rocking chair and began his story. It started with the demon Asura who was killed by the Goddess Durga, and then somewhere along the way, a magician held the town captive while giant termites gnawed at the trees, destroying the entire forest. The tale then took a fantastic turn and the Asura's pet dog was thrown into outer space holding a golden globe in his mouth,— from where he watched the spectacle on earth with great interest, barking instructions to his own kith and kin there who were engaged in a battle for supremacy.

The story session lasted an hour, and even a logical thinker like Anthony was engrossed. Tarak was an extraordinary story-teller, he modulated his voice well, and gave the rendering a dramatic touch, whispering in fright or shrieking in terror as he spoke. The children couldn't take their eyes off him, a range of expressions crossed Tarak's face and he related the story with great animation, making up events as he went along. Sometimes he recounted a proper fable, and sometimes his own imagination took over and none of the boys could tell the difference.

When the story came to an end, the boys had a thoughtful expression, as though they were transported to a faraway place.

"How about another one, Uncle Tarak?" asked Michael.

"Tomorrow. A new story for a new day. Tomorrow I shall tell you some tales from the Panchatantra."

"I also want to hear an Akbar-Birbal story tomorrow," said Kyle, getting up.

"You love those, don't you?" said Tarak. The boys found the anecdotes of the wise king and his clever courtier quite irresistible. "Now run along, your father wanted to take you for a drive around the island. Give an old man some peace for a while," he grinned. "I've to go and teach the goldfish how to cook."

"Uncle Tarak, you are such a pet," Kyle said, hugging him. He could imagine the old man donning a chef's cap, standing in the kitchen

and giving cookery instructions to the goldfish that watched attentively from their glass bowl and took down notes.

The boys went downstairs to look for their father. They found him on the treadmill in the exercise room talking on the phone. He was discussing a case with another doctor. The boys figured this when they heard him utter words like ‘pulmonary’, ‘aorta’, ‘angiography’, ‘coronary’, ‘bypass’, ‘ICD’, and ‘carotid endarterectomy’.

They went to find their mother. Kate was in the kitchen finalizing the next day’s menu with the chefs. “Do not worry, Ma’am,” Louise was saying, “I will incorporate vegetables in their diet,” evidently putting at ease Kate’s anxiety about the boys’ nutrition.

“And one more thing, Abdul, we’re expecting maybe half a dozen carpenters tomorrow. Would you arrange for some extra chicken biryani to be cooked?” she asked him.

“Certainly, Ma’am,” Abdul replied.

At that moment, the boys entered the kitchen. “Hello, what’s cooking?” asked Anthony, then laughed at his inadvertent use of the pun.

“Surprise, surprise, you are not allowed to ask, and nobody in the kitchen is going to tell you.” said Abdul, slicing mushrooms.

“Awww,” said Kyle, disappointed.

“Mom, any idea if Dad is taking us out for a walk?” asked Anthony.

Kate shook her head. “Where is he?” she asked.

“He’s upstairs, taking a call,” replied Anthony. “Anything wrong, Mom? You seem upset,” he pointed out. Kate shook her head and said “Nothing’s wrong, why don’t the three of you go over to the workstation and wait there?” she said, referring to the third garage that had been converted into an airy enclosure to keep the boys’ sports equipment like bicycles, skateboards, tennis racquets, baseball sets, and footballs. It was also fitted with work tables, and

there was enough room for tools, bulletin boards, odds and ends, paints, art material, and such paraphernalia. Here the boys occasionally sat and crafted things, without fear of ruining or dirtying anything.

Their parents joined them here sometimes, while the boys painted toys, made picture frames, collages, worked with clay and mud, and stuck shells on boxes for hand-made birthday gifts. Part of a wall was fitted with a wire frame where the children's finished and semi-finished work was mounted.

Soon their father joined them and offered to walk with them around the island. This was a ritual they didn't like to miss. They h walked over to the top of the island from where they had an uninterrupted view of the sunset.

The man-made island had only 25 exquisite luxury homes, each occupying over an acre of land. All the houses had tall walls around them, and had access to the waterfront where their private boats and yachts were docked.

They walked around, enjoying the breathtaking landscape. Tall, hundred-foot-high Royal Palms lined the few streets. Although the island was connected to the mainland by a bridge, it had its own private security force and offered maximum privacy to the families. For the exclusive use of the residents, there was a private beach club on the oceanfront, with a clubhouse, party room, restaurant, bar, and a community pool.

"So. Kylie, do you know why we named you Kyle?" asked Dr. Bose. Kyle shook his head. "A 'kyle' is a narrow channel of water between two islands, or between an island and the mainland."

"Wow! I didn't know that," said Kyle.

"Why didn't you name us Isthmus or Strait or something?" asked Michael.

"Yeah, or even Canal or Island." said Kyle.

"Hmmm, why not Creek or Peninsula or Archipelago?" asked Anthony, laughing.

“You know, after you were born, Tony, for a long time your Mom and I couldn’t make up our minds if we wanted to call you Archie or Anthony,” his father grinned. “Had we decided on Archie, you’d have believed your name was short for ‘archipelago.’ Anthony laughed.

They soon finished their tour of the island and headed back home. “Dad, didn’t you mention wanting to buy a new boat?” asked Michael.

“Yes, son, I was thinking about it, but I’m not sure if I should buy it now, or wait awhile,” he replied.

“You had promised to take us for a boat cruise down the Intracoastal Waterway,” Anthony reminded him.

“Yes, we’ll do that one of these days,” he promised.

“Can we go tomorrow?” asked Kyle.

His father smiled, “Not tomorrow, Kylie. Tomorrow the tree house will be ready.”

“Uh-oh. I’d forgotten all about that,” Kylie said, skipping towards the tree. He stood directly below it, gazing up at it.

“Why don’t you stretch out on the grass and look up at it, you won’t have to crane your neck that way,” suggested Michael. Kyle actually did just that and the boys burst out laughing.

“C’mon, smallie, time to go inside,” said Anthony, rumpling his hair and half picking him up. The three of them raced inside, almost bumping into Eddie on the staircase.

“Dinner in thirty minutes,” called out Kate from the landing. “Did you have a good time?” she asked.

“Oh, yes, Mom, we missed you, you should’ve come along as well,” said Kyle, going up to Kate and hugging her tightly. She hugged him back.

“Sit here with me and tell me all about it while I molly-colly you,” Kate led him to the den and tumbled on the rug with him. Kyle giggled as she tickled his tummy. Andrew and Michael said they’d use the computers for a while and went off to their room.

Kyle told her all about the drive and the plans for the tree house. “I want the ladder painted yellow, and can I have a birdhouse that can hang outside the tree house?” he asked.

“I’m sure you can, you’ll have to ask the carpenters to make you one,” said Kate. “You’ll have to put out some nuts and seeds to attract them there.”

“It can be painted yellow, to go with the ladder,” said Kyle, quite excited about it.

He started telling his mother all that he would do, once the tree house was ready. He even was thinking about camping there at night.

“No,” said Kate. “You might turn into an owl when nobody is looking.”

Kyle giggled. “You sound like Uncle Tarak when you say such things,” he said.

Soon dinner was announced and they gathered at the patio. Abdul had prepared an Indian meal for them and they all sat down and helped themselves to palak-paneer, fish tikka, rotis, dal, salad, and vegetable pulao. The old chef was pleased to see them enjoying their meal, taking several helpings of the spicy fish tikka. “That was really good, Abdul,” they said.

“And now I’m ready to be surprised,” declared Kyle as Juanita and Eddie cleared the table.

At that very moment, Louise and her assistant wheeled out a trolley on which were stacked some trays and a pot. As soon as he saw it, Kyle exclaimed “Fondue! Wow! Chocolate fondue!” he cried out happily. Then he added, eyes shining “Louise, you’re the greatest!” Louise arranged the trays containing slices of cake,marshmallows and fruit,and set the fondue burner in the center. “Now be careful

you don't knock it down," she warned.

Louise set before them their fondue plates and their mother helped them with the cutlery. She handed out special long forks with colored tips so that each person could identify their own fork. They took turns spearing the meat cake, marshmallows and fruit and dunking them in the molted chocolate that was slowly simmering in the pot.

There was lots of laughter, joking and kidding around the fondue pot. Dr. Bose told his sons how to master the technique of keeping the item on the fork, trying not to knock off anyone else's.

"My strawberry is lost forever in the chocolate sauce," grinned Michael.

"From the bottom of the pot, it will flow out and land up on the other side of the world," said Tarak, "maybe it will travel to China through the center of the earth and pop out of a well or a fountain."

"Or perhaps from some child's bowl of Munchow soup," suggested Tarak.

Not only the kids but even the adults loved the fondue experience, it felt like they were playing a fun game while eating a delicious dessert.

After dinner, the boys settled down to read for a while, while their parents attended to their business calls and emails.

The Bose family relaxed indoors but someone else who was outdoors was restless—an animal whose family once ruled the earth for tens of millions of years.



For more than 200 million years, crocodiles and alligators had survived unchanged, and their numbers undisturbed. But between 1900 and 1967, in a period as brief as one human being's life, they were hunted relentlessly throughout the world for their meat and skin and almost became extinct.

Alligators form a vital part of any aquatic ecology as they create essential habitats for a variety of wildlife by building ponds, or 'gator holes' that collect water and act as freshwater reservoirs during the dry season. Without a resident alligator to maintain these small ponds, sediments and vegetation would fill the hole and deplete the stored water on which so many other animals depend. Thanks to the conservation efforts of a selfless few, the American alligator narrowly escaped the endangered animals list.

But its habitat was still shrinking. Where there was open water until recently, man had created islands, and the alligator's territory had vanished.

This particular 14-foot alligator moved silently, skirting one such man-made island, avoiding the passing cruise boats. It lurked along the grassy banks and peered from beneath the waters, waiting.



CHAPTER THREE

UNCLE TARAK

The next morning, the boys woke early. They went for a quick swim in the pool followed by a massive breakfast of waffles with syrup, mushroom and cheese omelets, croissants, pancakes, muffins, and strawberry-banana smoothies.

The carpentry team arrived with a small truck containing wooden planks, a ladder, and all kinds of machines and tools. They set up a working table on which they fixed some clamps, and began.

Tarak sat in an armchair in the shade of the tree and dozed. Dr. Bose had warned the boys not to disturb the team in any way, so the boys watched from a safe distance as the men worked. They watched as the men kept taking measurements, quickly cutting wooden planks with the help of electric saws, and assembled them. In a few hours' time, the structure began to look like a real tree house.

When they stopped for lunch, the boys wanted to climb up and test it, but they were told that the team head would have to test it first and declare it safe for the boys, so they had to wait.

"Just a while longer, son, and your tree house will be ready," said one of the carpenters, removing his safety helmet.

"Can you make me a birdhouse to go with it?" asked Kyle.

"Sure, son," he replied, grinning. "Can you make me a drawing of what you have in mind?"

Kyle ran off to get some paper and a pencil. He soon returned with

a rather complicated drawing of a birdhouse that looked more like a castle. It had everything from fences and walls to towers and turrets, and even a moat.

The carpenter, whose name was Danny, looked at it and smiled. "Do you want your birdhouse to be ready today," he asked. Kylie nodded. "Then we'll have to make it a little simpler than this. If you want a birdhouse merely for decoration, then this is fine, but if you seriously want to attract birds, then remember, birds often prefer plain, weathered, unpainted houses."

"I want to paint mine yellow," said Kyle.

"All right, but remember, don't paint the inside of the house. Birds will not nest in houses which are painted on the inside or which smell like humans. Expect your new house to hang unoccupied for a few weeks before any birds settle in."

"I'll make a simple design like this," said Danny, drawing a very basic shape. "We can have some holes here, a perch here, another perch here, and this hole here is for fixing it to a nail on the tree."

"How long will it take you to finish it?" asked Kyle, his eyes shining.

"Not too long, son, now run along and have some lunch yourself, I can see my mates enjoying some delicious-looking chicken and rice, and I can't wait to eat some too."

"See you later then," Kyle replied, and hurried inside along with Anthony and Michael.

"It's just awesome, Mom," he said as soon as he glimpsed Kate.

Kate smiled. "Did you tell them about the birdhouse? Will it be possible to get one ready today?" she asked.

"Yes, Mom, I asked for a simple design." Kyle went on to explain. "If I had asked for a complicated design, that would be good just for decoration and it would take forever to make, whereas if you want

to really attract birds to your birdhouse, you must remember that birds prefer a plain, unpainted house,” he repeated the information he had just gathered from Danny.

“And we can paint it yellow from the outside, but we cannot paint the inside of the birdhouse, because birds won’t enter into houses which are painted from the inside,” he said knowledgeably. Kate was amused.

“And how does a little boy know so much already?” she asked, ruffling his hair.

“Little boys know everything,” he replied, taking a bite of the yoghurt that accompanied the biryani.

After lunch, Tarak excused himself and went outside into the garden with some newspapers.

“Has Uncle Tarak been keeping an eye on you?” asked Dr. Bose.

“He’s been taking a nap in the shade,” replied Michael. Dr. Bose frowned. “But we were okay, Dad, Uncle Tarak asked us to stay well away from the workmen while they used their power tools, and we did.”

Dr. Bose and Kate looked at one another. They were a little worried about Tarak’s behavior sometimes. They couldn’t really blame the old man, and were grateful for his presence, but they sometimes wondered if they ought to have a regular babysitter.

“Be careful, anyway, and look after your kid brother, Tony, Mikey,” Dr. Bose said to his two older sons. “I have to go to my office for a few hours, and your mother will be upstairs making some important calls.” “Don’t worry, Dad, we will,” they replied, going towards the garden. They saw Tarak talking to the gardeners and inspecting some fruits that they had picked from the yard.

Kyle was on his bicycle, circling the carpenters as they worked. Anthony and Michael got out their bikes as well and the three of them rode around the estate for some time. They spotted Tarak reclining



in the armchair and went up to him.

“Uncle Tarak, tell us about your childhood in India, what kind of games did you play?” asked Michael.

Tarak told them about his childhood in the village, the simple games that children invented and how they amused themselves on make-shift slides and see-saws and an improvised swing using a bicycle tire and some rope, or a small plank of wood with a rope passing through its center, suspended from a tall tree.

“Can you fix us a swing like that, please?” begged Kyle. “The carpenters are here, they’ll help.”

“No, baba, don’t disturb them while they work, else your tree house won’t be ready today,” said Tarak. “We’ll see about a swing another day.”

Anthony and Michael lay on the grass near Tarak’s chair, and Kyle went towards the carpenters. Danny waved to him. Kyle watched as Danny’s assistant placed a long piece of wood on the worktable and Danny made markings with a small pencil. He asked Kyle to stand back when he started the electric saw. Kyle observed the smooth planks of wood fall in a heap as Danny expertly ran the saw over the wood.

“What are those for?” he asked Danny.

“The longer ones are for the tree house and the smaller ones for the steps of the ladder, and these odd shapes here are for the bird-house,” he told Kyle, pointing towards a few pieces of wood that lay to one side.

Two of the team members were working on the planks, making grooves and notches. Two more men had climbed up and were securing the planks to the railings, using electric powered tools. They worked fast.

They started work on the ladder, fixing the narrow planks to the

longer lengths and finally they sanded down all the edges so that they were smooth and safe for the children to use.

Before long, Eddie called them over to the patio for tea. The boys went in for their milk and cookies too and were joined by Tarak and Kate.

“How’s the tree house coming along?” asked Kate.

“It’s almost finished, Mom, Danny said he’d allow us to climb up into it after he checks it thoroughly” Michael said. “Isn’t Dad back yet?” he asked.

“He’ll be home shortly, then you can take him up into the tree house as well.” she said.

“When I was your age, or maybe even younger, my father had built a tree house in the backyard for his children to play in, and then he spent more time in it than we did. We would fight with him sometimes for being selfish,” Tarak told them.

“Really?” Kyle giggled. “Mom, can you picture Dad always in the tree house and refusing to come down?”

“Yes, and his patients lining up to meet him in the garden..... where’s the doctor?....oh, he’s up in the tree house...” said Anthony and they giggled some more.

“Can we have our dinner up there tonight?” asked Kyle.

“Not tonight, but maybe breakfast tomorrow morning or a picnic lunch,” said Kate, considering the request. “I’ll discuss it with Louise later,” she added. “And now, why don’t you go upstairs and collect the knick-knacks that you want to keep in your tree house? And bring a camera and take some pictures too,” suggested Kate. “Yes, that’s a great idea,” said the boys, dashing off upstairs.

They bumped into Bernadette the housekeeper and asked her to send some small rugs and a few cushions. Anthony went to the workstation from where he picked up a length of rope. Michael

went to the kitchen and asked Eddie to find him a small basket and some bottles of water. Kyle picked up a drawing pad, some books, some toys, a couple of balls, a yo-yo and some colored pencils.

Anthony found an eye patch, some baseball caps, and some toy guns. Michael got his tiny mp3 player as well. The boys laid out their things on the table outside and waited for the tree house to be ready. Then they take some pictures of the men as they put the finishing touches to the structure.

Before long, Danny called out to them and they darted towards him. He had thoroughly tested the tree house himself and made sure that the structure wasn't too heavy for the posts, nor too light and shaky for the children to play in.

They quickly scampered up. "Wow! Our own tree house! And the birdhouse too... Wow! This is really cool" they kept repeating excitedly. "Mom, come up and see, Uncle Tarak, come on up!"

Kate cautiously made her way up. The children's enthusiasm was infectious and she kept smiling at their pleasure. Kate descended and Tarak went up next. He peered over the railing and pretended to feel dizzy. He stood there, clutching his hands tightly to the banister and pretended to faint.

"This old man is afraid of heights, this old man is getting an attack of vertigo, ooooooh, my poor head, how it spins!" he moaned. The boys giggled. He pretended to rebuke them "And you laugh at a poor old man, wicked, very wicked!"

Danny and his team collected their things, loaded the truck, said goodbye and left. The boys gathered their paraphernalia and arranged everything in the tree house, making several trips up and down the ladder. Anthony tied a length of rope to the basket and secured it to the railing. He then dropped it down so it became easier for Michael and Kyle to load the basket while Anthony pulled it up and emptied it.

They called out to everyone to come up and soon even Louise, Abdul, Eddie, Bernadette, Juanita visited them and admired the tree house. Louise said she would arrange a special picnic basket for their lunch the next day. They were pleased.

Although it was getting dark when Dr. Bose returned, he went with the boys to see the tree house. They decided to paint just the rungs of the ladder and the bird house. "Paint it yourselves. Just ask Uncle Tarak to supervise you one afternoon," he said.

"Freshen up before dinner," Kate advised, and off they went. "They must be tired, they've been out all day, running up and down," she said to her husband.

Abdul had made their favorite paneer tikkas, jhinga masala, kofta curry, naans, and a cool green vegetable salad. For dessert Abdul had made pistachio kulfi which the boys devoured.

"Uncle Tarak, can you tell us a story, please?" asked Kyle. Michael and Anthony excused themselves, they wanted to check out some games on the computer, so Tarak thought of a simple story that would appeal to a seven-year-old.

"I was reading a book in the library upstairs - it's called Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs - have you read it?" asked Tarak.

Kyle shook his head. "That's a strange title," he observed. "What does it mean?"

"The weather report, the weather is cloudy, with a chance of meatballs. In a town called Chewandswallow, the residents didn't have to shop at grocery stores the way the rest of us do. Instead, all their food was delivered to them by the weather. Every morning, people would go and wait under a cloud holding up their cups and plates."

Kyle giggled. "Wow! Imagine living in a place called Chewandswallow! And waiting for food like that!"

"Yes, it would be fun, wouldn't it? So then coming back to the story, in the mornings the citizens of Chewandswallow were rewarded with a drizzle of hot coffee, followed by eggs, toast and bacon fall-

ing from the clouds....and then in the afternoons, they received soup and vegetables, and fish or meatballs or whatever the cloud fancied.”

“And what if someone didn’t like what fell through the cloud?” wondered Kyle.

“They complained loudly, and the cloud felt guilty and threw down some ice cream,” Tarak added his own twist. “There was something for everyone, and on special days like Christmas or birthdays, the cloud provided unusual treats like a birthday cake, only you had to be really swift and hold a large tray and catch it fast, before it splattered and made a mess on your face,” continued Tarak.

“That happened often?” asked, intrigued.

“Yes, but people got used to it, and spent their birthday wiping cream from their faces and licking it off,” invented Tarak.

“If you had a pet cat or a dog, they would be happy to do that for you,” imagined Kyle.

“Yes, of course, and for the pets, the cloud provided food too, dog biscuits and cat food dropped into their bowls too and everyone was happy and life was good there in Chewandswallow, if you ignore the occasional cake or custard pie going splat in your face.”

“What happened next?” asked Kyle.

“Then the weather became unpredictable,” sighed Tarak.

“Due to global warming?” asked Kyle.

Tarak looked at him sharply. “Do you know what global warming is, baba?” he asked. Kyle nodded.

“We’ve been taught at school,” he replied, and Tarak pretended to be so impressed that Kyle started laughing.

Tarak continued the story, much to Kyle's delight, and told him How the food that came from the elements became life-threatening, and how eventually the townsfolk were forced to leave on rafts made from giant peanut butter sandwiches.

"Hey, imagine that! Rowing with celery sticks," Kyle chuckled.

"Yes, all of them then restarted their lives in the city."

"No food fell from the clouds there?" asked Kyle, stifling a yawn.

"No, the only thing that fell from the sky was rain and snow."

The story then took the strangest of turns and had Akbar and Birbal putting in an appearance with Birbal providing a solution to the food problem faced by the hungry refugees.

Kyle yawned again. Tarak looked at the clock and decided to send the boys to bed.

"Another story tomorrow, you go and sleep now, sweet dreams, Mr. Kylie, tomorrow you have a busy day in the tree house." As the children went upstairs, Tarak looked at him and the vision flashed before his eyes again.

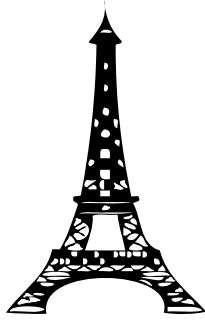


The creature slithered quietly along the water's edge, and lay in wait. The alligator was a carnivorous predator that could eat almost anything. It usually ate fish, reptiles, mammals, even other alligators, and occasionally a human.

The alligator was naturally wary and afraid of humans, and mostly retreated when confronted by people. But many locals and tourists alike violated local laws by feeding the wild alligator as they spotted it from their boats. Feeding had caused it to overcome its natural fear of humans and the alligator had now begun to associate people with food, becoming a 'nuisance' alligator —the type to attack anything not typically found in its food chain and appearing in backyards, swimming pools, ditches, and drainage ponds. It usually hunted at dusk or at night by stalking its prey on shore, or by floating motionless in the water with only its nostrils and eyes exposed.

At this moment, the alligator was absolutely still. It had spotted a small dog chasing a ball and coming towards it. As soon as the dog came near the water's edge, the alligator lunged towards it, and clamped its powerful jaws hard on the creature. It then submerged the dog underwater until it drowned.

When the alligator was ready to eat, it tore the dog's remains into smaller pieces and swallowed them. It was all over in a few minutes.



CHAPTER FOUR

KATE'S TRIP

The next morning, Kate woke the boys after her workout in the exercise room. “Tree house, boys.” She just had to say the words and they shot out of bed. In less than twenty minutes they were downstairs.

“Have your milk and then proceed,” Kate called out.

“In the tree house, send it there please, Mom,” Michael replied and they ran off.

They clambered up, and stood looking in all directions. The tree house provided a clear view of the house, the flower beds in the garden, the orchard, the swimming pool, and the waterfront beyond. Kyle hugged the tree trunk and touched the bird house that he could just about reach. Danny had fixed three steps on the tree trunk just for him.

They saw Juanita coming over to them with a tray. Their milkshakes were put in shakers so they wouldn’t spill. There were some boxes of cookies, sandwiches and fruit cake as well. Anthony lowered the basket for Juanita to place everything in, and then pulled it up.

“This is cool,” said Michael. “I can’t wait to tell my friends at school about it.”

The three of them lay down on the rugs and cushions and watched a couple of squirrels jump from branch to branch. Kyle spotted some ants and followed their path. They read, invented a new ball game where two of them climbed down and from the ground threw the

ball up which the third child tried to catch in the basket.

Uncle Tarak came by and told them a story in pantomime. They watched in wonder as the master raconteur used his hands and facial expressions to relate the story of a man who tried to tame an animated chair that wouldn't allow him to sit, the imaginary chair kept moving away while Uncle Tarak tried to sit on it. The boys were in splits.

"Come, baba, take a quick swim in the pool," said Tarak, walking towards the poolside.

They thought it was a good idea and scampered down. In his haste, Kyle slipped from the ladder and landed with a thud on his bottom. He started crying.

Kate rushed out when she heard the commotion. She panicked when she saw Kyle lying on the ground and rushed to him, shouting "Amit, Amit, come quick!" She held Kyle and consoled him, and tried to see if there was a broken bone, or if the child had hurt himself badly. "Shhh, shhh, it's okay, Kylie, shhhh," she comforted him.

Fortunately, Dr. Bose was still at home, though he had intended to go out for a couple of hours later for a conference. He ran out and quickly assessed the situation, inspecting the boy for any damage. Luckily, Kyle had landed on the soft earth and not from too great a height.

He soon stopped crying and began to smile when, over his parents' heads, he saw Tarak making faces at the tree house and silently screaming abuses, jabbing his finger up and down. Everyone fussed over Kyle and made sure he wasn't hurting. His brothers offered to kick him on his behind to check. Hearing that, he squealed "noooo," and ran off towards the house, holding his hands to his bottom.

Tarak followed him, concerned. Dr. Bose said if he could run like that he was fine.

Kate smiled weakly in relief. Dr. Bose told them he'd phone his assistant and inform her that he wouldn't be going for the conference, in any case he was attending it as an invitee and not address-

ing it, so that would be okay, he'd spend some time with the boys.

Kate chose that moment to tell Anthony and Michael that she had to go to Paris the following week.

"Awww, Mom, a whole week!" exclaimed Michael. He looked disappointed and couldn't hide it. Even Kate looked miserable, she was unusually silent.

Anthony sensed that Kate didn't really want to go, especially now after Kyle's little accident. He tried to cheer her up. Michael caught on and both of them tried to reassure her that things would be fine since it was just a matter of a week.

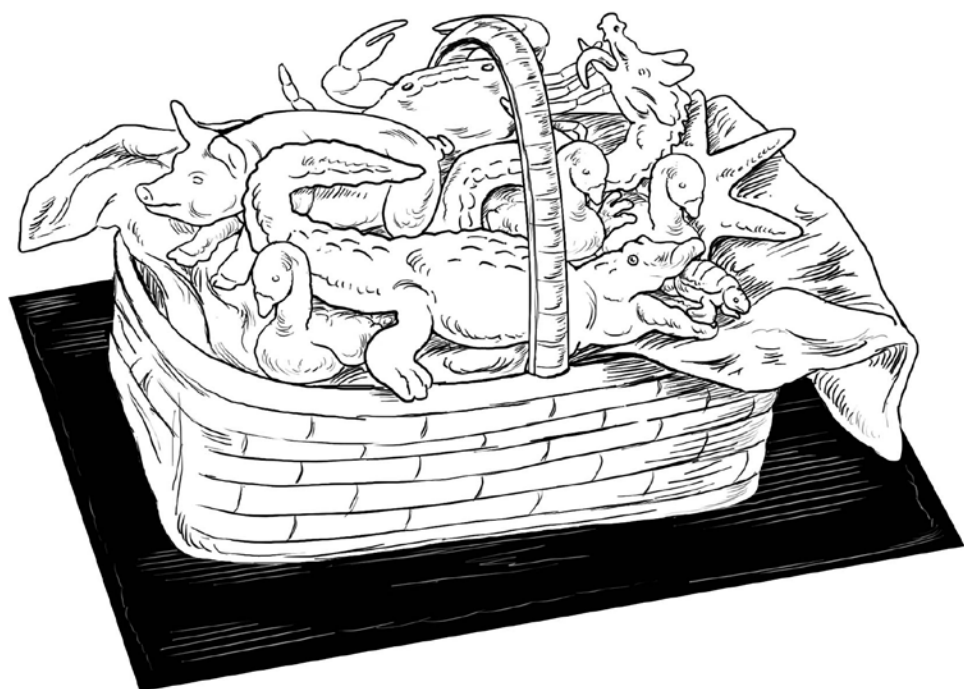
"Let's make the most of our time together with the children," Dr. Bose told her. "Cheer up, let's join them in the pool," he said, seeing Kyle and Tarak walk towards the pool.

"All right, give me ten minutes," said Kate, feeling better. "Louise is working on yet another surprise, Kyle will be enchanted," she said to the two older boys, hugging them and kissing them. "And so will you two," she added

They ran to change, and soon joined Kyle and Tarak who were lazily floating on their backs.

"You okay, smallie?" asked Anthony. Kyle nodded. Tarak was recounting to Kyle the story of Hanuman, the monkey God, and how he picked up the whole mountain when he was asked to bring the Sanjivani plant to Lord Ram. Anthony and Michael listened attentively though they had heard the story before. Tarak held a rubber float high above his head and circled Kyle in the water. Kyle laughed.

Dr. Bose and Kate arrived and gamboled and frolicked with the kids in the pool, and soon they were all splashing water, teasing, diving, pulling each other down, squealing and shrieking with abandon. The children thoroughly enjoyed the playtime with their parents. In a little while, Eddie came to ask if they were ready for lunch. Kate nodded. The boys had worked up a good appetite, she was sure.



They dried off and assembled at the patio. Tantalizing aromas wafted out of the island kitchen. Juanita came out wheeling a trolley. Kyle ran over and tried to peep into the dishes.

“Wow! Pizzas!” He yelled in delight. “Farmhouse Pizza, my absolute favorite!” he turned towards the kitchen where he saw Louise watching them and waved to her. She waved back, smiling.

Anthony and Michael hooted in joy. “Junk food!” they cried, eyeing the pasta and the chicken rolls that Juanita was arranging on the table.

A large heap of French fries and a huge jug of chilled cola completed the special treat. The boys were delighted. They ate ravenously, and enjoyed the “junk food” into which Louise had very cleverly packed as many vegetables as she could manage.

For Kate there was a grilled chicken and pasta salad. Kate would never eat pizza smothered with so much cheese. She smiled as she watched the boys enjoy their lunch.

Anthony looked at his mother. “When you’re in Paris, Mom, we shall eat all kinds of junk and you won’t know.” His remark intended to inform his youngest brother about their mother’s impending absence, and he wanted to soften Kyle’s disappointment.

“You’re going to Paris, Mom?” he asked. Kate nodded. “How long will you be gone?” he wanted to know.

“Just a week, honey,” she replied. “I’ll be back before you begin missing me, but make sure you eat healthy in my absence. Dad and Uncle Tarak will keep an eye on you.”

“Uncle Tarak lets us eat what we want, sometimes we just sit in front of the globe and pick up a random country, then ask Cookie or Louise or Abdul to make us that country’s cuisine, or we phone a specialty restaurant,” Anthony said happily.

“Once I closed my eyes and touched a spot on the globe, and it happened to be the Atlantic Ocean, so we had seafood that night,” said

Michael. Kate smiled, she was familiar with Tarak's ways.

Later, the boys sat on the colorful underwater bar stools in the pool. They helped themselves to chocolate mousse and diced fresh fruits that Louise had appetizingly arranged in the shape of a rainbow.

Soon the boys got out of the pool, dried off, changed and went to the tree house. Anthony said he wanted to spend some time on the computer, Michael asked Kyle if he'd like to watch a movie. They went back to the house and spent the afternoon indoors.

Kate saw that the boys were busy, so she thought it was a good time for her to pack for the Paris trip. Dr. Bose caught up with phone calls and some reading in the study. Tarak decided to take a nap and went off to his own room.

It was a quiet afternoon. Kate pulled out two empty suitcases and a travel bag and started packing clothes and accessories. As and when she remembered things, she put them in. In a small diary she made a note of the things she had to do before leaving for Europe. She also got together all the papers, brochures and designs that she had to take with her.

Dr. Bose had to make notes for a medical conference that he had to address a few days later. He also had to talk to the surgeon who had so kindly agreed to perform surgeries while Dr. Bose had taken a short break.

Kate finished her preliminary packing and peeked into the study where her husband was working. "How's it going, Katie? Done with the packing?" he asked her. "What are the boys doing?"

"Mikey and Kylie are watching The Great Dictator, Tony's at the PC," Kate replied. "Should I call for tea now or later?"

"Now, else I'll fall asleep." said Dr. Bose.

"Louise and Abdul are spoiling the kids, they've planned one more surprise for them and they've kept me in the dark as well."

Dr. Bose grinned. He got up to stretch his legs. "Let's go downstairs to the kitchen and have tea there," he said.

"They'll throw us out of the kitchen, Louise especially, let's go somewhere else, like the tree house," suggested Kate. Dr. Bose laughed. He asked Juanita to pour the tea into large mugs for them which they took with them and walked outside towards the tree house.

"As a child, back home in the Bahamas, I used to envy the kids in the neighborhood who had a tree house in their backyard, even though it was a rickety and shabby one," said Kate. "Now that our children have a sturdy tree house of their own, there are no neighborhood children who can come and share the fun," she sighed, placing her empty mug on the ground and climbing up.

Dr. Bose joined her in the tree house. "I feel twenty years younger already," he declared.

Kate chuckled. "They've made a complete hide-out here, look at all the stuff they've collected already," said Kate, picking up the yo-yo and playing with it.

Dr. Bose saw the eye patch and put it on. He wore Anthony's baseball cap, took it off, took Kate's scarf and wrapped it round his head. He looked like a pirate, a neat and clean one, though. Kate laughed. "Wait till the boys see you," she teased.

Right enough, Anthony was looking at them from the window and laughing. He waved to them. His father picked up the toy gun and pointed it in Anthony's direction. Anthony pretended to catch a bullet in the chest and fell down. He called out to his brothers for help. They came to see what was going on and were delighted to see their father play-acting.

Kate quickly whispered something, and Dr. Bose tied her hands behind her and pointed a gun at her head, evidently taking her hostage. The boys rushed down, armed with more toy guns to "save" their mother from the "pirate." They reached the tree house, stealthily surrounding it from three sides, and while Michael kept the "pirate" occupied, Anthony and Kyle scrambled up, surprised

the “pirate” and rescued the “hostage” who was very grateful to be released.

They climbed down, laughing and talking at the same time. Kyle held his mother’s hand as they walked up the garden path leading towards the house.

“Would you like to eat something now?” asked Kate. He nodded. “Good, go run ask Louise to give you something to munch,” she said. Kyle ran off. He was met at the kitchen entrance by Louise who said she had a surprise and asked him to wait a few minutes.

They went to the shaded pavilion where a picnic table had been set up. On the red and white checked tablecloth, an assortment of sauces, bread spreads, mayonnaise, butter, jam, cheese spread, and mustard had been laid out.

“Call out to Uncle Tarak,” said Kate. Michael went inside and brought him outside.

“Lovely, lovely,” the old man exclaimed, seeing the colorful setting. “A picnic meal to amuse an old man, how nice, so very kind of you,” he formally bowed to Kate before sitting down in a chair with his back to the garden. Kyle giggled.

Louise accompanied Juanita who was wheeling a large trolley towards them. It was covered with a white tablecloth, concealing what lay underneath. When they reached the table, Louise took off the tablecloth with a flourish.

“Voilà ! Une surprise pour vous!” Louise said to them.

Everyone’s eyes were riveted to the trolley. On it were arranged the most exquisitely crafted shapes, sculpted with bread. Apart from soft rolls and croissants, there was a variety of some lovely figures made out of bread.

The children gasped in wonder and couldn’t take their eyes off them. “They look too good to eat, Louise,” said Michael.

“Absolument fantastique,” pronounced Anthony. “Vraiment merveilleux.”

“Wow!” said Kyle, over and over again, as he picked up the pieces one by one. “Look at this crab!” he exclaimed. “It looks so real.”

“Yes, it might sting any moment, and just see this hedgehog,” cried Michael.

There were half a dozen tiny swans with long graceful necks, a few ducks, a starfish, a bread basket made entirely of bread containing tiny little footballs with hexagonal markings, six pairs of tiny little shoes, a dozen chairs, a little pig, a Chinese dragon breathing fire - the fire being yellow syrup poured over its tongue - a tiny tree house lodged on a lumpy bread tree, and an alligator with a turtle trapped in its mouth.

The parents were glad to see the boys happy. Tarak inspected a swan, said “Off with its head!” cut off its head, applied some jam on it and began to eat it.

Juanita brought a tray laden with tea, coffee and milkshakes and set it on the table.

Dr. Bose and Kate picked up some regular rolls and croissants, leaving the more interesting bread sculptures for the children.

“Sit down with us and eat a bite, Louise,” said Kate. Louise smiled and sat next to Tarak.

“These are masterpieces, Louise, such a real-looking starfish!” said Michael, slicing it horizontally and stuffing some cheese spread into it.

“Thank you,” said Louise, accepting a cup of coffee from Juanita and enjoying the compliments that the kids were heaping on her. She took a shoe and applied a light layer of mayonnaise to it.

“May I eat the alligator?” asked Kyle.

“Sure, go ahead, smallie,” said his brothers.

The alligator was a work of art, with scales on its back, and its mouth wide open, showing several teeth. Louise had pushed a small turtle in its mouth and it looked as though the alligator might clamp down its mouth any moment, crushing the turtle.

Kyle picked it up, and kept admiring it. He finally picked up some butter and applied it over the alligator’s snout.

He opened his mouth and was about to put it in his mouth when he looked across Tarak’s shoulder and screamed.



CHAPTER FIVE

CREATURE

In the shadows of the late afternoon sun, the huge, dark alligator had climbed over the water's edge into the backyard, ambled across, and had slipped unnoticed into the garden area. For a long time, it lay undetected, hidden in the shadows. It finally started moved towards the swimming pool.

When Kyle saw it, he was startled. He dropped the bread alligator and started screaming, and when the others turned to see what had frightened the young boy, they saw the real alligator slowly approaching them.

Tarak was quick to move. He placed himself between the boys and the creature and shouted rapid instructions. "Move back, move back."

Dr. Bose quickly took charge as well. "Go on to the house, boys, go inside and stay there, go quick," he shouted, without taking his eyes away from the animal.

The three boys ran in, frightened beyond belief. They went upstairs and ran towards a window from where they had a good view of the garden and the swimming pool.

"The rest of you, quickly go and get long sticks and whatever you find," he yelled at everyone present.

They all rushed towards the house and the garden shed, and were soon back with weapons. Juanita brought a long-handled broom, Eddie carried a long stick that he kept beating on the ground, the

gardener noisily dragged a rake, Louise returned with a lacrosse stick in her hand, shouting loudly, Kate found a large frying pan and a lid and came rushing out of the house banging them together, Bernadette came out with a long-handled umbrella, Dr. Bose fetched a chair and held it up high above his head, poised to hit the ground and drive the creature away.

Anthony held Kyle by his shoulders, while Michael peered at the creature. "That's not a crocodile, that's an alligator," he declared.

"How can you tell?" asked Kyle, his heart still beating fast.

"From the snout and the teeth, and the coloring," answered Michael. "I'll show you the pictures in a book or on the internet later."

"It's huge, and scary! Does it eat humans?" Kyle wanted to know.

"Gators are actually quite docile, but they are wild animals and can be dangerous especially when surprised by an intruder or while protecting their nest and their young," explained Michael who was a walking encyclopedia on history and nature.

"Look at that!" cried Anthony excitedly. From their window, they saw everybody rush noisily towards the alligator, but a most extraordinary spectacle greeted them.

From the garden area, Tarak had started walking towards the pool, waving his arms about, and the alligator was walking backwards as though following invisible signals from his arm movements.

When it reached the edge of the pool, the huge creature slipped into the water without making a splash. It went round in circles, stopped, and peered at Tarak. Tarak drew circles in the air with his arm, and the alligator flipped on its back and floated upside down in the water before turning right side up and staring at Tarak.

Everyone had come rushing out, armed with make-do weapons in order to drive the animal back into the waters, but they just stood rooted on the spot and gaped in astonishment. "Shhhhh, quiet," hissed Tarak.

Before anyone could stop him, Tarak had slipped into the pool, as though in a hypnotic trance. No one dared to breathe. The boys watched in silence from the window, and the others stood still as though frozen in time, their implements held forgotten in their hands.

Tarak smiled at the alligator, crooning softly, he dove in the water and came up, and the alligator did likewise. He turned around three times, and the alligator copied him and twirled the whole length of its body, its tail cutting through the water.

"I just don't believe this!" whispered Michael. "The gator is behaving like a playful seal or a dolphin at a water park."

"Who'd believe that's a dangerous animal out there?" said Anthony. "And I don't know whether Uncle Tarak is extremely brave or incredibly foolish right now, and...oh my God, look!"

"Wow!" was all that Kyle could say. "Let's go downstairs and join the fun."

"No!" said Michael emphatically. "That is a potentially dangerous wild animal out there and we stay put here until Dad calls us."

Tarak and the alligator were behaving so strangely that nobody knew how to react.

"Careful, Uncle Tarak," Kate called worriedly. "Come on out now," but Tarak didn't seem to hear.

He and his new playmate were engrossed in a little game. Tarak was still holding his spoon in his hand and he now waved it like a music conductor waves a baton at the orchestra. The creature danced and twirled and moved, following Tarak's commands like an obedient pupil.

Dr. Bose decided enough was enough and called out to Tarak. "Uncle Tarak, come on out now, stop being foolish," but Tarak paid no heed.

"Uncle Tarak, stop being so reckless and irresponsible, if not for

anyone else, then at least for the sake of the boys!" Kate implored, but Tarak ignored her.

"That animal might suddenly pounce on you and chew you up," Dr. Bose restrained himself from shouting at the old man.

Tarak slowly turned his head and looked at his nephew. He seemed to come out of a spell. "No animal will hurt me, this alligator won't harm me, and I won't be killed or eaten by any creature, I know exactly how I will die - in a glorious explosion of golden fire, a big magnificent golden blaze that will be seen for miles."

Dr. Bose rolled his eyes heavenwards - he had heard too many of Tarak's tales by now to find them interesting or to attach much importance to them - he just waited for Tarak to come out of the pool safely. It was getting darker.

Tarak slowly climbed out of the water, and the alligator got out too, copying him. Dr. Bose handed him a long stick, which Tarak then used to tap the ground lightly several times. The alligator tapped its foot in response. Tarak moved forward, slowly approaching the alligator, the creature moved backward, slowly moving towards the dark waters where it belonged. Tarak lifted his arms high in a final farewell and said "Go now!" and the docile alligator stared at him one last time in a final farewell and slid backwards into the water, into its own territory.

Everyone then heaved a collective sigh of relief and started chattering animatedly. Tarak was regarded with wonder and astonishment by all of them. Kate looked up at the house and saw the boys standing there. She signaled to them to stay where they were.

"Everybody inside, everybody, including the gardeners! Eddie, nobody stays out tonight, secure the house firmly, leave the floodlights on all night, nobody venture out, leave all these long sticks and rakes handy, near the doors, clear the tables outside of all food, don't leave any garbage outside either," Dr. Bose shouted these instructions so that all of them heard and understood. He then went inside to make a few phone calls, first to the island Security. "And empty the pool first thing in the morning," he added.

Kate ran upstairs to the children, and met them as they came running downstairs to meet her. She hugged the boys, Kyle held on tightly to her. "Mom, Mom, what an adventure!" he exclaimed. "We should've captured it on film from upstairs, but nobody thought of it."

"I'd never have believed this could actually happen, it's straight out of a storybook," said Anthony.

"Where's Dad?" asked Michael. "And where's Uncle Tarak?"

"Dad's making a few calls, and Uncle Tarak must have gone to his room," replied Kate, shivering at the thought of what could have gone wrong. "Tony, just go downstairs, dear, see if Dad needs any help, make sure the house is locked and everyone safe." Anthony nodded and ran down.

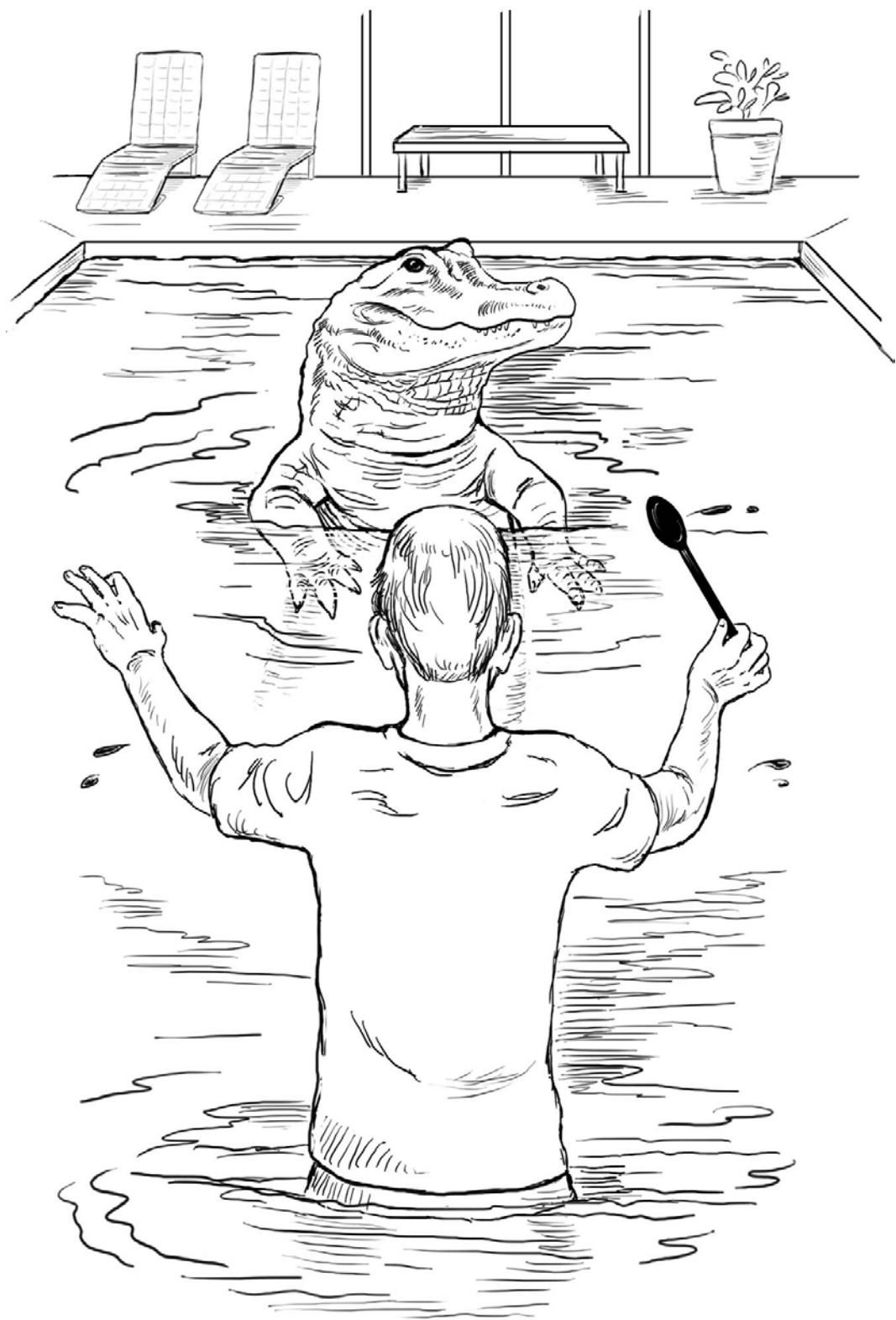
He met his father downstairs. Dr. Bose had been giving instructions to the staff and assigning duties to some members. He saw Anthony and asked how Michael and Kyle were feeling. "Fine, Dad, but that was an incredible experience, really out of this world, Uncle Tarak must be some kind of a magician or an animal hypnotist, to be able to handle a wild animal like that!"

"I'm not sure if I'm amazed or angry with Uncle Tarak," said Dr. Bose. "Anyway, we have a long night. We will be keeping vigil all night, taking turns." They walked up towards the living room.

"Everything under control?" asked Kate. He nodded, picking up Kylie and hugging Michael.

"I spoke to Security and they said the Rubinos reported that their pet dog was missing since last night. After I told them about this huge alligator in our pool, they presume the gator must have eaten the Rubinos' Labrador."

"So what do we do now?" asked Kate. The boys were listening quietly.



“Security have informed the FWC, that is the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, they’ll be sending someone over to check, they gave more or less the same instructions - everybody stay indoors, leave the outside lights on, no food to be left out. I’ll be speaking to Uncle Kavi later tonight,” added Dr. Bose, referring to his brother who lived in England.

Kavi was their dad’s brother. He was head of the history department at a private boarding school in Farmborough, U.K. Kavi and his wife Jenny were quite fond of the boys, and doted on them. The couple didn’t have kids of their own, but they were devoted teachers, quite addicted to their profession. Jenny was the gym teacher in the school and was keenly interested in children’s sports and fitness, nutrition and health.

Sometimes Kavi and Jenny visited them in Florida. Sometimes Dr. Amit Bose took Kate and the boys to Farmborough, and once they had all taken a trip to India together and had seen New Delhi, Agra, Jaipur, Jodhpur, Udaipur and Jaisalmer.

The boys were too excited now to talk of anything else other than the alligator. They sat in silence remembering the fantastic episode and Anthony repeated that he regretted not having captured it on video.

Kyle sat next to his mother on the sofa. “Do you think the alligator will be back?” he asked his Dad.

“I really can’t say, Kylie, the alligator has been behaving like a pet dog. If it continues to feel attached to Uncle Tarak, it might come back, looking for him. Uncle Tarak is very good with animals, but I didn’t know he could have this effect on them.”

“So what does one do now?” asked Michael.

“Security has alerted the rest of the families on the island and issued warnings. If anyone spots an alligator, they must not approach it or attempt to feed it, not throw food or bait in the water or on the shore, avoid swimming alone, not swim at night or dusk, and not approach the waterfront with thick vegetation. Children and

pets are to be watched. Pets resemble an alligator's natural prey and may attract them, you understand?" he said, turning to look at Kyle.

"That's probably how the Rubinos' Lab went missing," said Kyle.

The boys were too fidgety. "Where's Uncle Tarak?" they asked.

"He's gone off to his room. Let him be there awhile, he's probably asleep, and it will take him a couple of hours to come back to normal," said their father.

Dr. Bose went off to make his calls. When he returned to the living room, the boys were deep in conversation with Kate.

"I spoke to Kavi," he told Kate, "I told him about the alligator episode and also of Kyle falling from the tree house steps. Kavi is worried, not just about the boys' safety but also about Tarak's sanity. He has asked me to send the kids over to him and Jenny for a couple of weeks, their school is closed and Kavi has said he and Jenny would be more than happy to look after the children for a while until things are in control over here."

"I've got to go to Paris in a few days, and I'm really afraid there are no suitable babysitting options other than Uncle Tarak right now," said Kate. "We ought to join the boys after a couple of weeks for a full family holiday later."

Kate looked around at the boys, seeing how they would take this idea. Kyle looked pensive and thoughtful. She glanced at her husband anxiously.

"Under the circumstances, it might be a good idea," Dr Bose said to the children who nodded.

"What about Uncle Tarak, will he agree to go?" asked Kate.

"I'll ask him as soon as I see him," said Dr. Bose. "So boys, what do you think?" he asked. "Mom will be gone to Paris for work, and I now want you to decide where you would like to go for a holiday

later. Take fifteen minutes to decide and tell us.

“When do we leave for Farmborough?” asked Anthony.

“Tomorrow morning, so you decide quick.” Dr. Bose smiled, getting up to check on the staff downstairs. Kate went with him, to oversee the new temporary sleeping arrangements for the staff.

Abdul took Kate aside and asked her for instructions for that night’s dinner.

“Can u think of something simple and wholesome, like a stew for the boys?”

“How about some khichdi and grilled chicken?” asked Abdul.

“Perfect, nobody’s in the mood to enjoy their food, so something like khichdi would be fine - nutritious and wholesome.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” agreed Abdul.

“Also remember to keep available coffee, fruits and donuts for those keeping vigil upstairs.”

Meanwhile in the living room upstairs, the boys were going over the day’s events. Kyle was visibly disappointed by the fact that they were being sent away. Michael and Anthony consoled him and tried to make him see it from their parents’ angle.

“Be practical, Kylie. Mom and Dad wouldn’t send us away if they thought it was safe. Evidently it isn’t, Dad said the gator might be back. Besides, Aunt Jenny and Uncle Kavi love us and are good to us. So now let’s not make things difficult for Mom and Dad, they’ve promised us a holiday, let’s quickly decide where we want to go. Each of us can put down his suggestion.”

“I’d like us to go to Egypt, take a cruise down the Nile by riverboat, by a felucca which is a traditional wooden sailing boat. It would be the best way to experience the life source of Egypt - the river Nile. We can discover some of the most remarkable archaeological sites

and visit cities on the Nile like Aswan. We can see the Sphinx, the Pyramids..." Michael went on, transported to Egypt in his thoughts already.

"I'd stay away from the river, what if a crocodile follows us all over again?" said Kyle.

"How about Switzerland, we could do some skiing on the Swiss Alps, or why not go see Niagara Falls again?"

"I think Dad and Mom are quite generous, imagine they are allowing us to choose a holiday destination - we could go anywhere - Rome, Venice, Singapore, Bali," said Michael. "Even Iceland, we can stay in a hotel made of ice, but it's not winter, and Mom and Dad wouldn't take us, we might freeze to death."

They finally decided on Venice after Michael told them that Venice is actually 116 islands connected by over 400 bridges, and that the simplest way to see the city would be to travel by public waterbuses or gondolas.

"Wow!" said Kyle, energized already.

On his way up, Dr Bose and Kate met Tarak who appeared rested and cheerful. "All well?" he asked his nephew.

"Yes, I just spoke to Kavi," replied Dr. Bose.

"Ah, Kavi, my dear nephew Kavi, how is he? And how is dear Jenny?" asked Tarak.

"They've invited you and the boys over for a couple of weeks. Would you like to go?"

"Yes, of course, I'll be delighted, when do we leave?"

"Tomorrow morning," Dr. Bose answered.

"As soon as that?" asked Tarak.

“Yes,” Dr Bose said emphatically. “Kyle is still upset after the alligator incident, and it would be better for him and his brothers to go to a safe place. I don’t want to take any chances.”

“Fine, fine, we’ll leave tomorrow, I can pack my bags in twenty minutes,” said Tarak, smiling.

“Good, give me your passport, I’ll be booking your tickets online. You can pack your bags right away, Uncle Tarak.”

Dr Bose and Kate then went to the living room where the boys were and asked them if they had decided on their holiday destination.

“Venice, we want to see the canals and the gondolas and St Mark’s square and eat authentic Italian Pizzas,” they talked at once.

“Venice?” Dr. Bose scratched his chin. “Venice is not an obvious choice for children, but it can be fun in some ways. It is surprisingly easy to navigate and you will love the boat travel.”

He looked at Michael. “You’ll enjoy the art and churches an historical treasures, Mikey, and in the vicinity, there should be track and field facilities, tennis courts and other services to keep Tony happy, and as for Kylie, he’ll enjoy wandering aimlessly, stopping for ice creams and cappuccinos.”

“And pizzas,” added Kyle.

“Yes,” said Kate, “there’s no traffic on streets and children play around in squares or meander in the streets without fear. But canals are not properly fenced, so you will have to be careful and not go too close to the water’s edge.”

“The city has many moods. For many travelers Venice represents a dream, a city of miracles, a romantic, fragile, sad, nocturnal, decadent, nostalgic, elegant, magical, a unique place where you can enjoy a unique vacation if you’ve decided on Venice.” said Dr. Bose.

“Yes, we have,” replied Michael. “I have a couple of books on Italy and Uncle Kavi will lend us more, I’m sure.” Michael was Kavi’s fa-

favorite nephew for the obvious reasons. Michael had a deep interest in history and uncle and nephew could talk for hours on ancient and modern history.

"After dinner, Bernadette and Juanita will help you pack," Kate told the boys. She took them to their room, made them open suitcases, and put in whatever they wanted to take along — books, toys, and games.

Kate sensed Kyle's nervousness and disappointment though he did his best to conceal it. She spent as much time with him as she could, holding his hand and cuddling him every now and then.

"I know you'll miss not being at home, your Dad and I wanted you at home for awhile, but seeing what happened today, it's better you are safe, you understand, don't you, Kylie?" she said, kissing him.

"Yes, Mom, don't worry, I'll be okay, the gator might come looking for Uncle Tarak again, to dance with him in the pool," grinned Kyle, trying to make her smile.

She smiled at his effort. "Come downstairs to the kitchen, we'll be eating there tonight."

They assembled in the kitchen and sat on the bar stools at the counter. Abdul set before them bowls of steaming hot khichdi - a mixture of rice, pulses, vegetables and spices cooked together. The mood was pensive.

"Where's Uncle Tarak?" asked Michael.

"He sent word that he won't be having dinner tonight," said Abdul.

Kyle suddenly remembered "I didn't eat that bread alligator earlier, was it saved?"

"Yes, it's here, said Abdul, picking it up from a covered basket and placing it before Kyle. "Do you want me to warm it up in the microwave for you?" he asked.

Kyle stared at the figure for a moment and shook his head. "No, I don't want to look at it again, take it away please."

Kate put a small bowl of yoghurt before him. "Don't think about the alligator now. Just think of your trip to the U.K. and meeting Uncle Kavi and Aunt Jenny there."

Kyle nodded.

Michael chirped in "Uncle Kavi's school will be closed for the summer vacation, we can explore the school building like we did the last time we were there, and if we're lucky, there will be the village fair and the circus nearby too."

"And after I'm back from Paris, your Dad and I will come there and we'll all proceed to Venice. How does that sound?" asked Kate.

"Get me something from Paris," he said, trying not to look as miserable as he felt.

"What would you like?" Kate asked.

"A souvenir, a tiny little Eiffel Tower," said Kyle.

"Perhaps I'll break off a piece when nobody's looking and slip it into my bag," suggested Kate gravely. Kyle started giggling at the image of his mother standing surreptitiously at the foot of the tower, chisel and hammer in hand, breaking little bits of the tower and popping them into her handbag, taking care that a patrolling gendarme didn't spot her.

Anthony helped himself to some grilled chicken and imitated a stern French policeman "Arretez-vous, Madame, mais qu'est-ce que vous faites?" You can picture Mom looking past him, continuing to hammer away at the Eiffel Tower, repeating 'Je ne comprends pas, je ne comprends pas. No parlez français.'

"If historical monuments were converted to souvenirs this way, there'd be nothing left," observed Michael. Everyone laughed.

They looked out from the kitchen towards the garden. The floodlights were on and illuminated the garden and pool area. It was quiet. Eddie and one of the gardeners were upstairs keeping vigil for the next three hours. Anthony told his father that he wanted to stay up for guard duty too. Dr. Bose agreed. He and Anthony would take over till 2 in the morning when two others would relieve them.

Bernadette came to the kitchen and announced that their bags were packed. Tarak sent word that his bags were packed as well. The boys finished dinner and went upstairs and sat talking for some time. Kyle and Michael soon went off to sleep, and Anthony and Dr. Bose stayed awake for a few hours. The rest of the night was uneventful.



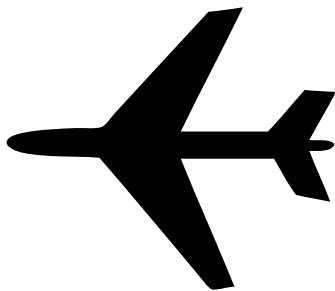
The alligator stayed in the vicinity for a long time, half submerged in the water. It slid silently among the vegetation bordering the island.

A cruise boat went past, disturbing the still waters. The alligator moved, and swam to another part of the island where it searched for food. A large fish came swimming in its direction, unaware of the predator.

Somewhat clumsy out of water, the alligator was superbly equipped to live in it. It was a strong swimmer and an expert at drifting along the surface, submerged completely, except for its bulging eyes and nostrils. Its long, flat jaw did not even make a ripple in the water as it stalked the large fish that swam its way.

In spite of its heavy body, it was capable of short bursts of speed, especially in short lunges. It lunged towards the fish and caught it in its powerful jaws, and then since it could not eat the whole fish in one bite, it performed a 'death roll', by biting and then spinning and convulsing wildly until bite-size pieces of the fish were torn off.

Its hunger sated, the alligator swam away.



CHAPTER SIX

UP, UP AND AWAY

The next morning, the boys woke up, got dressed, went down to the kitchen where they were joined by Tarak and their parents for breakfast, and were ready to leave for the Miami International Airport. Dr. Bose and Kate drove them to the airport terminal.

Kyle was cheerful and excited and Kate was glad. Tarak was in his usual form. In the car, he had taken charge of Kyle and was telling him a story of how an airplane turned into a bird and started pecking at sunflower seeds in a field while the pilot, the crew and the passengers waited for it to finish. Kyle giggled.

“Have a good time, boys, we’ll call you every night,” their father said, hugging them.

“Bye, sweetheart,” Kate embraced and kissed each of them. “I’ll call you from Paris as well. Love you.”

Their father handed over a folder containing their etickets, their passports, travel documents, money, credit cards and a cell phone to Tarak. They waved goodbye and were off.

On the flight, Tarak regaled them with stories of Kavi and Amit’s childhood pranks. Then Michael asked Tarak why he decided to join the Indian army. For a moment, Tarak’s eyes flashed and Michael regretted having asked the question. “Let an old man sleep and take some rest now,” he said, closing his eyes and placing an open newspaper over his face.

Anthony and Michael exchanged glances and said nothing. Kyle was engrossed in a children's movie. They talked in whispers for a while, and then drifted off to sleep.

It was evening when they reached London. A car had been sent to receive them and take them to Farmborough. They were happy that they would soon be meeting their uncle and aunt. In the car, they chatted with Tarak and looked out of the windows at the picturesque sights and the neat little cottages and gardens of the English countryside.

Kyle giggled. "What is it now?" asked Michael.

"Everybody's driving on the wrong side," Kyle observed.

"In this part of the world, this is right," said Michael.

"You mean left is right," Kyle giggled again.

Tarak added to the puns. "Left is right, and right is wrong."

"That's right," said Anthony, "quite right. But it's wrong to be right."

"It's right to be left," said Michael.

"If you're right, you're wrong," said Tarak. "And if you're wrong, you must be right."

"Left is left and right is right, right is right and wrong is wrong," continued Anthony.

The nonsensical conversation made no sense except to the four of them, and they laughed continuously. On the way to Farmborough, they passed the town of Reading. Kyle found the name amusing and kept giggling.

"How does one pass the time in Reading? Reading." He giggled again.

“Do you like Reading? No, I prefer writing,” joked Anthony.

Soon they reached Farmborough and the school named Green Meadows where their uncle and aunt taught. Kavi and Jenny were really happy to see them and greeted them warmly. “Hello Uncle Tarak, hello boys, welcome. Did you have a nice flight?”

“Yes, Aunt Jenny, we did. How are you, Uncle Kavi?” They kissed their aunt and uncle. Tarak embraced his nephew affectionately.

“It’s a lot different from what I remember,” said Anthony, looking around.

“Yes, a new structure has been built for additional dormitories and living quarters for the staff,” replied Kavi.

A cheerful young man appeared in order to help them with their luggage.

“James, this is my uncle Tarak, and these are my nephews Anthony, Michael and Kyle. Show them their rooms, please,” said Kavi.

“How do you do, Sir, how do you do, boys?” said James.

“How do you do, James?” replied the boys.

“This way. Follow me, please,” said James. He fetched a luggage trolley and loaded their suitcases on it. He took them up to the living quarters in the new building and led them to two rooms that had been prepared for them.

“Couldn’t we look around the school a bit first?” asked Anthony.

“I’m afraid not, most of the rooms are locked and we’d have to ask for Professor Rabbany’s permission in the morning to be able to do that,” he replied.

“Who’s Professor Rabbany?” asked Kyle.

“That’s the Headmaster of the school,” replied James. “Here we are, this room is for the three of you, and this one next to it is for you, Sir,” James said to Tarak. “Freshen up and come downstairs for supper in twenty minutes, will you?” he said, leaving them to wash and unpack.

“I don’t want to meet too many people on my first day here,” grumbled Kyle, but his brothers told him they saw no reason to object, considering their uncle was a resident teacher here.

They went first to their uncle and aunt’s rooms and handed over the presents that Kate had hurriedly picked up for them on the way to the airport. Kavi and Jenny then accompanied Tarak and the boys downstairs to one of the smaller dining rooms.

A few teachers were present, along with some students who hadn’t yet gone home for the holidays. Soon a tall, authoritative figure appeared accompanied by two young lads, and the boys guessed correctly that this was Professor Rabbany, the Headmaster of the school.

“Hello, young men, welcome to Green Meadows. Have you been here before?” he asked after they were introduced. Anthony nodded and replied that their parents had brought them here a couple of years ago one weekend before the whole family had gone to Scotland for a holiday.

Professor Rabbany’s sons Harold and Percy were a little older than Anthony and made no effort to be friendly. The other boarders chatted with the boys and made them feel at ease, asking questions about Miami, Florida and Disneyland, while the boys asked if there was a circus or a fair nearby.

“Anne, Samantha and Robin, you can spend some time with our American guests tomorrow and show them around school,” said Professor Rabbany.

“Yes, of course, we will, Sir,” they replied, taking a second helping of roast meat, vegetables and potatoes.

Harold and Percy just stared without smiling and it made the boys uncomfortable. Tarak sensed it and started talking to the other teachers, asking them where they were from and how long they had been teaching there.

“I’ve been here for as long as I can remember,” said Professor Rab-bany, “long before Kavi joined us.”

Tarak smiled. His question hadn’t been directed at Professor Rab-bany, but he had answered nevertheless. With his sixth sense, Tarak sensed trouble with the Headmaster but continued the conversation with the others, taking the discussion to the British connection with India.

They talked of Britain’s colonial past and how it had become a very powerful nation. Kavi being a professor of history suddenly became very lively and animated. He explained how the British Empire began with maritime explorations in the 15th century and how this sparked an era of the European colonial empires.

“By 1921, the British Empire held control of about one quarter of the world’s population and covered a quarter of the world’s total land. As a result, its political, linguistic and cultural legacy is widespread and at the peak of its power it was often said that ‘the sun never sets on the British Empire.’”

“That’s because the empire was so widespread that it spanned across the globe, and at any given moment, the sun was shining on at least one of its colonies or subject nations,” chipped in Michael.

“That’s right,” said Kavi. He talked of most of the territories of the Empire becoming independent after World War II, the Commonwealth of Nations, the Indian Uprising of 1857, Gandhi and the Quit India movement, and independent India.

“I have a small collection of coins and artifacts that I’ll show you later,” he told the boys.

Michael’s eyes shone, he had seen some of his uncle’s treasures but Kavi kept adding to his collection and Michael knew there would be

many more new things for them to view.

“That’s right, Kavi has some fantastic possessions, you must see them,” said Professor Rabbany with a gleam in his eye.

“Professor Rabbany has always taken a keen interest in my passion and we spend many hours discussing the history and significance of some of the pieces,” said Kavi, looking gratefully in the Professor’s direction. Tarak had an uneasy feeling that he tried to banish but could not.

After their meal, Tarak and the boys went upstairs with Kavi and Jenny to their rooms.

“I just don’t like the Headmaster,” whispered Kyle. “He pretends to be friendly but I think he’s a mean one.”

“Shhh, I don’t like him either, but we’ll just have to be polite, for the sake of Uncle Kavi,” said Michael.

“And his two sons are even worse, they just keep staring,” Kyle told Anthony in an undertone.

“Pay no attention to them, just pretend that they don’t exist,” Anthony suggested.

They soon reached Kavi’s quarters. He unlocked a cupboard and drew out a large box, the size of a shoe box. It contained a photo album with photographs of coins, and dozens of paper envelopes containing old coins. On each envelope Kavi had written a brief description of the coin inside, the period, the mint and the metal from which it was made.

Michael pounced on them and quickly went through the album, opened the envelopes and saw the old coins, read the descriptions, and lovingly fingered them, totally enraptured. “Wow! You have a real treasure here, Uncle Kavi.” Kavi beamed, evidently proud of what he had amassed.

“How did you manage to take pictures of the coins?” asked Anthony.

“Taking pictures of coins is a bit tricky, since they are so small. It is difficult to capture the details, which is exactly what you need. All the pictures I have clicked took a lot of time,” Kavi replied.

“Your uncle spends a lot of his free time searching for coins and things on the internet nowadays, especially on eBay” said Jenny.

“I got a few George VI and early Pakistan coins from my grandmother. But mostly, my coins have been bought from dealers in India and the UK in the last few years.”

“What are the major areas you collect in? British India? Republic? Indian Princely states? Or even older?” asked Michael.

“I collect all periods, and my most treasured coins are these here - a couple of 1835 1/12 anna coins that I bought from street beggars in Puri, Orissa, and this Chandragupta II Vikramaditya coin that I bought two years ago. Then this one is my favorite since as a high school student, it blew my mind that I had a coin with ‘East India Company’ written on it. My oldest coins are a few from the Janapada period, i.e. about 500 BC, here, take a look.”

“500 BC! Double wow!”

“And this one dates back to approximately 200 BC, from the Eran Vidisha region, it’s a uniface punch marked coin,” said Kavi showing them a misshapen square coin.

“Uncle Kavi, why don’t you put these coins in coin albums, rather than envelopes? You would be able see them easily,” suggested Kyle.

“Coin albums are made of plastic and polythene sheets which slowly damage the coins, so paper envelopes are the safest,” replied Kavi.

Jenny passed around some chocolates which the boys munched on while viewing the coins. Their parents called while they were poring over the photographs and the coins. They were glad to know that the children had reached safely and had already settled in.

“And this here is my collection of old Indian artifacts,” Kavi said, bringing out another large box and showing them a collection of



curios, trinkets, amulets, small swords, a kukri knife, and two antique cups embellished with precious and semi-precious stones.

“Wow!” Where did you get all that?” gasped the boys.

“These are actually old Indian treasures, plundered by the British. Some of there relics surfaced by and by during sales and auctions here in the countryside. I have been buying them over a period of time,” said Kavi.

“Why would people sell such treasures?” cried Kyle, trying on a helmet studded with semi-precious stones.

“Sometimes people don’t understand the true value and worth of family heirlooms and sell them off as antiques, curios or souvenirs,” explained Kavi, “and sometimes families that fell out of favor when nobility went out of style had to sell off their treasures bit by bit because they couldn’t afford the upkeep of their stately homes. When I spot such things at auctions or tucked away in some antique shop, I buy them. I am luckily able to ascertain their value and true worth, being a historian, and so you see before you all that you do,” he ended with a flourish.

“Aren’t you scared someone might just steal these treasures? I’d never let them out of my sight, if I were you,” said Michael.

“They are always locked. When I am away, I give the keys to Professor Rabbany, he is another collector who knows the true worth of all this, everything is safe with him.”

The boys looked at one another and then at Tarak. Tarak pretended to be half asleep but in reality nothing missed his ears.

“In fact, I met the Professor in London where we got talking of numismatics and philately, this was the time I was teaching at Kent, and I showed him my collection, and it was he who suggested I join this school Green Meadows, and that’s how I got here at Farmborough,” Kavi explained.

Tarak slowly uncoiled his limbs. “Well, well, well!” was all he said.

“And these here are my most prized possessions,” he said, unlocking another cupboard and drawing out a beautiful wooden box, inlaid with stone. Inside, resting against dark blue velvet were two platinum amulets and two artifacts - a silver shield and a bronze bracelet.

“Wow! Just look at these!” The boys drew their breath and exclaimed in astonishment.

“I managed to lay my hands on these priceless amulets and artifacts,” said Kavi.

“What’s an amulet?” asked Kyle.

“An amulet is a small object generally worn at the neck or upper arm to ward off evil, harm, or illness, or to bring good fortune. It is a protecting charm,” explained Kavi.

“And what’s an artifact,” Kyle wanted to know.

“An artifact is a handmade object such as a tool, or the remains of a piece of pottery, characteristic of an earlier age and culture. Such objects are often found at archaeological excavations,” Kavi told him.

“Would a plastic comb be considered an artifact?” asked Kyle.

Kavi smiled and answered “Maybe not now, but hundreds of years later, perhaps yes.”

Their uncle also told them that he had obtained several intricately patterned tapestries related to the objects from various places in India, and added that he would show them the tapestries another time.

“The boys listened with interest, but Tarak had his reservations. Later that night, after they said goodnight to Kavi and Jenny, they gathered in Tarak’s room and discussed the treasures they had seen.

“What do you think, Uncle Tarak?” the boys asked.

“Hmm, I’m not so impressed, I know the real significance of that collection, and the role those trinkets play in your future and in the future of India and the rest of the world,” he declared, arms outstretched.

“You make it sound like we are truly blessed, some lucky creatures, the chosen ones with special powers,” said Anthony.

“Just you wait and see, mark my words, young man,” replied Tarak “and Kavi is just a puppet in that Professor Rabbany’s hands.”

The boys then said goodnight, and went off to their own room, a hundred thoughts and a thousand questions running in their heads.



CHAPTER SEVEN

GREEN MEADOWS

The next morning, James woke them and asked them to come down for breakfast in thirty minutes. Anthony quickly went for a jog around the school buildings and the playgrounds. Michael and Kyle preferred to stand at the window and look at the main school building from across the gardens and the courtyard. It was a beautiful stone edifice. The boys were familiar with the colonial style architecture that they had seen in several Indian cities and towns. In the distance they could see the church building with the steeple and bell.

Kavi and Jenny met them and accompanied them to the dining room downstairs. Once again, they met the same people whom they had met there the previous night. When the Professor met the boys he appeared friendly but they all sensed that he was putting on a false show of sincerity.

After a hearty breakfast of porridge, toast, orange juice, and coffee, they decided to spend some time with Anne, Samantha and Robin. They wanted to have a game of basketball. Anthony was a very good sportsman and he played really well. In order to keep the game equally balanced, he deliberately played badly and let the others score.

After a while they all then went cycling on the estate, and came in just before it was lunchtime.

It was Sunday and a typical traditional Sunday Roast had been prepared. The boys relished the roast lamb with green mint sauce, two different kinds of vegetable dishes and a Yorkshire pudding.

After lunch they expressed a desire to go inside the school building. Professor Rabbany reluctantly gave his consent, with a whole list of instructions to Anne, Samantha and Robin. He asked James to go with them as well, and to be with 'the American guests' all the time.

The boys didn't like the way he worded it, as though they might steal things when nobody was looking, but since Kavi sat there smiling, they didn't complain and went with the others. Tarak decided to inspect the beautiful gardens with Kavi for company.

Anne and Samantha were sisters. They took to Kyle very well and kept up a lively chatter, while Robin attached himself to the older boys. The building was dark and gloomy and Kyle said he was scared. His brothers laughed, saying that it was eerie because it was empty. Once the holidays were over, it would be noisy and lively.

Anne and Samantha asked Kyle about their school and they exchanged notes and made comparisons. The girls loved it when Kyle said 'Uh-oh' and made him repeat it all the time. He kept giggling and was more than happy to be in their company.

In the school building, they were first shown the classrooms. The corridors were long, and the classrooms had high cavernous ceilings. Then they were shown the assembly room and the library. They peeked into the library through its glass doors. It was now closed to students but it housed an enormous collection of books. Then they came down to the gym where they saw their aunt. They called out to her.

In the bright, modern gym, Jenny and an assistant teacher were busy checking the equipment and taking an inventory. She told them she was waiting for a carpenter and an electrician who would be arriving any moment to make some repairs.

"You can use the gym tomorrow, boys, and you can even borrow

books from the library, I'll take you upstairs myself and help you choose," she told them cheerfully.

James led them to the auditorium upstairs where they bumped into a young girl who was carrying a basket of linen. "Hey, Julie, where are you coming from?" he asked her.

"Mum wants me to take this to the laundry room," she replied, looking nervously at James and at the boys, before walking on.

James explained that Julie was a pupil of the school and the caretaker's daughter, she was not a boarder but a day scholar, and they lived not too far away. Julie occasionally lent a helping hand with the innumerable chores that her mother did, especially in the holidays.

In one of the corridors, James checked one particular door to make sure it was properly locked.

"What's behind that door?" asked Michael.

"That's the Headmaster's rooms, nobody is allowed to go that way," he told them, quickly taking them away from the area as though they might contaminate it.

Anthony and Michael looked at Robin quizzically. He shrugged his shoulders and when James walked on and they were out of ear-shot, he whispered "It's completely off-limits, nobody's allowed anywhere near Professor Rabbany's private quarters."

The boys found it more and more mysterious, but refrained from asking questions. They were glad when their tour ended and they were happy to be out in the open, in broad daylight.

They went to the playground where they sat on swings for some time, laughing and chatting. Presently they were called for tea and they were served milk, biscuits, and plum cake in a shaded area next to the kitchens.

They met Tarak there who told them that Professor Rabbany had

taken Kavi with him on an important errand and that they would return before dinner.

“Have Percy and Harold gone with them too?” asked Kyle, making a face.

“Yes, baba, they have gone as well. It seems Rabbany takes them with him wherever he goes.”

Kyle giggled. “Like a pair of bodyguards?” he wondered aloud.

“Like a pair of watchdogs,” Michael giggled back, “bow wow wow,” not knowing how close to the truth he was.

“Shhh, don’t be rude now, and tell an old man what you saw inside that school building,” asked Tarak.

“I think it would be a better idea if we told you what we didn’t see, or couldn’t see, or were not allowed to see inside that school building,” said Anthony, grimacing.

“Hmmm,” said Tarak, looking thoughtful. “Many mysteries surround this place. Let us see how this week progresses.”

Later that evening, just before dinner, Kate called and spoke to each of them. She told them she was leaving for Paris the next morning. She also told them that when her work was done, she’d fly directly to London where their father would meet her and both of them would drive down to Farmborough, and from there they would all proceed to Italy.

“Do you miss home?” she asked Kyle.

“I do, and I also miss Louise and Abdul,” he replied, cheekily. Kate laughed.

Kavi, Professor Rabbany, Percy, and Harold returned and the Professor and his sons went straight up to their private rooms in the main building. They asked for their dinner to be sent up there. “Where’s their mother?” asked Kyle, curious about the kind of life

they led.

“The Professor said she’s been dead for some time, actually none of us knew that he had a family, because he had never mentioned one. The poor man has always kept to himself, and suddenly one day, his two sons joined the school a few years back.”

“Why don’t they talk to us?” asked Kyle.

“They’re shy and reserved,” said Kavi, but the children thought otherwise.

That night, after dinner, and after saying goodnight to their uncle and aunt, they gathered in Tarak’s room. They were full of questions and Tarak made them settle down comfortably on the rug while he stretched out and propped himself against some pillows.

“Let me tell you a story tonight, it’s going to be a long one.”



CHAPTER EIGHT

PURGED OUT

“Tonight’s story is about three young brothers, Chaitanya who was fifteen years old, Narendra who was twelve and Uttam who was just ten. Three brothers just like you. They were ordinary kids from a poor village in India.”

He continued. “One day a sadhu came to their village and...”

“What’s a sadhu?” interrupted Kyle.

“Sadhu means holy man,” replied Tarak. “One day a sadhu came to their village and told the parents of the boys that he needed the children to protect the countryside from an approaching danger that could destroy the world. Since the sadhu was known to the parents, and since they respected and obeyed holy men back then, the parents reluctantly agreed to his request and allowed the boys to take a few possessions and accompany the sadhu.”

“They went without a fuss?” asked Kyle.

“It didn’t cross their minds to make a fuss - they were good, obedient children. The sadhu then took the boys with him on a long trek high into the mountains of Ladakh. Do you where Ladakh is?” asked Tarak. They shook their heads. “Ladakh is the ‘land of high passes,’ it is a region in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir near the Himalayas,” said Tarak.

“I now remember, it is a very sparsely populated region and shares a common border with Tibet,” said Michael. “Its capital is Leh. Ladakh is sometimes called ‘Little Tibet’ on account of the pre-dominant Tibetan culture. Now there is Indian military presence

in Ladakh indicating that it still remains a disputed territory between India and Pakistan, and also between India and Tibet.”

“Absolutely correct,” said Tarak.

“Given that the majority of Ladakhis are Tibetan Buddhists, would the holy men have been Buddhist monks?” asked Michael.

“These holy men were sadhus according to my story, but does it matter, baba? And besides, the story goes back many hundred years ago.”

“I guess you’re right, Uncle Tarak, let’s just continue,” said Anthony.

“Right,” said Tarak. “They walked and walked for several weeks. It wasn’t the most comfortable of journeys because it was always uphill, you understand, but the boys were strong and healthy with all the work they did in the fields back home, so they just about managed to keep pace with the sadhu who was like a mountain goat who didn’t seem to tire.”

“Did they talk to the sadhu and ask him where he was taking them?” asked Kyle.

“The sadhu didn’t talk much, he had his prayer beads and the boys didn’t disturb him. When they reached Ladakh, they went even more northwards higher up in the mountains, until they reached some caves. Do you remember the names of the boys?” asked Tarak.

“Chaitanya, Narendra, and Uttam,” replied Michael.

“Very good,” said Tarak, carrying on. “The sadhu took them to the largest cave which was home to a very large group of sadhus who lived in isolation from humanity, and spent most of their time in prayer and meditation. When the boys reached the cave, they saw that the holy men had been waiting for them and were very pleased to see them.”

“After paying their respects to all of them, the boys rested for a while and refreshed themselves with the simple meal that was offered to them by the sadhus. All three of them — Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam — were then given amulets to wear around their necks. These amulets were made of platinum and were attached to metal chains. The head priest said some prayers, blessed the amulets and proceeded to put them around the necks of the three brothers.”

“What happened next?” asked Michael.

“As soon as they put them on, the amulets glowed briefly. First the boys got a little frightened when they saw light emitting from the charms, but then the sadhu who had brought them there explained that these were special amulets, with special powers, and that is why they glowed.”

“So now we have the three brothers, we have them wearing an amulet each and we have the amulets glowing. All’s right with the world, isn’t it?” asked Tarak.

“There must be more to it, Uncle Tarak, your story won’t end here, I know,” said Anthony, grinning, “come, on, tell us more, please.”

Tarak grinned and continued. “Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam were fascinated, but as yet they didn’t know what to make of it. So they just stood there waiting respectfully. All the sadhus then started chanting special prayers and the head priest was then handed a tray covered with a red satin cloth. He made the boys stand together, anointed their heads with a paste made of sandalwood, turmeric and crushed petals, and then handed them some special gifts.”

“Wow!” said Kyle, “what kinds of gifts?”

“Some really special gifts, with magical powers.” said Tarak.

“Magical powers? Wow!” said Kyle, his eyes shining.

“Yes. Chaitanya was given a golden sword, Narendra got a silver shield and Uttam received a thick bronze bracelet.”

“One gold, one silver and one bronze, just like Olympic medals,” observed Anthony.

“The senior sadhus then went on to explain how each of the weapons worked, and how they were meant to complement one another. The sword could generate a blinding white light which could challenge the light of the Sun. A single beam of light emerging from the golden sword was capable of striking down entire armies and demolishing whole mountain ranges. The person holding the sword could be transported enormous distances on a beam of pure energy, on the light emerging from the golden sword.”

“Wow! Just imagine if one of us had such a sword now, it would be fun,” said Kyle.

“It would be fun, but it might be a little scary too,” observed Michael.

“I’d use the light beam to go home, eat some kebabs and be back in a flash,” said Kyle. “I’d take Mom to Paris and back, and rent out the sword, so people wouldn’t have to buy air tickets and fly in airplanes, they’d just hold on to me and off we go, whoosh,” said Kyle, his imagination taking over.

“Yes,” interrupted Anthony, “and there’d be thousands of people waiting to steal it from you. Am I right, Uncle Tarak?” Anthony said, turning to Tarak.

“Absolutely! Now to continue with the story — and the shield — the second boy Narendra got a silver shield. The sadhus explained that this again was no ordinary shield, but it had special powers too. It was capable of repelling all weapons and was designed to protect the bearer from all the evil that the world could throw at him.”

“Wow!” said Kyle, “think of what we could do if we had such a shield,” he said, thinking of his favorite science fiction heroes. “We’d be unbeatable!”

“And the youngest brother Uttam received the bronze bracelet, continued Tarak. “The special powers associated with this brace-

let seemed rather ordinary and simple if you compared it to the other two articles. The sadhus told them that it would enable the wearer of the humble bronze bracelet to communicate and control all nature. He would be able to speak to all kinds of animals, and all living beings. He would also be able to command the wind to blow a mighty gale or order a hurricane to calm down.”

“Wow!” said Kyle.

“Yes, wow! That’s your favorite word, isn’t it, Kylie baba?” commented Tarak. “Wow!”

Kyle smiled, but remained silent, imagining all that he would be able to do with a magic bracelet like that. He could turn the swimming pool into a Jacuzzi, a breeze could be ordered to sweep away dust and rubbish and clean up entire cities in a manner of minutes, fields could be irrigated, and desert storms ordered to subjugate advancing armies. It would be similar to the games that Anthony, Michael and he played on the computer.

Suddenly Michael shot up. “I just remembered something, didn’t Uncle Kavi show us two platinum amulets, a silver shield and a bronze bracelet?” he said wildly excited.

Anthony started laughing. “Don’t you know Uncle Tarak by now? Can’t you figure out he’s just weaving a story around those objects?”

“But, but I ...” trailed off Michael, with a very confused expression. He turned towards Tarak, who had a sardonic smile playing about his mouth.

“Is that a story or is it real? Uncle Tarak, please tell us the truth,” Kyle held Tarak’s hand and kept pumping it, but the old man neither agreed nor disagreed.

Anthony started laughing and said “Uncle Tarak, just continue with the story, please, and let fact and fiction merge together as

always.”

Tarak went on. “The boys were given these presents, and they accepted them gracefully, bowing low and paying their respects to all the sadhus. They wondered why they were being given the special gifts, but were too timid to directly ask.”

“Their doubts were soon answered as one of the senior sadhus began to speak to them. The magic powers were repeated to them, and then they were told to use the powers well to bring peace and prosperity to the land. They were also issued a strict warning by the sadhus and told to stay together and united if they wished to face and fight all the evil powers of the world. If they separated or fought among themselves and became divided, the weapons would lose their effective powers and the whole world would be in danger,” said Tarak.

“What kind of danger?” asked Kyle.

“The danger of being swallowed by darkness,” continued Tarak. “They had to make sure they didn’t quarrel among themselves or have petty jealousies or plan to kill each other, because if one of them died, the other two brothers would lose their magic powers too.”

“I don’t think a guy would wish to kill his own brother, would he?” asked Kyle.

“No, but in a story, anything can happen, right?” asked Tarak.

“Right,” Kyle nodded.

“So after taking blessings from the sadhus, Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam set off and as directed by the holy men, they began wandering the length and breadth of the country, putting right all the wrongs they saw, destroying cruel warlords, restoring peace and quiet, diverting the course of flooded rivers to where there was drought.”

“Traveling would have been easy for them, all Chaitanya had to do was to order the golden sword to take them places,” observed Michael.

“Yes, and self-protection would be easy too, with Narendra’s silver shield,” added Anthony.

“If Uncle Kavi would let us play with those items in that big box, we could pretend we were Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam and we had special powers, it would be such fun.” said Kyle.

“Don’t even think about it, collectors don’t give out their precious items to their nephews to play with,” said Anthony. “And besides, Uncle Kavi doesn’t have a golden sword, we’d have to make one using cardboard and tinsel.”

Kyle smiled and said he wanted to hear the rest of the story.

Tarak continued the tale. “The three brothers were a happy trio, they enjoyed their adventures, they never seemed to get tired, and if they needed something, they just used their collective powers to get it. Life was good.”

“What about their parents, didn’t they miss them?” asked Kyle.

“Sure they did, and they went to meet them very often. But they had to be extremely careful that their gifts were not stolen, for they could be put to wrong use. You understand, don’t you?” asked Tarak. Kyle nodded.

“Since small-scale wars were rampant in the country at that time, the three brothers were busy intervening, deciding which side to support, identifying the oppressors and the oppressed, and setting things right. They struck down armies of the cruel and tyrannical rulers, destroying hills where evil soldiers lay in wait, and restored peace and harmony.

Nobody and no weapon could harm them because Narendra had his silver shield.”

“Nobody suspected anything?” asked Kyle.

“At first nobody did, but as time went by, and their actions got more and more heroic, people realized that the three brothers had some kind of mysterious powers. They loved them and praised them and made heroes out of them, sending them on rescue missions to neighboring villages, states and provinces. The tough aggressive provincial rulers hated them and started dreading them. Their power started diminishing because their entire armies were being destroyed in a matter of minutes by these three little boys. And there was nothing they could do, they were quite helpless.”

“The three of them must be very happy, Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam,” commented Anthony.

“Actually, little Uttam was not too content. He saw his brothers getting all the glory and the accolades. Attacking the enemy, defending oneself against weapons, flattening hills and mountains in a trice, and traveling long distances in seconds was all that had been taking place. Chaitanya and Narendra who used these powers were becoming popular. People loved them, and couldn’t get enough of them. Uttam had not yet been getting any opportunity to use his own special powers and was beginning to feel left out. It was not required of him to communicate with animals, or create or dispel storms and floods.”

The boys listened with interest. Tarak continued.

“He was part of the team, no doubt, but he didn’t really have much to do and just stood in the sidelines. He felt ignored and started resenting his brothers.”

“Didn’t his brothers notice?” asked Michael, patting Kyle. “I’m sure we would have realized if something was eating Kylie, right, Tony?” Tony nodded.

“They were too busy to notice, I think,” said Tarak. “He also kept his emotions hidden and didn’t tell Chaitanya or Narendra how he felt. But life went on, and the three of them were given special status wherever they went. They occupied a place of honor and all the noblemen treated them well, consulting them on important matters like protecting their boundaries, and maintaining peace between

regions.”

“So when there were no wars to be fought, what did they do?” asked the boys.

“Hmmm, I’ll have to think. Now don’t stare at an old man, give him a few minutes to think, go take a break, fetch me some chocolates or cookies. Eating makes me remember clearly.”

Michael grinned and sprang up. Kyle got some biscuits and cookies that had been kept by Jenny in their room. Anthony pulled out some chocolates from a packet and Michael fetched some plum cake and a jug of water. Even Tarak stood up and stretched his legs. After they munched on the snacks, he continued.

“Are you sleepy? I can stop,” he said with an innocent glint in his eye.

“Nooooooo,” the boys reacted, “we aren’t sleepy, and neither are you, Uncle Tarak.”

“To answer your last question, there were little skirmishes happening all the time at some place or the other, in such a large country, so they were very busy, using the power of their gifts,” said Tarak

“Now these boys had grown up in the interior of the land and had never seen the ocean until they had started traveling recently. They loved to watch the water lapping at the shore and the smell of the salty air. They spend a lot of time watching little boats and ships sail in and out of the harbor.”

“One day, on the coast, the three of them watched as three large ships sailed into port. The ships looked unfamiliar and they wondered what kind of vessels they were. They waited on the coast, watching as the ships slowly approached. The locals spotted the unfamiliar ships and a lot of people gathered at the shore waiting for them to dock. The nobleman of the province sent his spokesman and representatives as well, to see what kind of visitors the ships were carrying.”

“Was it a pirate ship?” asked Kyle excitedly.

Tarak shook his head. "Not pirates, baba, it was explorers, the three ships carried explorers."

"Explosives, wow!" said Kyle.

"Not explosives, baba, explorers," corrected Tarak. "The ships carried explorers from England. When they docked, the Captain came and met the group. His name was Terence Barnaby, he said. He met the nobleman's spokesman and delegates and was also told that Chaitanya, Narendra, and Uttam were special envoys of the nobleman. From the way the local people treated the three brothers, Captain Barnaby understood that the three young boys were very important here and that they commanded some kind of authority. He instinctively knew that he would have to interact with them."

"Chaitanya asked Captain Barnaby who he was, where he was from, and why his ships had landed there. He explained that the ships were carrying explorers from England.

Barnaby said he was the leader of the team of explorers and traders, and that he and his comrades were there to trade. Narendra doubted whether Barnaby was speaking the truth. He had noticed so many soldiers on the ships that they seemed to outnumber the traders. Something was wrong somewhere."

"When asked about the soldiers, Captain Barnaby said that they needed to take a lot of soldiers and bodyguards for protecting the explorers from pirates. Pirate activity had been on the rise, he told them, and they needed all the help they could manage. Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam looked at one another and conferred in private. They thought they would give the Captain the benefit of doubt as they knew for sure that pirates did indeed pose a threat to floating vessels, they looted and pillaged cargo and were a nuisance on high seas."

"So they decided to keep an eye on the Captain and his men without them realizing it. They didn't quite trust the Captain but there was no logical reason for this dislike. They decided to let the visitors into the country."

"I think the way the story is going, they will live to regret it," ob-

served Michael.

“Yes, I think one should always respect one’s intuitions,” said Anthony.

“What happened next?” asked Kyle.

“Captain Terence Barnaby and his band of merry men were allowed to enter the country and trade with the locals. They purchased from them spices, silk, handicrafts, ivory, sandalwood, and also gold and silver jewelry studded with precious and semi-precious stones. They paid the locals well and everybody was happy. It was utopian, everything was for the best in the best of possible worlds.”

“The three brothers decided to move on and travel the countryside, settling skirmishes and making themselves useful elsewhere, as they had promised the sadhus in Ladakh. They took their leave from the local nobleman and left.”

“For the next few years, the three of them traveled widely, they visited their parents in their village as well, and didn’t stay for too long in one place. They had Chaitanya’s golden sword that made travel quick and easy,” Tarak reminded them. “The warlords had vanished, there was peace and quiet instead of the constant battles and clashes and scuffles of yesteryear. During this time, Uttam stood out. He made himself useful, can you guess why?” asked Tarak.

The boys shook their heads.

“Come on, think, why would Uttam’s powers be needed now?”

None of them came up with any answer, they waited for Tarak to continue.

“Are you boys sleepy? We can continue tomorrow,” suggested Tarak.

“Noooo,” they squealed in unison, “please continue.”

“Okay, but old man is thirsty, give him a drink break,” he said, sip-

ping some water.

“You were telling us why Uttam was given his share of importance,” reminded Michael.

“Ah, yes, Uttam, this youngest fellow who had been feeling left out all along was suddenly much sought after by villagers. There was peace and quiet and people could concentrate on their chief occupation which was agriculture. All they wanted to do was grow their crops, and all they needed was good soil, good weather and adequate water for the crops to thrive.”

“Got it, and with the powers of the bronze bracelet, it was possible for Uttam to do so,” said Kyle.

“Yes, all he had to do was hold his bracelet tight, and command rain to fall in places where it was dry, to whisper in the ears of elephants to make little clearings in forests for people to cultivate the land, to request birds to help plant seeds, and to murmur to bullocks to plough the soil. Occasionally Chaitanya helped him in reshaping land forms. Land had to be flattened for rice cultivation, so he just used his golden sword and got rid of the annoying little hillocks and mounds of earth that came in the way.”

“I guess people must be very pleased, it reduced their work many times over,” observed Michael.

“Yes, and they gave a lot of credit to Uttam who was now their hero. They heaped praise on him, showered him with gifts and treated him little a little prince. He was just ten or eleven, and after a period of feeling neglected and resentful, he was happy. This continued for many years. The three brothers wandered the length and breadth of the country, helping create abundance and bounty. Soon it was a land of plenty, everybody was occupied and happy, and people pursued other activities such as painting, handicrafts, music, reading, and writing to improve their minds.”

“What about the coastal town they left, didn’t they go back there, or to their parents’ village?” asked Kyle.

“They did, indeed. And when they went back to the coastal town

and the port where they had met Captain Whatshisname Barnaby,” Tarak paused and scratched his head hard, trying to remember the Captain’s first name. He tapped his head with his knuckles, screwed up his eyes and declared “Old man cannot remember the Captain’s first name,”

“Here, Uncle Tarak, maybe this will help,” said Kyle, giggling, handing him a chewy bar.

“Thank you kindly for restoring a poor old man’s memory,” Tarak said, accepting it and chomping on it. “Captain Terence Barnaby! That was the name! So now the three brothers Anthony, Michael and Kyle reach the coastal town...”

“Nooooo, Uncle Tarak, you’re forgetting names again, we are not the boys in the story. Here, have these Brazilian nuts,” Kyle giggled again. “You’ll remember the correct names now.”

“Ah, yes, you are right, Kylie baba, the three brothers were called Chaitanya, Narendra, and Uttam, and they reached the coastal town after many years. What do you think they saw there? In the few years that they were away, many more traders had arrived, and had started settling in the town. At first the townspeople were happy, because all that trade was good for them, but slowly more and more ships started arriving at the port and discharging traders and lots of soldiers.”

“Uh-oh” observed Kyle.

“They soon grew in numbers, and because they were aggressive, the local nobleman and his people couldn’t do anything about it. Every week more ships entered the harbor, with their cargo of soldiers and took away local handicrafts, spices, ornaments, and jewelry. When opposed, the foreigners took to arms and dominated the peace-loving locals who didn’t have an organized army of their own.”

“The soldiers then started building proper garrisons. They fanned out into the region, and overpowered nearby towns as well. They built barracks, and strongholds, and forts everywhere and stocked supplies and ammunition. Before anyone could do anything, they

had invaded the land, maintained well-organized battalions and had built a proper military defense force.”

“They controlled the towns and villages totally, I’m sure,” said Anthony.

“They did indeed,” replied Tarak.

“It sounds like the beginning of the British colonization of India,” observed Michael.

“This is a story. British colonization of India was real,” corrected Tarak, but Michael smiled, knowing that in Tarak’s tales, fact and fiction intermingled and was never compartmentalized.

Tarak continued. “The brothers had grown to love this coastal town. They were attached to it, having spent a lot of time here, as I said earlier. So when they returned, they found it completely different from what it was when they had left. It was beyond recognition, there were soldiers patrolling everywhere, the harbor and port were closed to all locals, new military command buildings had been built, and the happy, easygoing people were now terrified and scared. It was as though a blanket of fear and gloom had enveloped the town.”

“The older brothers Chaitanya and Narendra were furious by what they saw. They visited the nobleman who was really happy to see them. He expressed anxiety about the future of the town. The current situation reminded him of the former warlords who had had a field day before the arrival of the three brothers. He told them that these foreigners were driving the local population crazy, and they had taken control of countless villages and towns. The soldiers were getting bolder and cheekier by the day and treated the locals with contempt.”

Michael’s eyes twinkled. He drew a lot of parallels from history.

Tarak continued. “The people looked to the brothers to deliver them from this nuisance. They had no enthusiasm or the means to take on the new enemy. Chaitanya and Narendra readily agreed and af-

ter briefly discussing and deciding on a course of action, they drew out their special possessions and immediately started destroying ships and everything that belonged to the English traders.

“The soldiers were no match for this powerful team of two, I guess,” said Anthony. “They mustn’t have known what hit them.”

“Oh, boy, this sounds like fun!” added Kyle.

“Yes, you can imagine the havoc and destruction that was heaped upon the foreigners. Suddenly they saw a blinding light that demolished their grey stone buildings, knocked down barracks, razed to the ground and flattened their encampments, and bulldozed their offices. They immediately rounded up their soldiers and started attacking the two brothers, but Narendra had his silver shield and they were unaffected by the enemy weapons. The battle continued in the countryside where the two brothers demolished forts and depots, and wreaked havoc and destruction everywhere.”

“What about Uttam?” asked Kyle, identifying with the youngest boy in the story.

“Uttam was upset. He understood that his older brothers would be busy now, using their special powers to save the local people, and later they were sure to overpower the enemy, after which everyone would be singing their praises. He had got a taste of hero-worship earlier and he wanted to be the only one to receive admiration and tributes.”

“He was jealous?” asked Kyle.

“Not jealous, baba, but resentful in a childish way. He wasn’t happy standing in the sidelines, not being part of the drama. In a churlish manner, typical of children sometimes, he made a terribly wrong decision, without thinking of the consequences.”

“What did he do?” asked Michael.

“Uttam grew more and more resentful and jealous. He remembered the instructions and the warnings that had been given to the three

of them by the sadhus. He knew that if the three brothers were separated, their powers would diminish. So out of sheer spite, he touched the bronze bracelet and summoned the mighty wind to pick him up. In a matter of minutes, the weather changed, and there was a strong gust of wind that blew right towards Uttam and picked him up, carrying him away up and above the land.”

“Nobody stopped him?” asked the boys.

“Nobody noticed it. Chaitanya and Narendra were busy inflicting ruin on the foreigners and the people were watching their progress with keen interest, focusing on white flashes of light in the sky. Nobody saw Uttam being carried away.”

“Where did he go? Back to his parents’ village?” asked Kyle.

“No, he decided to go as far away from Chaitanya and Narendra as he could. He commanded the wind to take him north, up and away, farther and farther, towards the mountains. Now can you guess what happened next? The farther he went from his brothers, the weaker his powers became.”

“Oh! What about the two older boys, Chaitanya and Narendra, their powers must have been reduced as well?” asked Anthony.

“Definitely. While fighting the English on the plains, the two of them realized that suddenly they were not half as effective as before, and that they were getting hit by the enemy weapons. This hadn’t happened before, ever since they had embarked on this great adventure. Chaitanya was hurt in the arm and Narendra in his right leg. They talked among themselves and wondered what might have gone wrong.” “Didn’t they notice Uttam’s absence?” asked Michael.

“I was coming to that. They suddenly noticed that Uttam wasn’t anywhere around. Chaitanya thought he must be back in the coastal town, so he commanded his golden sword to produce the beam of light. Unfortunately, the beam of light was too weak, it was just a feeble fluorescence emitting from the sword, and not powerful enough to transport them anywhere. They now realized that Uttam must be far away, which explained why their powers were

unexpectedly diminished. But they continued their assault on the invaders, though not with full force.”

“What happened to Uttam, where did he land?” Kyle asked.

“Uttam had by now, landed far up north towards the foothills of the Himalayas. From there he commanded the powerful wind to take him higher, towards the snow-covered peaks. The wind did take him in that direction, but its force was not strong as before, and Uttam was dropped at the base of a snow-covered mountain.”

“What happened to him?” asked Anthony. “Did he land safely?”

“He landed with a whoosh, but remember, there was fresh snow and it was quiet and serene, and in those conditions you can imagine what can happen when someone even sneezes, it is enough to disturb the peace...” Tarak smiled, leaving them to imagine what might happen.

“An avalanche?” asked Michael.

“Yes,” Tarak nodded, “the sudden appearance of the wind started an avalanche, and a small roar began in the hills and increased in intensity to a deafening thunderous sound. Uttam got really frightened. In a matter of minutes, the air grew thick with mist and the snow thundered down in Uttam’s direction. He screamed and started running downhill but the enormous waterfall of snow barreled right behind him. He ran, screaming, as fast as his legs could carry him, he looked backwards and saw the terrifying sight of a rushing river of snow chasing him. He tripped and fell, tumbling a few steps, and before he could get up, he was enveloped in the rushing torrent, in the beautiful but deadly avalanche.”

“Did he die?” asked Kyle.

“Yes, sadly, he suffocated under all that snow and died. Now do you remember the warnings given to the boys by the holy men?”

“If they were separated, the power of the weapons would be diminished but if one of them died, the other brothers would lose all

their powers,” said Anthony.

“Yes, and that’s exactly what happened to Chaitanya and Narendra. These two were busy fighting the English with their feeble powers. They just about managed to stay alive, thwarting the attacks that the English soldiers heaped upon them. All of a sudden they sensed that they had no powers left, that their sword and shield were devoid of all special magic and were now of no use whatsoever. It was like holding any ordinary sword and any ordinary shield.”

“They must have been frightened to death now, right?”

“Right. The invaders were able to overpower them and brought them down like flies. They were no match for an entire army that was focused on killing them and they died.”

“That is so sad, Uncle Tarak, I didn’t expect this kind of an ending, can you change it and make it different for us?” asked Kyle.

“I’m afraid not, that is exactly how it all happened, and that’s exactly what I told you,” replied Tarak.

“What did the invaders do then? They must be glad to see the end of Chaitanya and Narendra. Did they find out about Uttam dying too?” asked Anthony.

“They found out, and they brought Uttam’s body from the mountains to the coast. They had been hearing the locals boast that the three boys with superhuman powers would drive the invaders out of their land. They had learned that the boys possessed special amulets and objects which gave them their powers.”

“Uh-oh, but in the invaders’ hands, these gifts would be dangerous,” observed Kyle.

“Yes, you’re absolutely right, baba, Captain Barnaby issued quick orders for the bodies of the three brothers to be brought to him. He then kept the three platinum amulets, the golden sword, the silver shield and the bronze bracelet in a safe place and got rid of

the bodies.”

“He almost went mad with joy, delighted to be in possession of these items. He screamed and shouted in glee and jumped up and down like a crazy maniac, noisily celebrating his triumph. He wanted to test the magic powers for himself and lost no time in doing so. He called his two sons and told them about the magical trinkets. His sons wouldn’t have believed him, had they not seen for themselves the destruction meted out to their father’s army by just two young lads.”

“They were also equally excited and anxious to use their newly acquired powers. So that very moment, they set off on horseback along with their father towards the nearby hills to test the powers of the objects. When they reached the top, they dismounted and stood there facing the sunset.”

“Captain Barnaby opened the sack containing the magic objects. He picked out the three amulets first. He wore one and handed the other two to his sons. They then proceeded to put them around their necks. For a few minutes, the amulets glowed.”

“Like they had glowed when the three brothers had put them on?” asked Kyle.

“Yes,” replied Tarak, “exactly like that. Then Barnaby picked up the golden sword and held it himself and asked his sons to take the shield and the bracelet. The two sons started quarrelling, both wanted the silver shield and stopped only when Barnaby boxed their ears and hurled a few obscenities at them,” smiled Tarak.

“The Captain then picked up the golden sword, held it high and said, ‘I want to create a new path for that river, I want to bring it here towards this valley’. No sooner did he say the words than a bolt of lightning emerged from the sword, struck the ground, created a huge gap in the earth and the course of the river was diverted. The three of them were overjoyed and laughed maniacally. Captain Barnaby then held the sword and said ‘take us home’. A powerful beam of light transported them and they landed right outside their garrison. ‘Take us back to the hill’, he ordered. A blinding white light took them back to the top of the hill in seconds.”

“They must be overjoyed,” observed Kyle.

“Indeed they were, they then proceeded to try the shield, but since nobody was fighting them at that moment, they couldn’t test it. The sons were disappointed, and then Barnaby had a brainwave. He told the younger fellow to order a hailstorm right above their heads. So then the chap held up the bronze bracelet and commanded nature to send down hail.”

“It started raining pellets of ice on their heads. These can get very powerful sometimes and can hurt, so then the Barnabys stood with the silver shield and were left unscathed. Not a single hailstone touched them. They were safe. They were jubilant. They started hollering in delight, ecstatic that they had so much power at their command.”

“They must have used this power to full advantage,” said Anthony.

“Yes, undeniably. As a result of what they possessed and used, they went on a rampage, overpowering nearby villages, taking control of towns, conquering little kingdoms and vanquishing entire armies. If the opponent’s army was strong, they easily wiped them out by flooding their land, or suddenly creating deep canyons and gorges where soldiers just drowned or fell and died.”

“They called for more and more soldiers, quickly transported them to the scene of action, and went on expanding their own territory. The local population was at a distinct disadvantage, they felt powerless in the face of an enemy powered by magical objects. Entire provinces and states succumbed to Barnaby’s control and before long the English armies had gained full control of the land. They carefully guarded the special ornaments and were powerful authoritative rulers, exploiting the people and the land.”

“Captain Barnaby must have died after some years,” asked Michael.

“He died at the ripe old age of eighty-two, and then his sons were joint commanders of the army,” said Tarak.

“Who got to use the golden sword then?” asked Kyle.

“The older son was given the honor of having the golden sword, the younger one got the silver shield and the older son’s oldest son was given the bronze bracelet. The artifacts stayed within the Barnaby family for many generations and the English maintained control over the land for hundreds of years.”

“Because the descendants of the Barnaby family were always in the possession of the artifacts, they always occupied top military positions. Thus they always held great power and exercised a lot of influence over successive British governments. The Barnabys were the guardians of the treasure and as a result, quite a force to reckon with, and they didn’t let the British forget that.”

“I can imagine that, holding an empire at ransom with the magic weapons in their possession,” said Anthony.

“The British governments, the Kings and the Queens empowered because of the artifacts and at the same time powerless because those who held the artifacts were powerful. Quite a problem there.”

“What happened then?” asked the boys.

“The British supremacy continued until not too long ago, there is a whole generation living that has experienced British rule. But in the early part of the nineteenth century, in the eighteen twenties, one of the artifacts went missing — the golden sword. There were family squabbles among the Barnaby descendents, they plotted and planned against one another, hoping to gain control by getting hold of the magic treasures, but the golden sword was untraceable.”

“It can’t have vanished, just like that,” observed Kyle.

“Why not?” said Anthony. “Someone must have made off with it, and another person stolen it, and yet others killed for it, or replaced it with a similar-looking sword that had no special powers, and finally it must have landed somewhere in a place where nobody guessed its true worth.”

“Quite likely. It’s probably still somewhere around,” said Michael, laughing, “Maybe in Dad’s ancestral home in the village.”

“Wow, imagine if that was true!” said Kyle. They turned to Tarak.

“The power of the two other artifacts had diminished, on account of the sword not being traceable. The shield and the bracelet lay among a heap of other treasures that formed part of the possessions of one of the guardians. This particular Barnaby descendant had collected quite some loot over the years, a lot of gold and silver coins, ornaments, jewelry, precious stones, goblets and jugs inlaid with jewels and many such things.”

“His son was a no-good wretch who never did an honest day’s work, and never helped his father in his exploits. He was a lazy scoundrel and a mean one. The old man kept an eye on all the treasure, keeping it locked and the key in his possession at all times. The son waited for an opportunity to lay his thieving, picking little hands on the wealth,” said Tarak, drumming his fingers in the air.

Kyle watched him in fascination. “So what did he do, did he have his father killed or something?”

“The cunning fellow paid some robbers to capture his father. He knew his father went hunting in the jungle each morning, so he had these robbers follow his father and take him prisoner. The robbers detained the old man for a sufficiently long time in order to enable his good-for-nothing son to break open the lock and make off with a substantial amount of wealth.”

“Then Mr. Robber Barnaby started selling the loot, bit by bit. He was too lazy to bother to ascertain the value of some of the items, all he wanted to do was convert the goods into cash, so that he could eat, drink, make merry, and live a decadent life. One single buyer did not purchase it all, so the power of the weapons was greatly diminished.”

“Then what happened?” the boys were eager to know.

“The British authorities soon got to know about the artifacts being sold. They understood that in the absence of the magic treasures, the Barnaby clan had no powers and would no longer have any hold on the government. They called for an emergency meeting and decided to quickly act against them. In some flash action that followed, the British purged out the Barnaby descendants from the army and nobility.”

“What does that mean, ‘purged out?’” asked Anthony and Kyle.

“In historic or political context, when people who are in power remove undesirable people from the government or political party, they are said to purge out such people,” explained Michael. “There is also a medical connotation, but let’s get back to the story.”

“The purges took place over a period of time, and during these purges, the remaining artifacts were lost. They landed up in different parts of England and India, and maybe they still lie forgotten in some rusty, musty, dusty cupboards,” concluded Tarak, making to get up.

“Aww, Uncle Tarak, the story hasn’t ended, has it?” asked Kyle. “It sounds incomplete still.”

“It hasn’t ended, but you could say that the story is about to begin,” said Tarak mysteriously, rising, picking up his pillows and sitting on the bed.

“Off you go now, get some sleep, tomorrow we’ll go out for lunch and have some fish-and-chips and strawberry ice cream,” he said, yawning.

“Right, good night, Uncle Tarak,” said the boys, as they left his room and went to their own.

“Boy, that was one interesting story!” said Kyle as they reached their room.

Anthony was lost in thought, and Michael even more so. Kyle was

quiet as well. They kept thinking of the lost treasures and imagined what it could be like if the treasures surfaced again.

It was late, and everyone else had gone off to bed. For a long time Anthony, Michael and Kyle lay thinking of all that they had heard, and finally, well past midnight, they fell asleep, only to be woken after a couple of hours.

Kyle was screaming.



CHAPTER NINE

DARK SHADOWS

Kyle's screams woke his brothers who immediately switched on one of the lights and rushed to Kyle's bedside. He was having a nightmare, and screaming and crying loudly. Anthony shook him awake, and held him, muttering "Shhh, Kylie, that's okay, Kylie, wake up, it's just a dream."

Michael turned on one of the lights and the two brothers reassured him, and sat with him till his crying subsided. After sipping some water, he told them that he was feeling better and asked them to turn out the light. In the darkness, he told them he had had a horrible nightmare.

"Are you okay? Should we wake Uncle Tarak?" asked Anthony.

"I'm okay now, don't call Uncle Tarak, I had a weird nightmare, it was scary," whispered Kyle.

"What was it? Tell us about it," said Michael.

"I saw Professor Rabbany and his sons going through some kind of a maze, it was made of steps and stairways, at times they were visible, and at times they were melting into the shadows, I was following them, and their eyes were shining like red hot coals and each time I looked at them, they were looking back at me and laughing, I don't know why I was following them, but they kept staring and I was like a magnet going closer and closer to them, and suddenly they walked into a colorful waterfall which was like a curtain that had a scene painted on it, and the three of them disappeared and

the red eyes came hurtling out at me like a pair of live coals,” said Kyle in a low voice.

“I think you really dislike the Headmaster,” said Michael.

“There was a dark staircase guarded by two fierce dogs, and I also saw some carpets hanging to dry in a large dark room, the room was like a big library,” continued Kyle, trying to remember the nightmare coherently. “Uncle Kavi was screaming, and the Professor was running away with some boxes, waving a sword, I can’t remember clearly, it was all very confusing,” said Kyle.

“I think you’ve been thinking about Uncle Tarak’s story just before sleeping, which explains, now try and get back to sleep, tomorrow Robin will show us some new-born pups, and Uncle Tarak will take us out for lunch, and we’ll see if we can buy a gift for Anne, it’s her birthday tomorrow,” said Michael.

“Yes, smallie, don’t think of anything else now, except tiny new-born puppies, and try and get some sleep,” advised Anthony.

Kyle nodded, and lay silently in bed, trying to think of puppies. But his thoughts kept straying to the images from his dream. Anthony and Michael were awake as well, but nobody talked, each of them was lost in his own thoughts.

They heard a car start up; it was unusual for anyone to go out at this hour, thought Anthony. He went over to the window and looked out. Michael joined him and both of them saw Professor Rabbany get out of the car and open the back doors. Two large dogs got in. The Professor then got back into the driver’s seat and drove away.

“Wow! German shepherds! I didn’t know the Professor had pets,” exclaimed Michael.

“Me neither,” replied Anthony.

“Must be some emergency,” said Michael. “I wonder why his sons didn’t go with him.”

They were about to turn back and climb into bed when they saw a

slim, short person furtively slip into the school building. They drew back, not wishing to be spotted.

"That's strange, who on earth would want to go inside at this hour?" wondered Anthony.

Kyle joined them at the window. "Don't let anyone see you there, move back, Kylie," said Michael, pulling him back.

"Maybe it's a robber, Uncle Kavi said that the Headmaster has a lot of personal treasures, maybe it's a thief trying to lay his hands on them," said Anthony.

Anthony and Michael looked at each other and an imperceptible signal passed between them. They grinned. Kyle looked at them, confused. "Will you stay here all by yourself for a while, smallie?" asked Anthony. "Mikey and I are going out."

"No way, I know what you want to do! Both of you want to see if you can nab the thief! I'm coming too, and if you're not taking me, I'm going to wake Uncle Tarak right now!" said Kyle with determination.

"C'mon then, but swear to stay quiet as a mouse," warned Michael.

Kyle nodded. They slipped on their shoes and quietly left the room. "Are you afraid?" Anthony asked Kyle softly, holding his hand.

"No," he whispered back.

They made their way downstairs and quietly, very carefully, they moved back the bolts to open the door that led outside. The bolts slid back without a sound. After making sure no one was watching them, they all raced across the garden and made a dash for the school building. They could see lights in some of the upper rooms.

"I bet the lights are on in the Professor's rooms, he's gone out with his dogs, but his sons must be up there fast asleep," Michael conjectured.

“We’ll have to be careful. Percy and Harold aren’t exactly friendly. I hope we don’t bump into them, they might think we are robbers,” said Anthony in a low voice. “We have to see where the thief has gone. Come on!” he whispered.

Inside the building, it was difficult to see anything, not even silhouettes.

“Close your eyes tight for a half a minute, then open them, your eyes will get adjusted to the darkness and you will be able to see better,” instructed Anthony in a whisper. Michael and Kyle did as directed and were actually able to see a little better as they walked into the dark, gloomy school building.

Careful not to make a sound, the three of them quietly dashed upstairs. They could just about manage to see the outline of the staircase ahead of them and quietly went up, holding the banister for support, climbing two steps at a time. At the landing, they looked around, trying to get their bearings and figure out what lay ahead. They had come here with James and the others.

“I think Robin had pointed in that direction when he said this place was out of bounds,” Anthony said in a low tone.

“Yes, and over here we saw that girl carrying a basket, I think her name was Julie,” whispered Michael.

“Shhhh! We must avoid talking unless absolutely necessary! Come on, follow me!” Anthony led them forward.

“If we’re caught, we’ll say we saw someone enter the building and suspecting it might be a thief, we came to investigate, which is the truth,” said Anthony. Being the eldest, he assumed charge. “We’ll try and nab the thief and we’ll also see why the Headmaster doesn’t let anyone in here. I wonder what secrets this room contains,” he whispered.

They slowly inched their way forward in the dark, holding on to each other. When they reached Professor Rabbany’s rooms, there was a faint light visible through the gap between the door and the floor. The three of them stood at the door, with their ears pressed

against the wood. There was no sound from within.

“Hopefully Percy and Harold are fast asleep, said Michael, “let’s get inside but we’ll have to stay away from the windows,” he added. Emboldened, they nodded to one another and very cautiously, they tried the handle. The door was unlocked. Taking infinite care, they pushed it little by little, and peeped in. There was nobody around. They slipped in and closed the door behind them.

They had entered a large living room that looked more like a museum than a private apartment. The walls were covered with pictures, paintings, plaques, framed photographs, tapestries, many beautiful curios, objets d’art, mirrors, and antiques. All around the room were strewn more curios, artifacts, clocks, vases, porcelain figures, and stuffed animals and birds. A piano stood in a corner of the room. An elegant stool upholstered in fine brocade stood before it. A beautiful beaded curtain was flanked by two enormous Chinese blue pottery vases. There stood a beautiful Greek urn between the sofas.

Doors led from this room to other rooms. The boys peeked into a tiny kitchenette and a dining room. Remnants of a meal still lay on the table. A few doggie bowls lay on the floor, two of them containing water. One of the bedrooms looked like a boys’ room, but Percy and Harold were nowhere to be seen. There was a writing desk, with a computer and a laptop. The room had some of the most expensive gadgets the boys had ever seen in one place. Anthony hissed a warning. “We don’t want to be caught here, let’s just look around and leave fast.”

“All these antiques here must be worth a fortune, Uncle Kavi said the Professor’s a collector as well,” said Michael “I wonder what kinds of treasures he has amassed.”

“Keep your ears open to the sound of the Professor’s car,” alerted Anthony.

The Professor had left the lights on and the three boys sneaked a quick look in all of them. In the study, lining the walls, were books. Although well-stacked with reading material, it hardly looked in-

viting. The chairs were high-backed and looked uncomfortable and Kyle whispered that he would never feel like sitting there and reading anything.

The last room they entered was evidently the Headmaster's room. Right in the middle was a huge bed, and all around, except for the window, were huge heavy cupboards. Anthony tried to open them but most of them were locked. Only one was unlocked and it contained the Headmaster's clothes and personal articles.

"I don't think there are clothes in the other cupboards, he must have kept all his treasures locked up in there," surmised Michael. "Boy, I'd give anything to have a glance at them."

They went back to the living room and fingered some of the objects. Michael gingerly touched the beads of the curtain. They formed an intricate Arabesque pattern.

"Mikey, just look out of the window and check if the Professor's car has come back, we don't want him seeing us here if he suddenly returns."

Michael pulled back the beaded curtain but instead of seeing a window, he saw a tapestry of the Indian countryside. It had beautifully woven scenery - green fields, cows grazing on the grass, a couple of boys playing on the hill with their dogs, a river, and a waterfall.

"There's no window here," he said, turning back to Anthony and Kyle. Anthony was holding up an exquisite Fabergé egg. Kyle stood there frozen, his mouth was open, and he was staring fixedly at the tapestry on the wall.

"Kylie, Kylie, what is it?" asked Michael in an urgent whisper, trying to break him out of his stupor.

Anthony shook him gently. Kylie, still wide-eyed, whispered "I saw that in my dream, I told you I was following the Professor and his sons, and they walked into that waterfall in that scenery, it's the same picture I saw in my dream, and they disappeared behind that waterfall, and their eyes turned into red-hot coals...."

"Are you sure?" asked Anthony, a little worried.

"I'm certain that's the same picture I saw, same green fields, same hills, same waterfall," replied Kyle with certainty. Anthony felt nervous and thought it was better if they left. "Should we leave?" he asked Michael. Michael nodded. "C'mon, let's go back," he said.

"Yes," said Michael, accidentally knocking down a large papier-mâché ashtray. It overturned and a bunch of keys fell to the carpet. He picked up the bunch and put it in the ashtray which he then positioned back on the table.

"Keys! Could those be the keys to the Professor's cupboards?" wondered Anthony aloud.

"There's only one way to find out," grinned Michael, feeling suddenly adventurous.

They went back to the Professor's room and quickly tried opening the cupboards. They selected one key and checked if it opened any of the cupboards, and to their joy, it did. The boys were excited. They quickly opened it and took a hurried look at its contents. There were several stamp albums and numerous boxes filled with old coins and notes, similar to what their uncle Kavi had shown them. A dozen antique clocks sat upon the top shelf.

They closed the cupboard and proceeded with the next key. It opened another cupboard which had neatly labeled boxes. 'Egyptian artifacts' said one. 'Mughal miniatures' said another. 'Chinese Jade' said a third. 'Antique Buttons' said a fourth. "Watches" said a fifth. They closed this cupboard and opened the next.

It was filled with transparent boxes containing neatly rolled tapestries. There were at least two dozen colorfully embroidered and woven fabrics that looked antique and valuable.

The next cupboard contained a lot of beautiful objects that were neatly arranged on custom-made shelves, golden goblets, silver urns, animal figures sculpted from metal and studded with precious stones, a small leopard that seemed to be made entirely of gold and rubies, and many more.

"Hey, look, this silver shield is similar to the one Uncle Kavi has," said Anthony.

"You're right, it's almost exactly like that one," said Michael, examining it.

Kyle, being the shortest of the three spotted something on one of the lower shelves. "Do you see what I see?" he whispered. Anthony and Michael bent to have a better look. They saw among various objects, a familiar bronze bracelet and two platinum amulets.

"This is unbelievable, something's not right here," said Anthony. "Mikey, time check, how long have we been here?" he asked.

"Twenty minutes," said Michael, looking at a clock.

"One of us will have to look out for the Professor's car, Kylie, go stand at a window," he said, taking Kyle to a window and stationing him behind a heavy curtain so that his silhouette didn't show up against the light in case someone looked up. "Warn us if you see a car drive up," he told him.

Michael and Anthony crouched down before the open cupboard. "If I am not mistaken, and if Uncle Tarak's story is to be believed, we should find something here," said Anthony, barely able to contain the excitement in his voice.

"What about that one there?" said Michael, pointing to the cupboard that they had not yet opened.

"Let's go through all this first," replied Anthony, peering behind some jars, careful not to move anything. They saw a long wooden box on the bottom shelf. Very carefully, they lifted the lid and stole a look inside. They gasped.

"I just don't believe this," they whispered. Kyle ran towards them, curious to know what had caught their attention.

Inside the box, nestling against yellow satin, rested the most beautiful thing they had ever set their eyes on. It was a long sword made of pure gold. It shone in the semi-darkness, the precious yellow metal reflecting the dim light in the room. The boys caught their

breath and stared at it in wonder.

“Wow! That’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen!” said Anthony.

“Awesome, just awesome,” said Michael reverently.

“Can I pick it up and hold it?” asked Kyle.

“Just for a moment,” said Anthony. They gingerly lifted it out and held it respectfully in their hands. It was remarkable and awe-inspiring.

They had been so intently staring at the sword that none of them heard the sound of the Professor’s car coming to a stop.

“Let’s go, better not push our luck,” said Anthony, taking the golden sword from his brothers and placing it back in the box. He closed it, and making sure the rest of the objects were undisturbed, he closed the cupboard and locked it. They decided not to check the last cupboard, there was no time, and it would be full of many more fantastic treasures, anyway.

“Do you think the golden sword is a magic sword?” asked Kyle.

“Don’t be silly, you’ll start believing all those silly stories that Uncle Tarak keeps telling us, of swords and shields with magic powers, of airplanes turning into birds,” rebuked Michael.

Anthony led them out of the room and placed the bunch of keys back into the ashtray. As they opened the door, they heard the sound of heavy footsteps on the wooden staircase. Anthony promptly shut the door and retraced his steps. He pushed them back into the room “Quick, let’s hide, remember, not a sound.”

The three of them darted towards the piano where it was darker and crouched behind it. The footsteps came closer. The door opened and Professor Rabbany entered the room. They knew they couldn’t afford to be caught now. They held their breath.

“Come on, time to go home now,” said the Professor. They heard scuffling and mild growling. They presumed it must be the two dogs that the Professor took with him in the car. They were too frightened to breathe, if the dogs smelt them, they would start barking and their hiding place would be revealed.

“Harold, Percy, good boys, now come to Daddy,” said the Professor again.

Anthony, Michael and Kyle stiffened. The Professor’s sons were back too. From their hiding place, they heard the sound of something move and rattle softly. It was the beaded curtain. The Professor was whistling softly. “Come on, Percy, come on, Harold, come on boys, go!” he repeated. He then made some petting sounds. The boys were confused, they heard the dogs panting but they couldn’t hear Harold or Percy - the Professor’s sons seemed to be dumb.

Then the strangest of things happened, so fast and so briskly that the three of them were later unsure of what exactly happened.

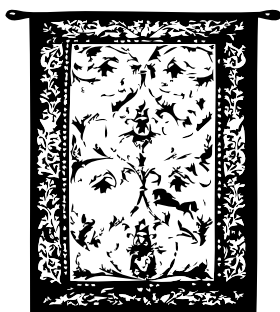
There was a loud swooshing sound and the Professor said “Come to Daddy, boys.” This was followed by another strange sound, a whirling. It was so loud that the boys peeked from behind the piano. They saw the Professor standing before the tapestry. He had moved aside the curtain and he now stood before the beautifully woven scene. “Come now, Harry, Percy,” he said one last time and his eyes started glowing. A red beam of light shone from his eyes right at the dogs. They meekly got up, wagged their tails, jumped into the scenery and became part of the drawing. They merged into the tapestry as though they had always been there. There was no sign of the Professor’s sons in the room.

The Professor then swiftly pulled back the curtain, picked up the bunch of keys from the ashtray, went to his own room and closed the door shut.

The three boys sat immobilized in terror. Anthony pulled himself together and said “Let’s get out of here.” They raced towards the door, opened it, shot out into the corridor, and ran down the stairs

at top speed without bothering to close the door behind them.

A slim, short person slipped out of the shadows, gently closed the door and melted into the darkness.



CHAPTER TEN

TARAK GROWS UP

The three of them ran like they had never run before. Kyle's legs shook, but he went on, half pulled, and half dragged by Anthony and Michael. They raced across the ground like their life depended on it, and reached the door that they had left ajar. Mercifully, they had been gone not more than thirty minutes and their absence hadn't been noticed.

Hurriedly they unlocked the door and sprinted upstairs to their room. Once inside, they fell on their beds and lay panting. Anthony and Michael were frightened by the unnatural spectacle that they had seen, but tried not to show it. Kyle was plainly traumatized. He had a glazed look and was breathing fast. They tried to pacify him but were unable to calm him. They decided to wake Tarak.

Michael went to his room and woke him. "Uncle Tarak, wake up, it's Kylie, he's frightened, come and talk to him, we saw some very spooky things," blabbered Michael.

Tarak came to their room at once, picked up Kyle, set him on his lap and rocked him, gently murmuring "Shhh, Kylie baba, it's okay, Uncle Tarak is here, don't worry, nothing will happen."

Anthony and Michael told him bits of all that had happened, but they were edgy, so whatever they said sounded illogical and incoherent.

Kyle slowly calmed down and sipped some water that Tarak offered. Tarak encouraged him to talk and to relate all that had happened.

Little by little, they told him whatever had happened that night, beginning with Kyle's nightmare, Professor Rabbany driving off with two large dogs, someone sneaking into the school building, their presumption that it might be a thief, their decision to pursue and nab the thief, and their discovery of the Headmaster's private quarters.

They told him how they had been too frightened to enter but had been curious as well, and how they had seen all the treasures in the Professor's cupboards, which they had managed to open.

"You won't believe it, Uncle Tarak, the Professor has amulets and the silver shield and the bronze bracelet exactly like the ones Uncle Kavi showed us, and Uncle Tarak, you won't believe it when we tell you what else we saw, you should've seen it too, it was the most beautiful object we've ever laid our eyes on, just take a guess, Uncle Tarak," they went on excitedly.

Tarak smiled. "Now how can an old man who's peacefully sleeping in bed tell you what you have seen someplace?"

"It was a golden sword," whispered Kyle.

"Are you sure, baba?" Tarak frowned.

Kyle nodded. So did the others. Tarak whistled softly.

"The same sword as in the Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam story," said Kyle. "Do you think they have magical powers, all the amulets and the sword and the shield and the bracelet?"

Tarak didn't reply.

"Don't be carried away by a story, it was just a story, wasn't it, Uncle Kyle?" asked Anthony.

“It’s a story based on legend and folklore. When I was in the army and my unit was posted at Leh and Ladakh, we lit bonfires at night and the locals sang songs and related stories,” said Tarak.

“Wow! So it could be true!” Kyle exclaimed.

Tarak shrugged his shoulders and said nothing.

“But the tapestry in the Professor’s room is spooky, that one definitely has some magical powers,” said Michael. “I’d never have believed it, if we hadn’t seen it with our own eyes.”

They then told him how they had heard the Professor return to the room and how they had hidden behind the piano, how the Professor had called out to Harold and Percy to follow him and how the dogs had jumped through the tapestry and taken their place in the scenery.

“His sons were nowhere, the dogs answered to the names Harold and Percy, his sons were not fast asleep, his sons did not go out with him in the car, they did not return with him, the dogs went out with him, so where are they?” said Anthony.

“Unless...” said Tarak.

“Unless what?” asked Anthony. Then his eyes opened wide. “Do you mean to say that the Professor’s ‘sons’ are really these dogs? Phew!” he said, sinking to the floor.

“He must have amassed a lot of special powers – he must have many more objects and artifacts with magical properties in order to be able to do all that....” Michael’s voice trailed off.

“Wow! Some real magical powers, like we see in movies,” said Kyle.

“Only, this is not a movie, this is for real, and here magical powers can be dangerous,” said Anthony. “We’ll have to be really careful.” “What do you mean ‘we’ll have to be really careful?’ What are you planning to do, young man?” asked Tarak.

“Oh, Uncle Tarak, we’ll have to check if those objects have any special powers.”

“As far as I can see, one platinum amulet is still missing, so even if the rest of them are magical, the magic won’t show up unless they are all together,” Tarak reminded him.

“Aww, I forgot all about that,” said Anthony, disappointed.

“I’ve never liked Professor Barnaby from the day we’ve met him,” said Kyle.

Michael was about to say something when he stopped. He was staring in space at a point near the floor, frowning. His brow was wrinkled in pure concentration. Suddenly he asked for some paper. Anthony opened his suitcase and from a notebook, he tore out a sheet of paper and handed it to his brother, along with a pencil. Nobody said anything. Michael scribbled some words and said “Anagram.”

The others looked at him. “Barnaby and Rabbany are anagrams,” he said simply.

“You’re right!” exclaimed Anthony. He wrote Barnaby and showed Kyle that if the letters were rearranged, they could spell Rabbany.

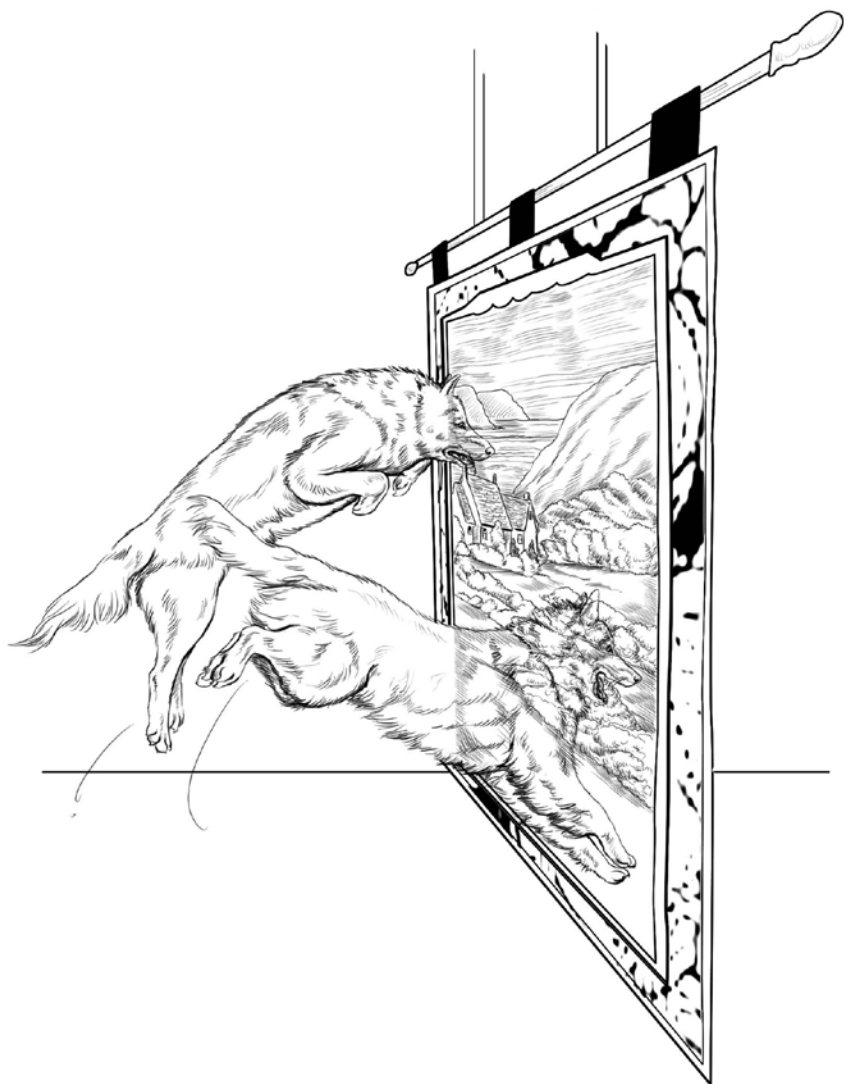
Tarak was impressed with Michael’s discovery. His eyes shone. He smiled and said “Well done, Mikey baba, good thinking.”

“What’s an anagram?” asked Kyle, not quite able to understand.

“See this,” said Anthony, “B-A-R-N-A-B-Y becomes R-A-B-B-A-N-Y, the way a word like T-E-A-M can read M-E-A-T or even M-A-T-E, so the words ‘team,’ ‘meat’ and ‘mate’ are anagrams. Get it?” he asked Kyle.

Kyle nodded. “You forgot ‘tame,’ even that’s an anagram of ‘team,’” he said, staring at the paper. “So what would it mean, if their names are written using the same alphabets?” Kyle looked at his brothers for an explanation.

“It means that Rabbany is a descendent of Captain Barnaby and



knows all about the powerful weapons. He must have corrupted his original name to Rabbany so that nobody associates him with Captain Barnaby. I'm sure he wants to collect all the pieces and use the power. We'll have to be really careful. Professor Barnaby is very powerful, and if he has all the artifacts, the entire world can be in danger," summarized Michael.

"Anyway, you go back to sleep now. I'll stay here with you tonight. Kylie's bed has some room to accommodate an old man?" Tarak asked.

Kyle grinned. Michael fetched his pillows and they settled in for the night. Tarak didn't allow them to talk, and before long, they were fast asleep. Only Tarak lay awake in the dark, his thoughts going back to the folklore of the Himalayas. He wondered if he should call Amit and tell him what the boys had seen, but his nephew wouldn't believe him, he'd think it was yet another of Tarak's fabricated stories. Moreover, even Kavi wouldn't believe it. Tarak sighed.

Tarak's mind went back to the moment when he had first heard the story of the sadhus and the three boys Chaitanya, Narendra and Uttam. He wondered if his own grand-nephews would be fulfilling some strange prophecy. He thought of the instance when his own powers of clairvoyance had alienated him from his own family.

As a child, Tarak had always been interested in astrology, numerology and palmistry. He had developed a powerful sense of prediction, based on his knowledge and very acute instinct. By the time he was a teenager he could read a person's face and predict his future. In the village, people begged him to read their fortune, and he obliged. People were happy so long as they heard good things, but Tarak was not diplomatic, and when he told them about impending misfortunes, folks didn't like it and resented him. They thought he was the devil incarnate.

His own parents were worried about his future since he didn't seem to be particularly fond of studying, and spent his time reading books on astrology and parapsychology, that branch of psychology that deals with the investigation of the so-called psychic phenomena such as clairvoyance, extrasensory perception, telepathy, and

the like. When his sister's marriage was fixed to an eligible young man from a good family, he told his parents to cancel the wedding — Tarak said she would be widowed within a month if she married this man. His mother was so upset that she refused to talk to Tarak.

It so happened that his brother-in-law was traveling to the city by train, the train had a head-on collision with a goods train and he was among the several killed. His sister was indeed widowed and his mother accused him of having a black tongue. She didn't speak to him ever again. Unable to bear the rejection, Tarak left home and joined the army. When he was entitled for leave, he went everywhere except to his village. He never felt like going home to an atmosphere of hostility.

His mother never came to terms with his strange ways and always treated him like the black sheep of the family. Tarak didn't get married or settle down the way his brother Tarun did. He remained close to Tarun, and doted on his nephews Amit and Kavi when they were young. Now he willingly played babysitter to Amit's three sons.

At daybreak, Tarak was still awake, his arm around Kyle, a smile around his lips, ready to face any challenge that life offered.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

MEAT PIES AND MYSTERY

The boys slept till noon. Tarak didn't wake them but let them sleep. In the dining room downstairs, James asked if anything was the matter, and Tarak told him that all of them had slept late, he had been telling them stories. Tarak met Kavi and Jenny and told them he'd be taking the boys out for lunch and shopping for some souvenirs. Jenny asked him to tell the children that she'd take them to the library later if they liked.

"Where's Professor Rabbany and his sons?" asked Tarak at the breakfast table.

"The Professor said that the boys left last night to spend a few days with their aunt in London," said Kavi, helping himself to some coffee.

"And the Professor himself?" asked Tarak.

"Oh, he must be up in his apartment, working," replied Kavi.

"Tony, Mikey and Kylie said they would like to come with us to see some new-born pups," said Robin and Samantha.

"They are quite adorable and so tiny," said Anne. Tarak told her they would definitely go and see them, perhaps after lunch.

When the boys stirred, Tarak asked them to be ready in thirty minutes so that they could go out for lunch.

“Where will you be taking us?” asked Kyle.

“To the local restaurants, baba, for some fish-and-chips or shepherd’s pie, or whatever you fancy,” replied Tarak.

Kyle asked if Anne, Samantha and Robin could go with them too. Tarak said he didn’t mind. Then Anthony reminded them that they had to pick up a birthday present for Anne, and moreover, they wouldn’t be able to discuss the Headmaster and his mysterious activities before anyone else.

They borrowed bicycles and rode to the town, enjoying the weather and looking at the local sights. They came across an Indian restaurant, an Italian and a Chinese one, and even a McDonald’s, but the boys shook their heads and they finally went to one of the local restaurants with a storybook name ‘The Golden Goose.’ They decided to eat fish-and-chips, meat pies, shepherd’s pie and strawberry ice cream.

Later they browsed some gift shops for Anne’s present. Michael suggested a goldfish in a glass bowl, but then they remembered that the girls would soon be going home, so instead they bought a picture frame for Anne, a colorful pillow for Samantha, a book on dogs and pups for Robin, and a box of chocolates for their aunt.

When they returned to Green Meadows, they immediately went looking for Anne. They found her in the playground, swinging in the shade. She was delighted at her gift and thanked them profusely. Samantha and Robin were particularly pleased because they hadn’t expected any presents.

They met Jenny near the garages and gave her the box of chocolates. She was happy too and opened it there and then, passing it around for everyone to enjoy. Anne was given an extra handful, being the birthday girl. Jenny reminded them that they could borrow books from the school library. She asked them to meet her in front of the school building in an hour.

That gave them sufficient time to go and have a look at the pups. The gardener's spaniel Cookie had a litter of five pups in the shed. They saw Cookie resting in the shade, her pups nestling against her. As they approached, she growled. Robin asked them to wait. Cookie was used to Robin and she wagged her tail and came up to him, allowing him to pet her. She was suspicious of the others and emitted a low growl when she saw them come near.

"Uh-oh, I don't think she likes strangers," said Kyle.

"Just wait there a moment, will you?" said Robin. "Cookie thinks you're here to harm her babies, just back off while I take her outside. You can then go have a quick look at her pups."

They pretended to walk away. Cookie was nervous but allowed Robin to tickle her and pat her and she followed him outside, wagging her tail. He drew out a packet of biscuits and let her sniff at one. He led her outside behind the shed where he fed her the biscuits one by one. She was distracted and didn't notice the rest of them quietly slipping into the shed. The pups lay in a large box lined with an old blanket. Their eyes were closed and they looked only a little bigger than mice. They lay in a heap one atop the other, and one of them made a soft sound that was more like mewling than barking.

"Wow! They are so cute!" whispered Kyle. "Can I pick one up?"

"It would be better not to, they are too young, no more than a week old," replied Michael.

They crouched on the ground and kept staring at the little pups, fascinated. Samantha said she could go on looking at them forever. Anne said they'd be even more adorable a few weeks later, and when the school reopened after the holidays, many more children would be coming by to have a look and play with them.

They heard Robin's voice as he spoke to Cookie. "So, girl, do you want more bikkies? Okay, I'll get you some tomorrow. Do you want to go back to your pups now? You do, don't you? Good girl, so let's go, Cookie wants to go back to her pups now, Cookie is coming with me back to the shed now, Cookie is a good girl."

Cookie finished her bikkies,” his voice grew louder. “Cookie is such-hhhh a pet. Cookie is a new mom. Cookie is a brand new mom. Cookie is a super mom,” he went on in a sing-song tone.

The others realized that Robin was signaling them to leave, so they had one last look at the pups and darted out and away. They could hear Robin’s prattle as he led Cookie back to the shed and her pups.

Back in the playground they sat on the grass and went through the pictures in Robin’s new book. The book was a pictorial guide on all breeds of dogs and they tried to pinpoint their favorites. They realized that their aunt would be meeting them in a few minutes, so they got up to go.

“Would you care to accompany us to the library?” asked Anthony. The others declined. They were content lying there on the grass under the shade of the tree.

Jenny had brought along a set of keys, she took them upstairs and opened the library. It had a musty odor, typical of libraries.

“This place smells of books,” declared Kyle and they laughed.

The library was huge, and stocked with thousands of books. Jenny switched on the lights, asked them to go and choose their books, while she waited at the librarian’s desk. “Only make sure you don’t borrow anything from the Reference Section, we don’t lend those,” she advised. Jenny had brought along her own library card against which she would let the boys take a few books. She picked up a book on sports nutrition and began to go through it.

Kyle chose two books that had plenty of pictures, one on cats and one on pets. Anthony picked up two books, *The History of The Olympic Games* and an autobiography of Muhammad Ali. Michael went to the History Section where he found a book that caught his eye: *Myths and Legends of Ancient India* and another one on the Stone Age.

They looked at the Reference Section where there were hundreds

of reference books, mainly encyclopedias, dictionaries and the like. Another cupboard contained books and manuscripts that looked very old. This cupboard was locked, but through the glass doors they could read some of the titles. The pages of these books had yellowed with age.

They went up to their aunt who was engrossed in the book she was reading. Kyle sat next to her, going through the pictures in the books that he had selected.

“Could we have the key to the locked cupboard, Aunt Jenny? I want to quickly read the titles of some of those old books,” said Michael.

“All right, but remember, some of the books in that cupboard need to be restored, and some of the really fragile ones might have to be photocopied and stored as CDs. You’ll be careful, won’t you?” she asked, handing over the keys.

“Don’t worry, Aunt Jenny, we promise to be careful,” said Anthony and Michael, taking the keys and going towards the cupboard. They opened it and looked at some of the books. Most of them were really old, and the paper was brittle. They refrained from handling them, but had a cursory look at their titles.

Bound in cloth was a long hand-written diary that was rolled up carefully. The boys cautiously opened the pages to read a few entries. The ink was faded in most places and they read the words “battle,” “across the hills,” and “Cochin.” When they read the word “purge” they were suddenly alert. They leafed through the pages of the manuscript more carefully and tried to decipher the writing. They recognized the words “descendents” and “killed.” The ink was more like a watermark in some places and they strained their eyes to make out the words. “Capture Bammaty,” read Anthony aloud.

“Hey, look again, could that be ‘Captain Barnaby?’” asked Michael, excited.

They looked closely at the writing and realized they were in fact reading the words “Captain Barnaby.” They were exhilarated. They



opened the manuscript to its very first page to check the name of the writer. They could make out the words Lord Killen followed by the date. They read the month as August but the year was indecipherable, they could only make out that it ended in 39. They tried to read further. On most of the pages, the ink had faded so much that the words were barely visible.

They kept turning the pages. "We won't get a chance again, let's make the most of whatever little time we have now," said Anthony.

"Should we ask Aunt Jenny if we can take this diary with us?" wondered Michael.

"Don't even think of it," warned Anthony. "The last thing we want is anyone suspecting anything. If the old Professor hears a word, we're dead ducks. Moreover we aren't sure if we'll find anything at all."

They continued. Towards the last few pages, they found some legible entries that they quickly scanned. "Treasures taken back," "British government" "purges," "caché dans le Prévert" were the phrases they could read.

"What's that?" asked Michael.

"It's French — 'hidden in the Prévert'— Jacques Prévert was a poet - it doesn't make any sense, unless it means hidden in one of Prévert's books," said Anthony.

They scrutinized some more and read the words "medallions" and "gold mohurs" but they felt a chill down their spine when they read the words "magic shield" and "amulets."

"Let's read this page carefully, and quickly, before Aunt Jenny calls us," said Anthony. No sooner did he say the words than they saw Kyle coming in their direction. He saw his brothers bent over the open pages and squatted down alongside.

"What's that?" he asked.

"We're not sure yet, but it could be important. Would you do us a favor, smallie?" asked Anthony. "Can you keep Aunt Jenny occupied for the next few minutes, so that we finish reading these last few pages? It's important. We can't leave till we've finished."

Kyle agreed and ran off towards his aunt. He read the title of the book she was going through, and asked her questions. "Even Dad says eating right is important," he announced.

"Your Dad is a doctor, and he is quite right," replied Jenny.

"He keeps says growing boys should get plenty of exercise and eat a balanced diet. What are proteins and carbohydrates, Aunt Jenny?" asked Kyle innocently. Jenny was only too glad to educate him and proceeded to give him detailed information on the subject, while Anthony and Michael quickly skimmed through the remaining pages.

Certain pages had whole sentences that were completely legible. "Here, read this," said Anthony, his finger moving below fragments of sentences "a total of three platinum amulets and three objects made of gold, silver and bronze' 'sont très puissants,' 'many treasures lost during the purges,' 'sword capable of transporting,' 'bearer of shield is invincible,' 'two amulets lost,' 'je l'ai caché sous le Prévert, and 'careful.'"

"There's Prévert again — 'I've hidden it under the Prévert' — I wonder what it means, he's hidden something under the Prévert book?" Anthony wondered aloud.

"It must be important, that's the only line repeated in a foreign language," observed Michael.

They came to the end of the journal, closed it, rolled it, and carefully put it back. They locked the cupboard and went towards the librarian's desk where they could hear Kyle and Jenny giggling.

"Did you choose your books, boys? Shall we go?" asked Jenny. They nodded.

Anthony asked for a scrap of paper and a pencil, and while Jenny made a record of the books they were borrowing, Anthony quickly jotted down whatever he could remember from the manuscript. Jenny made sure the windows were closed and the lights off before locking the library.

As they went down, they bumped into Julie, the caretaker's daughter. When she saw them, she jumped.

"Hello, Julie, did we startle you?" asked Jenny, patting her on the head.

"No, Miss Jenny, nobody usually comes to this building in the holidays, Mum sent me to collect the laundry from Professor Rabbany's room," she replied.

"Wasn't he there in his room?" asked Jenny, seeing that she wasn't carrying any laundry.

"The door isn't locked from outside, but when I knocked, he didn't reply," she answered.

"Don't worry, it can be done later, maybe the Professor is fast asleep, come along with us for tea, dear, we've planned a birthday cake for Anne," said Jenny and the girl shyly nodded.

Jenny introduced the boys and they tried to strike up a conversation, but Julie was timid and didn't talk much. Anne was surprised and pleased at the fuss everyone made for her birthday. Kavi and Jenny gave her a present, so did some of the other teachers. All of them enjoyed the special rich chocolate cake that had been made for Anne. There was enough for a second round and all the children were happy at the treat.

Tarak entertained them all with a story of a little boy who was so fond of milk that when his parents asked him what he wanted for his birthday, he said he'd like an enormous tank filled to the brim with milk. But being poor, they couldn't comply with his request and Santa Claus conspired with the boy's fairy godmother and on the morning of his birthday there was a gigantic reservoir filled to the brim with cool, sweet, chocolate-flavored milk. The boy was

delighted but didn't know how to reach up. They fetched a ladder but it was too short, so they tied two ladders together and the boy climbed up on the long wobbly ladder, dipped his head and drank all he could. He filled pails of the chocolate milkshake and distributed them to his friends, but there was still a lot more! So he distributed it to the entire town. The level went down, but while reaching down to fill a bucketful, he fell into the tank and they had to extract him with great difficulty and all the neighborhood cats had a good time licking him clean. The children giggled and found Tarak quite charming.

Kavi suggested that Julie stay on until dinner, he sent word to her mother so she wouldn't worry. Julie reluctantly agreed. At first she was withdrawn, but soon she found herself chatting with Kyle who asked her if she'd seen Cookie's pups. She nodded.

"They are simply lovable," she replied.

"Do you like dogs?" Kyle asked, stretching on the grass.

"I love all dogs, but I hate like the Professor's dogs, I find them creepy," she answered.

Suddenly she stiffened, realizing she had revealed something and spoken too soon.

Anthony and Michael, who were walking across towards Kyle, heard her words and quickly looked around to make sure no one else was listening.

"Even we find them creepy and eerie, almost unreal," they said in a low tone.

"Yes, you saw them last night, didn't you?" she whispered back.

"How do you know?" asked Anthony. Then it dawned on him. "Oh, it was you, wasn't it, the slim short figure we saw entering the school building, we mistook you for a robber and followed you, but what were you doing there at that late hour?" he asked.

"I'd dropped my diary up there a few weeks ago and I wanted to

search for it in the Professor's absence. It contains a lot of things I have written about him and his sons and I don't want him reading it and telling Mum. She'd be ashamed of me," Julie was upset as she said this. "I saw him go out, and thought I'd go up to his room and get it."

They saw Robin coming towards them. Anthony quickly whispered to Julie "I'll tell you what, let's walk you back home after dinner and on the way you can tell us more, we don't want anyone else to hear or know." Julie nodded.

While Robin and the others were busy playing, Anthony asked Tarak to walk with him. He summed up the afternoon's findings in the library and Julie's comments as well. He showed Tarak the slip of paper on which he had jotted down what they had read in the old manuscript.

"We'll have to find out who Lord Killen was, and also Prévert," said Tarak. I'll ask Kavi in a roundabout manner. But that nephew of mine has blind trust in the Professor, and I don't like it, he might tell the Professor what I ask, I'll have to be careful. You go and play now, we'll talk later tonight."

Before dinner, Kate called and spoke to the boys. Tarak had asked them to save the adventure stories and relate them later when they met their parents. They spoke to their mother who told them she was in Paris and had had a busy day. They told her they were having a good time, they had made new friends and they had seen newborn pups. Kate felt happy after chatting with them; she told them that their father would also call later. He did, and they spoke to Dr. Bose, and assured him that they were enjoying themselves and were no trouble to anyone.

Tarak asked James if there were any brochures of the school, he wanted to know the school's history. From the school office James brought for Tarak a whole lot of school magazines and a file containing press clippings. Tarak sat down to methodically go through them.

In a few minutes he found what he was looking for and called out

to Anthony. He showed him the brochure that told the school's history — its founder was listed as Lord Killen. Anthony was all excited but Tarak asked him to remain calm and to go away as though nothing of importance had been discussed. James was watching them.

They had dinner which was a lively meal. The star of the evening was Anne and after dinner they sang songs and danced a little. Soon the girls and Robin went up to the dormitory. It was time for Julie to leave, and before Kavi could call James, Anthony and Michael offered to drop her off. Kavi and Jenny agreed.

"I'll go as well," said Kyle, "I want to count the stars in the sky."

"Wait, take a poor old man with you, his numeric ability is not so bad," said Tarak, getting up and joining Kyle.

Kavi smiled at them. "Tell me the total number in the morning. I'm off to my room now. Good night, boys. Good night, Uncle Tarak."

"Good night, Uncle Kavi. Good night, Aunt Jenny. Uncle Kavi, you still have to show us your tapestries," reminded Michael. He smiled and nodded.

They walked outside with Julie and went to the other side of the building from where the main school building couldn't be seen. "Let's sit down here for some time," said Tarak, pointing to a bench. "Now let's hear what everyone has to say."

Julie began. She was glad she had found someone to talk to. She instinctively trusted the boys and told them whatever she knew. The Professor had always lived alone, and nobody knew if he had a family because he never spoke of one. His wife was dead, that's all they knew. He kept to himself and was a collector of antiques. He went for auctions and brought home stuff that he locked away. Some of the things were very valuable, so he got extra furniture made, especially cupboards, in which he locked his riches.

Nobody paid much interest to his pastime until Professor Bose joined the school.

Professor Rabbany appointed Kavi as the head of the history department at Green Meadows. He befriended Kavi and Jenny. Kavi enjoyed the Professor's company, since both of them spent hours admiring each other's treasures. They often went to auctions together and brought back antiques. Professor Bose was the only teacher whom the Headmaster invited up to his rooms, said Jenny. And when Professor Bose went on vacation, he gave the Headmaster his cupboard keys, believing that his treasures would be safe with the Professor.

"They seem to be good friends," observed Michael.

"I thought so too, until I saw the Headmaster replacing some items from Professor Kavi's collection," said Jenny.

"What?" Tarak, Anthony and the others exclaimed loudly.

Julie continued. She said her mother now suffered from arthritis and was unable to climb stairs very often, so she often sent Julie to the Headmaster's rooms to fetch and deliver laundry, or accompany the cleaning lady and wait there till she finished. She was a quiet, unobtrusive girl, so the Headmaster paid no attention to her as she waited quietly while the maid did her work.

On one occasion, when Professor Bose and Miss Jenny were away, and the keys to their cupboard were with the Headmaster, Jenny said she saw him take a silver shield, a brown bangle and two shiny pendants to Professor Kavi's room.

"A bronze bracelet and two platinum amulets," Anthony corrected.

Julie stared at Anthony but continued. She said she somehow got suspicious by the Headmaster's behavior and followed him without him noticing. When he reached Kavi's room, he opened his cupboard, opened some boxes and quietly removed four objects and replaced them with the four that he was carrying. Julie was certain that the Headmaster had swiped them because they must be really

valuable. She didn't know whom to tell, her mother would scold her, saying she read too many mystery books and now her imagination was running wild.

One day two boys joined the school. They were the Professor's sons. This surprised many people because nobody knew that the Professor had children. Percy and Harold studied with the other children but did not use the dormitories like the children of other teachers did. They were quiet, didn't talk much but there was something about them that was unnatural, even others had an uncanny feeling in their presence.

The Headmaster did research in his rooms, and nobody was allowed to disturb him. Often, while the cleaning lady did her work, Julie sat there doodling in her diary, sketching pretty objects or writing down whatever she saw or felt. Her diary was soon filled with sketches of the room and of some of the treasures. It also had an account of her observation of the Headmaster replacing Kavi's treasures, and her suspicions about Percy and Harold.

"That could be dynamite in the Professor's hands, your little diary," said Tarak "No wonder that you are anxious to get it back. Go on," he prodded.

One day, maid finished her work and left, but Julie wanted to complete an unfinished sketch of the Greek urn, so she waited a few minutes, sitting on the ground before the urn. There was a strange swishing sound and she looked up from her vantage point between two sofas. The Headmaster didn't notice her; he presumed she had left with the maid too. She watched transfixed at what happened next. He stood before a beaded curtain and moved it aside, to reveal an embroidered picture. He then called Percy and Harold, they came and stood there before him, he said "Go, boys." His eyes shone bright with a red light, his two sons jumped into the tapestry and were gone! She was so frightened that the diary fell from her hands.

Luckily the Professor didn't hear anything. He stood there for a moment and then removed a whistle from his pocket and whistled softly three times. After this, the strangest of things happened.

As Julie watched, two dogs came bounding out of the picture and stood in the room. "Good boys, good boys, come to Daddy," said the Professor, taking them with him to his room and closing the door. Julie was too frightened by what she had seen, and left the room as fast as she could, leaving her diary behind. It took her several days to recover from what she had observed. She had no friends whom she could confide in, so she told no one. Whenever the Professor went out, she would sneak into his rooms and look for her diary, but as yet she hadn't found it.

After she finished, they all sat in silence for a while. Tarak asked her to meet them the next day. He said he would take the children out for lunch again and she could accompany them so that they could talk some more. They dropped her home, returned to their rooms, and continued discussing the day's events.

"I might have to go to the library again to look at books by Jacques Prévert," said Anthony "I'm a little unsure if I'm on the right track because Prévert was a 20th century poet as far as I know, so how could the school's founder mention his name in the early 19th century? I'll have to check again. Maybe there's another famous Prévert?"

"You could ask Uncle Kavi permission to use the internet, Aunt Jenny did mention that he kept using the net to buy and sell antiques on eBay," said Michael.

"That's brilliant, Mikey, let's see if we can go right now, I don't think Uncle Kavi sleeps so early," said Anthony, looking towards Tarak for permission.

"Go ahead, take Mikey with you, he'll keep Kavi busy while you do your online research. Good luck. And now, you and me, baba, will play a game," said Tarak, turning to Kyle.

The boys raced off to Kavi's room and asked him if they could use his computer to check their mails. "Sure," said Kavi, taking them towards his desk. Michael engaged his uncle in conversation, asking him about the tapestries that he had collected. Kavi said he had succeeded in acquiring a few intricate tapestries related to British India, some of these were priceless. collectors would give an arm

and a leg to complete the whole set.

“Wait, I’ll show them to you right now,” he said to his favorite nephew.

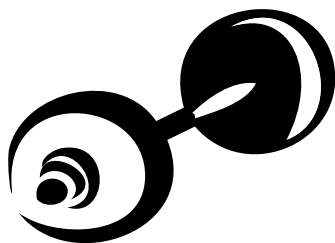
While Kavi proceeded to open his cupboard and fetch out the rolls, Anthony quickly started the computer and ran a search on Prévert. As he had suspected, Jacques Prévert was a 20th century poet who lived from 1900 to 1977. There was no other notable Prévert that he found.

Anthony felt he had arrived at a dead end. “Prévert, Prévert, Prévert, Pré-vert,” the words ran through his head. “Caché dans le Pré-vert.”

He stared at the screen for a long time, not aware that Kavi was showing Michael some priceless tapestries. Michael, on the other hand, was so engrossed in admiring them that he forgot all about Anthony.

Anthony drummed his fingers. “‘Prévert, Prévert,’ who could you be?” he wondered. “‘Pré-vert, Pré-vert,’ what could you be?”

He looked again at the word, “vert” is green, he knew. Could “Pré” mean something, he asked himself. “Pre-green?” “Before green?” It made little sense. He checked a bilingual dictionary site, keyed in the words Pré vert and requested a French-to-English translation. A second later, when he saw the screen, he almost fell out of his chair.



CHAPTER TWELVE

EXERCISING INTELLIGENCE

“P ré vert” meant “green meadow.” “Caché dans le pré vert,” deliberately written as a proper noun “Prévert” to mislead, or to protect.

Anthony’s heart raced and his face flushed. He quickly shut down the computer and told his uncle he had finished. To avoid attracting any suspicion, he sat there with Kavi and Michael, admiring the tapestries, but his mind was elsewhere. Jenny gave them a packet of potato chips and cookies, in case they needed a midnight snack. Michael said there were plenty of things for them to eat, but Jenny told him to take some more, nevertheless.

They said goodnight and left. Anthony was too excited to speak. Michael decided against asking him questions, he thought they should all hear it together. When Tarak saw them, he arched an eyebrow in question.

Anthony locked the door and sat on his bed. “Mystery solved,” he said, smiling.

He told them how the puzzling words had nothing to do with the French poet Prévert, and what the word meant when the syllables were separated was “green meadow.”

“Green meadow?” asked Kyle, “you mean Green Meadows, this school? Wow!”

Tarak sat up alert too. They realized that they had stumbled upon an important discovery. They sat silent for a few minutes, digesting the importance of their breakthrough. During the purges, Lord Killen who had been a British officer had got possession of an amulet with special powers, and he had hidden it somewhere in the school that he had later founded. Lord Killen's descriptions and accounts matched the fable that Tarak had heard in the mountains of Ladakh, and here they were, on the brink of something important. The boys were excited, but Tarak was a little afraid for them.

"Professor Rabbany is a very powerful man," he warned them. "He has a lot of power, we know he can change dogs to boys and boys to dogs and freeze them in tapestries. He probably has in his collection many other artifacts of great power as well. Remember, he stole Kavi's original artifacts too, and now he has all the items from the original set, all except the third amulet which as we have now discovered lies somewhere in the school building."

"If this man gets his hands on the third amulet, do you realize that the entire world will be in danger? The Professor belongs to the old school and wants to restore the old British Empire, expand on it, and lead it, from what I gathered when we met him on the first day here. We'll have to be really careful. We have two options now, we go to the library, get Lord Killen's diary and burn it, or we go all out and search for the missing amulet."

The boys were unanimous in their decision. "We go all out and search for the missing amulet," they said.

"Okay, so tomorrow we meet Julie and ask her more questions, hopefully she will know of possible secret places where something valuable could be hidden. Now go to sleep, tomorrow is going to be a busy day, we can't plan anything, we'll just use our wits and act according to the situation. Good night, no talking, just sleep now, shhhh." said Tarak.

He waited till they got into bed, then quietly went to his own room where he lay awake most of the night. He couldn't decide if he ought to call Amit and inform him about the events and the turn they had taken, nor could he bring himself to tell Kavi about

all that they had discovered. It might create more problems than solve any. Tarak took a decision: he would assume full responsibility for whatever happened that moment on. Having decided that, he slept.

In the morning, the three boys were raring to go, but didn't know where to begin. They had to wait until they met Julie. They trusted no one else whom they could approach and ask awkward questions. Professor Rabbany came down for breakfast that morning. The boys were uncomfortable and were not their usual, talkative selves. Even Tarak was quiet. Anne and Samantha kept up some prattle but the atmosphere was tense.

The boys kept stealing a look at the Headmaster every now and then, trying to figure out if he knew or suspected anything, but they gauged nothing from his demeanor. He asked them what they planned to do during the next few days at Farmborough and they tried to give intelligent replies. Kavi broke the ice saying that soon his brother Amit would be coming down with his wife Kate and they would be taking the children to Venice.

They thought the Professor looked relieved, but couldn't tell for sure. They got a start when he said "Make sure you stay indoors as long as you are here, don't wander off at night, bothering about things that don't concern you."

Michael sat there with his mouth open, but Anthony quickly said "Yes, Sir."

After breakfast, they went cycling around the estate with Robin and the girls. They went and had a peek at Cookie and her pups. Once again, she greeted them by growling so they looked from a distance while Robin fed her some biscuits.

Julie appeared just before noon. Tarak had informed Kavi earlier that he would be taking all the children out for lunch. They went to McDonald's where they had a good time eating "junk food" as Kyle put it. The girls found it very amusing and they kept giggling. Julie was used to them now and was less self-conscious, she chatted easily with the rest of them.

After lunch, Kyle whispered to Tarak asking if he could go over to the bookshop and get Julie a book, he wanted to give her a present, they had picked up gifts for the others the previous day and now Julie was their new friend and he felt like giving her something.

“No problem, baba, go on inside and let her choose. I’m sure Julie will prefer some mystery books.”

At first, Julie wouldn’t consent to Kyle buying her a gift, but later she agreed and right enough, she selected *The World’s Unsolved Mysteries*. She was delighted with the unexpected present and kissed Kyle. Kyle went red in the face with embarrassment and ran out.

The boys wondered when they would be able to talk to Julie, but Tarak seemed unconcerned. They waited till they got back to school. Robin excused himself saying he wanted to go and read, the girls said they would be going home in two days’ time and wanted to pack, so the three of them decided to go up to their own room with Tarak, taking Julie along.

As they were about to enter the building, Julie whispered “Don’t look across at the school building now, the Headmaster is at the window, watching us from behind the curtain. He knows I’m with you, and he’s suspicious, I think.”

They refrained from turning their heads in that direction. “I can feel the Headmaster’s eyes boring into the back of my neck,” said Anthony, in a low tone.

“It’s probably because you know he’s watching, it’s your mind,” replied Tarak.

They reached their room, locked the door and began talking at once. Tarak asked them to calm down, and to brief Julie on what they had discovered. Julie’s eyes grew wider and wider as Anthony related his findings.

“We now know that all the amulets are here, in the school build-

ing. The golden sword, the silver shield, and the bronze bracelet are with the Professor. So are two platinum amulets. All that remains to be found is the third platinum amulet, which we know is in Green Meadows. Somewhere in Green Meadows, but where?" said Tarak.

They looked at Julie. She had screwed up her eyes and was thinking hard. "I'm trying to remember what I've heard about a secret doorway or a tunnel somewhere."

They remained silent while she racked her memory. She shook her head. "When I remember, I'll tell you," she said, turning towards Tarak.

"Don't worry, my girl, but we have a bigger problem ahead. If we do manage to find all the secret doorways and tunnels, and if we do succeed in acquiring the third amulet, we will then have to assemble the entire set in one place, so that the power of the weapons is restored. The weapons are in the Professor's room, locked up, and the Professor is in his room, standing behind a curtain and watching the activities of four young children and an old man," said Tarak.

"And he has a couple of fierce dogs that he can summon anytime," said Kyle.

"That's very encouraging, baba," said Tarak, smiling.

"He has many more powers, once I saw him hold a prism to the light and mutter some words, and suddenly the sky turned dark and a dust storm brewed up, then he chanted something else and the weather was clear." said Julie.

"Uh-oh, he probably has many more powers, and you've been snooping on him good and proper," said Kyle. Julie grinned.

Then Tarak said something that made them think, "We won't be able to snoop around anywhere at night. We can't switch on lights anywhere in the building, we can't use a torch, so whatever we do, we'll have to do it in the daytime. It could be more risky in some

ways, but less risky in others.”

They agreed with him, Tarak was right. They asked Julie if the Professor had any fixed schedules, she shook her head. They decided to go to school building the next morning. After breakfast they would ask Aunt Jenny to let them use the gym and then they’d take it up from there.

Julie said she’d leave, and if she remembered anything, she’d come by to tell them. They all decided to go downstairs since it was approaching teatime. Julie left and the boys stayed close to the playground, waiting for Robin and the others to come down. When they did, they chatted “of ships and shoes and sealing wax and cab-bages and kings, and why the sea is boiling hot and whether pigs have wings,” as Tarak liked to put it, quoting Lewis Carroll in *Alice in Wonderland*.

The Professor didn’t descend; he called for tea to his rooms. Kavi, Jenny, the other teachers, and the rest of them sat around the table and talked. Kyle suddenly surprised everyone by announcing “We came over to the U.K. to escape an alligator.” The others wanted to know more, so he started telling them of how an alligator had come into their garden and into the swimming pool. Luckily, he didn’t say anything else, other than the fact that they drove it off, using sticks and rakes, and making loud noises.

Michael then went on to tell everyone the difference between an alligator and a crocodile, their habitat, and the precautions to take when face-to-face with an alligator. Samantha and Anne were flabbergasted by the whole story and thought they were foolish to live in a place where such dangerous animals lurked. Michael got defensive and explained that gators are usually docile, and this sparked a long discussion on animals.

Tarak went for a walk outside and he saw Julie coming in his direction. As a precautionary measure, he went around the building and waited there and Julie joined him in a few minutes. She told Tarak that she had asked her mother if there were ghosts in the school building, and her mother had laughed, again accusing her of reading too many mystery books. Then Julie had asked her if Green Meadows would have any unsolved mysteries like the schools in

storybooks. Her mother said that she had heard the previous old caretaker talk of a hidden staircase leading to some cellars, but wasn't sure if the old lady was rambling or telling the truth. After much pestering, Julie's mother said that the door to the cellar had been covered up, and that was all that she knew.

Julie told Tarak she ought to leave; the girl was scared that the Professor would disapprove of her friendship with the visitors. She sounded so restless that Tarak allowed her to go.

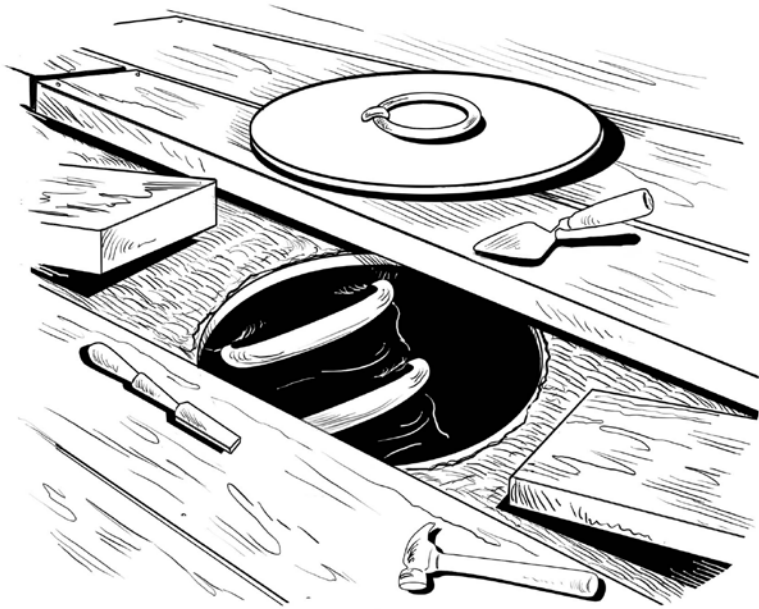
"All right, you have brought some information and we can use it to begin our search tomorrow. Tonight we do nothing. You can go home now, drop by tomorrow morning," Tarak said to Julie.

Amit and Kate called and spoke to the boys who had decided that they would say nothing to alarm their parents. They told them about Anne's birthday and Kavi's treasures and their "junk food" lunch. Amit and Kate were happy that the boys had made new friends and were having fun.

After dinner, they watched television for some time, Then Tarak announced that he was sleepy and was going upstairs to his room. The three boys followed suit and decided to sleep early too. They left without arousing any suspicion and went upstairs to their room, where Tarak told them about his conversation with Julie. The boys were excited, but Tarak warned them to maintain a low profile.

The next day, after breakfast, Anthony asked Jenny if they could use the gym. "I'll be glad to take you, but you've just eaten breakfast, I'll meet you here in an hour," she said.

An hour later, she came by with a bunch of keys, took them to the gym, showed them the exercise equipment, told them what they were not allowed to touch, and asked them to lock the gym and leave when they had finished. They couldn't believe their luck when they saw Jenny keep back the large bunch of keys in a corner and leave. They were the keys to all the closed rooms and had tags saying 'auditorium,' 'library,' 'A/V room,' 'science lab,' 'comp lab,' 'CR1,' 'CR2,' etc.



Tarak was ambling towards the gym as Jenny was leaving. "Let's see if an old man can still pick up some dumbbells and hoist himself up on the parallel bars," he said. She laughed and said that she was sure he could.

Tarak was happy with the ways things had gone so far. Now that they were in the school building, all they had to do was systematically check every door. "I'm sure the door we are looking for is on the ground floor, since the cellar would be connected from this level, so we'll check this level first. Tony, keep guard, if you see James or anyone coming this way, just alert us, send Kylie over or make some noise, I'm going with Mikey," he said, picking up the bunch of keys.

Anthony and Kyle pretended to use the gym equipment, but their mind was elsewhere. They mechanically used the climbing frames, checked out the boxing area, and tested the balance beams, training bars, handspring trainers, circuits, and the horizontal, and parallel and uneven bars. Kyle jumped on the tumbling mats and the exercise trampoline but there was no spring in his step.

Anthony swung on bars while Kyle tried to vault unassisted over the vaulting horse. They were alert, their eyes and ears open, their nerves uptight.

Kyle saw Julie scuttle towards them. She told them she had more information on the original layout of the school building. Anthony quickly sent her down the corridor towards where Tarak and Michael had gone. Julie was off in a flash.

She saw Tarak and Michael in one of the classrooms where Michael was standing guard at the door while Tarak was inside, touching the stone walls and tapping them here and there, looking for hollow spaces behind them. "Nothing here," he declared.

Julie went over to Tarak and told him she had harassed her mother all night, begging her to tell her more about the construction of the school. Tarak saw that her eyes were shining, he asked her to tell

him everything.

“You may as well lock up this room and come to the gym where the others are, Uncle Tarak, may I call you Uncle Tarak?” she asked. He nodded. Tarak was amused at the way she pronounced his name. It sounded more like ‘Uncle Track’. They locked up the classroom and went towards the gym.

“I just saw the Headmaster go out with the dogs,” she said.

“Did he take the car or has he taken them for a walk?” asked Tarak.

“He took the car, which means he might be back just before lunch,” Julie replied. “That gives us an hour and a bit more to investigate.”

In the gym, Anthony and Kyle were waiting. They saw James come over and waved to them. “Quick, everybody, pretend to be using the equipment,” said Tarak, putting the keys where Jenny had left them and walking over to the rowing machines. Julie ran to the ballet bars, Michael swung on the rings.

When James entered the gym, he saw everyone occupied. His eyes missed nothing. “You’re here too, Julie?” he asked.

“Oh, Kylie and Julie are inseparable now, see, even their names rhyme,” said Michael, saving the situation. Everyone laughed.

James was forced to laugh too. He asked them if they would be having lunch in school or going out. Tarak looked at the children and asked them to decide.

“Can we have a picnic lunch in the park that we saw yesterday?” asked Kyle.

“In that case, shall I arrange for a picnic basket to be packed?” asked James.

Tarak said he would take the children to the local market where they could buy some fresh fruits and salad vegetables, and some

cheese and bread and such things as they liked and they would eat in the park. Anthony said he'd go across to James later and borrow a knife and a peeler before leaving.

"Excellent idea, Sir. Enjoy yourselves. The weather's perfect for a picnic," he told Tarak before leaving. He then looked at Julie and said "You make sure you're wearing your ballet shoes if you want to practice at the ballet bars," he told Julie before leaving.

Her face flushed. "I think he can be horrid sometimes," she told the others.

"Don't worry about James; he gets a lot of support from the Professor. The Headmaster uses him as his eyes and ears, I'm sure," said Tarak.

As soon as James was gone, they converged and ask Julie to tell them what her mother had told her.

"Mum was getting annoyed at all the questions that I have been asking her about school lately, but when I pleaded a little bit more, she said she believed that the secret door led from the kitchen to the cellar."

"But the kitchens are in the opposite building," said Michael, crestfallen.

"The kitchens are there now, but the old kitchen wasn't there then," she replied, her blue eyes sparkling.

"So where was the kitchen originally built?" asked Anthony. "It must have been in this old building."

"That is right," said Julie, waiting. There was a smile dancing at the corner of her mouth.

"So where was the old kitchen?" Anthony was getting impatient.

"Mum says the kitchen was destroyed to make way for a common room, and later as the school became more modern, a new com-

mon room was built on the second floor, and a modern gym was built in the place of the old common room.”

The words hit them like a thunderbolt. “You mean here? We’re standing on it?” they asked. Julie nodded.

Tarak was quick to act. “Come on, everyone, let’s get to work, opportunities won’t knock twice. Make a systematic search of this place. One person to always act as lookout. Julie, you keep vigil for now. Boys, divide the room into four quarters, the four of us will thoroughly knock on every board on the floor and the walls to detect a hollow or unusual sound. Let’s begin immediately,” he said, fanning them out. “If anyone comes here, we pretend to exercise.”

They got to work, knocking on every panel in the wall and every board and tile on the ground. They had to be careful they didn’t miss any area, and used skipping ropes as markers. After about thirty minutes, Kyle said his knuckles hurt, but he didn’t stop and kept knocking. Suddenly Michael said “Eureka!” All of them except Julie ran towards him. He lay on the floor, tapping the ground hard. Tarak tapped to check and make sure and so did Anthony and Kyle. They were jubilant. Tarak reminded them that it wasn’t time to celebrate yet.

They had to plan their escape route first. Tarak asked them to fetch some mats and keep them handy. “Later drag the exercise bikes over here and place them over the mats. We will be removing some floor boards and will have to cover our tracks.”

Julie said there was gardening equipment in the shed and she could fetch some tools. Tarak said that was a great idea, but the tools would have to be small so that they could be concealed. He asked her to get a chisel, a small hammer and maybe a trowel as well if she should see one. She said she’d manage, she was wearing a loose shirt over jeans and she would easily be able to tuck the tools in the waistband.

Tarak gauged the size of the hollow, and presumed it was at least two feet wide. Julie was back in the twinkling of an eye, and produced the tools. “Good girl,” said Tarak, taking the hammer and chisel and starting to work.

“Tony, you give me a hand here! Mikey, Kiley, go pretend to exercise near the windows where people can see you.”

Tarak and Anthony very carefully removed some boards with the help of the chisel and trowel. The edges were damaged but that couldn't be avoided. They continued working until they saw wooden planks underneath. They forced out the planks as well and finally they saw a circular shape. It was an iron trapdoor with a handle in its center. They were excited but as Tarak had said earlier, it was too soon to celebrate.

“I need more help now, Mikey, you come here and give us a hand,” said Tarak.

There was a lot of dust and they sneezed. Julie said if they sprinkled some water, the dust would settle. Tarak told her she was smart and ought to join the army. She grinned, walking over to the washrooms to get a mug of water. She sprinkled some over the trapdoor and waited. The dust soon settled.

“I see Robin,” said Kyle. The others stiffened and made to rise. Then Kyle said “but he's not coming this way, you can continue.”

It took three of them to grasp the handle and heave with all their might, and on the third attempt they managed to pull the door open. They could see nothing except a dark hole. Anthony reminded them to do what Tarak had taught him “Close your eyes tight for a minute until they get used to the darkness, then look.”

They saw iron rungs down one side but could not gauge how long the passage stretched. Tarak was thoughtful. “We can't enter right away, the place has been shut too long, it needs to be aired for a while,” he said to Michael who was waiting to descend. “One can die from lack of oxygen. And if anyone is going down, it is me.”

The boys began to protest but he raised a hand. “If I am down and someone comes along, pile some exercise mats over the hole, making sure to leave air vents. Then pretend to play, make a mat mountain or something over the hole so that no one suspects anything,

got it?" he asked. They nodded. "I'll keep tapping three times if all is well, and four times if there's danger."

After a few minutes, Tarak took a deep breath and descended. He gingerly placed one foot on the rung, tested it before putting his weight on it. He repeated this for the next rung and the next. When his head was about to disappear below ground level, he took a large lungful of air, held his breath, made a thumbs up sign and descended.

The children watched him go, anxious, frightened, happy, and tense all at the same time.

Tarak had slipped the hammer in his pocket and they heard it ring against the metal three times. They waited. A few minutes later they heard three sounds again, so they knew all was well. They had no torch and hadn't thought of asking Julie to arrange for one, so Tarak had to grope in the dark and make the most of the situation.

The hammer hit the metal three more times, but more faintly this time. The children could do nothing except wait. They thought they heard Tarak shout, Anthony bent and called out "Uncle Tarak!" but all they heard was an echo.

"Why did he shout? Do you think Uncle Tarak fell down?" asked Kyle anxiously.

"Uncle Tarak, are you okay?" shouted Michael down the hole.

"Shhhh, don't shout so," warned Julie. "We don't want James or anyone to suspect."

It seemed a long time, although Tarak had been gone just a few minutes. They heard the hammer strike three times and breathed a collective sigh of relief. They heard it again, this time louder, and soon, Tarak was visible, moving up slow and steady. His clothes were dusty, and something bulged under his shirt. He scrambled up and lay down on the gym floor, taking deep gulps of air. He was smiling.

Julie thoughtfully ran towards the washrooms and fetched some drinking water for Tarak. They dusted him down and were badgering him with questions on what he saw down below.

"Later, later," he said. "There'll be time for all that later, first close the trapdoor and neaten up the place," he instructed.

The boys saw the wisdom in his words, they quickly shut the trapdoor, and over it arranged the planks of wood that they had pulled out. Then they put back the floorboards and saw the result of their handiwork - it was messy. But they could do nothing about it. They pulled a medium-sized exercise mat over the patch, placed two exercise cycles over it, checked if the gym looked normal, switched off the lights, locked the door and left.

Julie ran off towards the garden shed to replace the tools and Anthony went to return the keys to Jenny. Tarak asked him to get a knife and a peeler from James.

"Let's pretend to go to the garden shed to inspect the puppies, we can talk and plan a course of action," said Tarak to Michael and Kyle. Julie saw them coming in her direction and waited. In a moment Anthony joined them as well.

Tarak then recounted all that he had seen. "I felt like Alice down the rabbit hole," he said.

"The way down the hole was dark and musty. I held my breath for as long as I could, not knowing how long I would be there. I climbed down slowly, the rungs seemed to hold my weight, and when I reached the bottom, there was no passage that led anywhere. It just opened out to a cave."

"I felt the sides of the cave, they were cool and damp to the touch, there were hollows and depressions in some places and I felt them, touched them, wondering if there was a lamp or a chain that could be pulled. In one such hollow I just found a small cloth bundle that I stuffed into my shirt front, there seemed to be nothing else. But in order to have a proper look we will need torches and more tools. There might be a door leading to a bigger room," he said.

“What’s in that bundle, Uncle Tarak, did you see it?” Julie asked.

“No,” he replied, “I put the bundle here. I thought if I opened it in the dark, I wouldn’t be able to see its contents in any case.”

Tarak then loosened the two top buttons of his shirt and drew out a small old-fashioned pouch that could be closed by pulling strings in opposite directions.

“Wow! I wonder what’s inside it,” said Kyle.

Michael took it gently from Tarak’s hand and slowly tugged at the mouth of the pouch. An object wrapped in a square of silk fell out. The silk was in tatters but the object had not lost its luster even after being hidden deep underground for hundreds of years.

It was a platinum amulet, suspended on a silver chain.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DIRTY LAUNDRY

They caught their breath.

“Wow! Is that for real?” said Kyle.

“Do you understand the significance of this find?” asked Tarak. “If we get the other things from the Professor’s room, the set will be complete. Do you want to do it, boys?” he asked. They nodded. He looked at Julie and asked her if she was willing to help them now. She nodded too. The children were all holding their breath in excitement.

“The Professor’s gone out, we still have time if we hurry,” said Julie.

“Should we all go up to his rooms?” asked Anthony.

“No, it’s better if only Tony and Mikey went up with Julie. We’ll keep watch here, Kylie and I,” said Tarak. “Take some curtains or something with you to use as a decoy. And here, wear this amulet, Tony.” He put it around Anthony’s neck. It glowed for a few moments and then the luminescence stopped.

Kyle gazed in wonder. “Wow!” was all he could say.

Julie gestured towards the kitchen. They saw James watching them, so they walked slowly towards the playground and then Julie and the two boys pretended to race, pointing to the school building.

Tarak joined in the pretense, and make them stand together. "On your marks, get set, go!" he shouted. Off they went. Then he readied himself and Kyle. He tickled Kyle and they both fell down, laughing. Bored, James turned and went back towards the kitchen.

Anthony and Michael waited while Julie went to the store room to bring some sheets. She soon returned with the keys to the Headmaster's rooms. She was taking a chance entering there because he hadn't authorized it, but they couldn't afford to waste more time, and they ran upstairs, taking two steps at a time.

They had to be on the alert every single moment. Julie took the keys from their hiding place and entered the Professor's bedroom. She checked the laundry basket — it contained some clothes, towels, and a dirty tablecloth. She took the basket with her. She asked Anthony which cupboard they wanted to open first and the boys pointed. She selected the right key and they quickly opened the cupboard and took exactly what they needed — the two amulets, the bronze bracelet, the silver shield and from the box on the bottom shelf the golden sword.

"You can wear one of the amulets," Anthony said to Michael, handing one to him. "Hide it inside your shirt like I've done."

"Are you sure?" asked Michael. Michael slipped it around his neck and it glowed. There was no time to admire it. It was the original amulet and the Professor had indeed stolen it from his colleague.

"Yes, there's no time to discuss anything, let's quickly put these beauties among the dirty clothes and leave." He hid the four objects among the towels, placed the clean sheets over them and handed the basket to Julie.

Julie locked the cupboard, placed the keys in the ashtray, and locked the room. They ran down, mindful not to speak. Julie gave the basket to Michael to hold while she returned the keys to the caretaker on duty in the store room.

Just as they came out of the school building, the Professor's car

came into view and he saw them. He stopped the car and got out. He was just a dozen feet away and they couldn't avoid him, they would have to wait and face him.

"Good afternoon, Sir," the boys greeted him. "Nice dogs." He paid them no attention, he was scowling at Julie. He eyed the basket in her hand.

"Why are you loitering about here at this hour with the laundry?" he growled.

"Mum said some sheets had to be mended, I'm taking them to her. She's at the sewing machine," replied Julie. Her eyes were lowered. She walked on.

"And didn't I tell you boys to stay indoors and not wander around, bothering about things that don't concern you?" he told the boys.

"Right, Sir, we won't. We're going out for lunch with Uncle Tarak, he's waiting for us. Goodbye, Sir, have a nice day," replied Anthony.

"Goodbye," said the ill-tempered man.

The boys cheekily waved towards Tarak and Kyle who waved back. The Professor opened the car door and the dogs followed him and stood there wagging their tails. He called out to James to park the car.

Then Michael said something which made the Professor turn sharply towards him. "Goodbye Harold, Goodbye Percy," said Michael.

Anthony's mouth went dry and he stopped breathing, expecting the sky to fall on their heads. Michael had unwittingly revealed to the Headmaster that they knew that he addressed the dogs by those names. The professor understood at once that the boys had been up to his rooms and had seen things.

Michael had started walking away, not realizing that he had made a terrible gaffe that would be a catalyst in their adventure.

Anthony quickly followed his brother; he didn't want to stay a moment longer with the Professor who was livid. He suspected that the children had been up to some mischief and decided to quickly go upstairs to his rooms to check.

Anthony told Michael about his faux pas. Michael winced in regret. They reached Tarak, Julie, and Kyle who were waiting for them.

"Mission accomplished. We got from the Professor's room all the five items, Michael is wearing one amulet under his shirt, the other amulet and the three artifacts are in Julie's basket," Anthony told Tarak

He then told Tarak how the Headmaster had questioned Julie and ticked them off, and finally how Michael had made a blunder and enraged the Professor.

"Goodbye, Percy, Goodbye Harold," he imitated Michael. Michael turned red with embarrassment.

Tarak laughed. "It doesn't matter now, the Professor would have found out sooner or later, now he must be checking his treasures, we have no time, we have to act now." He turned towards Julie and asked "Would you like to go on a real adventure with us, child?"

Julie surprised them by shaking her head and declining the offer. "No, I don't know what will happen next. I shouldn't like Mum to have any more troubles than she already has."

They shook hands and said goodbye to her. She kissed them one by one and said being with them had been an adventure in itself for her. She handed over the laundry basket to Tarak who picked out the remaining objects from among the towels. He quickly put the third amulet around Kyle's neck. It glowed. Kyle was satisfied. He looked at Tarak and giggled.

"What's funny now?" asked Tarak.

"We're about to embark on an adventure and your clothes are dirty."

"With the magic powers that will soon be at your disposal, you can

make my clothes look clean, Kylie baba,” said Tarak, handing them the objects one by one. “Use them well,” he added. He gave the golden sword to Anthony, the silver shield to Michael and the bronze bracelet he put around Kyle’s wrist. Then they all stood together, held on to Anthony, and closed their eyes. Anthony held the golden sword high above his head. It shone luminously in the sunlight, the dazzling brilliance of the metal hurting their eyes.

“Take us away from here,” commanded Anthony. The sword emitted a blinding white light, there was a flash and before they understood what was happening, they were sent rocketing skywards. On the magic beam of light, they were transported across land, over seas and entire continents, over rivers and mountains and dropped somewhere in a strange place, over some freshly-fallen snow.

It happened so fast that they didn’t know what hit them. The boys were completely awe-struck. They shook their heads in disbelief. Could the experience have been real?

They didn’t even know where they were. It was cold and there was snow in the mountains. They clutched their new possessions and looked at Tarak. He pointed towards some caves. They saw some holy men watching them.

“Should we wave at them or something?” asked Kyle.

“We don’t wave at sadhus and holy men, we fold our hands like this in greeting,” said Tarak, demonstrating. They approached the sadhus with folded hands the way Tarak had shown them.

“Could we be in Ladakh?” asked Anthony suddenly.

“Yes,” replied Tarak, “the treasures have come home.”

“Are these the same sadhus from the story, Uncle Tarak?” asked Kyle.

“Does it matter, baba? It is enough to know that they know all about the magic weapons that had originally been given by such sadhus to three little boys called Chaitanya, Narendra, and Uttam.”

The sadhus greeted them warmly and made them sit down inside the cave. They shared with Tarak and the boys their simple wholesome meal. After the guests were refreshed, the oldest sadhu asked Tarak if all was well and whether evil forces were pursuing them. Tarak told them all about the Professor and said he would have missed the treasures by now.

“He has collected a lot of magic powers, he has stolen many blessed artifacts from all over the world and he now wants to rule the world, we know that,” said the wise sadhu. “You will have to be ready. Your enemy will soon be here with his own army.”



CHAPTER FOURTEEN

PROFESSOR'S DISPOSAL

Back at Green Meadows, the Professor was furious. "Curse those boys!" he kept saying over and over again. James appeared with his car keys. He asked James if everything was all right and what the American guests had been doing all morning.

James told him about their activities, they had all spent the morning in the gym and said they would be going out for lunch.

"And what about the old Uncle?" he asked, referring to Tarak.

"Oh, he was with the boys in the gym as well, and so was Julie," replied James.

"That girl too? She's becoming quite a pest, comes at all odd hours to collect laundry."

"I'll speak to her mother about it tomorrow, Sir," said James.

As the Professor walked by the gym, he glanced inside and noticed something amiss. He stood there wondering what was wrong. "Fetch me the keys, will you?" he said.

James ran to the new building and was back with the whole bunch. James unlocked the door and they both stepped in. The dogs stayed outside and waited for their master to come out.

“Those boys are quite a nuisance,” said James, “see how they’ve messed up the equipment. Look, they’ve even placed the exercise cycles right here in the middle of the room!” he exclaimed, and proceeded to drag the cycles away to their right place against the wall. The mats were dragged away too, and James and the Headmaster soon understood that the flooring had been damaged. But why, they wondered. The Professor suspected that it had something to do with Tarak, he thought the old man looked sleepy and stupid but was actually quite sharp.

The Headmaster bent down to examine the floor more closely. He asked James to help him pry loose the disturbed pieces of flooring. They did so, only to find more broken planks. They lifted up those as well. Underneath, under a damp layer of dust was a heavy metal trapdoor. James was intrigued by the discovery, but the Professor clearly wasn’t. He realized that the Bose children had unearthed something, but what?

With growing doubt, he marched up to his own rooms. The dogs followed. The first thing he did was to check if the keys were in their usual safe place. They were. He picked them up and went straight to the cupboard in which he kept his most treasured possessions. This was the cupboard that the boys had not opened, after they had found the sword and other artifacts.

He opened the cupboard and gloated over his entire range of magical weapons and powerful talismans that he had been collecting, by fair means or foul, over a period of time. The items were all intact — flat stones and crystal prisms, bull’s horns and sacred bells, magic belts and strange stones, powerful amulets and dangerous weapons.

Some of these innocent-looking objects could summon mythical beings like serpents and dragons, part-human creatures, winged beasts, land beasts, and sea creatures. He also had at his disposal several modern monsters such as Bigfoot, Mothman, Yeti, Yowie, Yeren, Pukwudgie, the Jersey Devil, Chupacabras, the Loch Ness Monster, and even space aliens called cryptids whom he could materialize by rubbing the artifacts or chanting special words.

All kinds of powers were at the Professor's disposal but what he coveted the most was the combined power of the sword, the shield and the bracelet. He had swiped Kavi's two original platinum amulets and silver shield and replaced them with replicas that he commissioned a silversmith to make for him.

He opened the next cupboard to check if the beloved objects were there. They were missing. The Professor was so furious he let out a blood-curling cry of anguish and frustration. The two dogs got so frightened that they yelped and jumped into the tapestry without being told, becoming part of the scenery.

He was beside himself with rage. His frenzy was so great that he shook. He walked up and down in fury. He was sure that the children had got hold of the missing amulet. He had known that it was somewhere in the school premises but in so many years he hadn't been able to discover the secret place where the school's founder had hidden it. He should have destroyed Lord Killen's diary. The boys had read the manuscript, he was certain.

"Curse Lord Killen, curse the boys, curse Julie, curse the old uncle, curse everyone," he swore loudly, kicking at the Greek urn. It fell on its side and shattered. A book fell out, it was a diary, and he glanced through its contents. It was Julie's diary and he was reading her private account of all that she had seen.

He understood that the young lady had seen more than she or anyone else ought to have. He knew now that it must have been Julie who had helped those American boys to open his cupboards and steal his possessions. He couldn't wait to get his hands around her throat, he was so irate he could have killed her. "Curse Julie," he said again, tearing the pages of the diary one by one.

He knew it was time to act. It would be a battle now. He went back to the cupboard and took out all the charms, talismans, amulets, and objects that had special powers. One by one, he summoned all the powers that he could command.

In the meantime Tarak, Anthony, Michael and Kyle waited. They didn't know what would happen, but they knew that it would be something big. The sadhu had told them that the Professor would



soon be coming with his own army.

Tarak asked them to repeat the magic powers they had and what were the things they could accomplish. The boys were feeling quite dejected, they were just children, after all, and they recited their powers without any enthusiasm.

In order to boost their morale and restore their confidence, Tarak knew that he would have to bring them into the right mental state for a battle.

“Repeat after me,” he told them “Shout out loud after me - I am strong!”

“I am strong,” they repeated, but not with much conviction.

“I am powerful,” shouted Tarak.

“I am powerful,” they shouted weakly.

“I am harmonious!” yelled Tarak

“I am harmonious,” they repeated.

“I am happy and prosperous!” hollered Tarak

“I am happy and prosperous!” they repeated, beginning to smile.

“I am kind, loving and whole!” screamed Tarak

“I am kind, loving and whole!” they screamed along now, laughing.

They immediately felt better and he made them touch their amulets and repeat the same lines after him over and over again.

“I am strong, I am powerful, I am harmonious, I am happy and prosperous, I am kind, loving, and whole, I am fearless, I am invincible!” they shouted at the top of their voices. The sadhus watched from afar, amused.

Tarak kept them at it, he didn't let them stop, he knew that if they stopped, they would again start having all kinds of doubts, and that could be self-defeating in the face of a powerful enemy such as Professor Rabbany.

The sky got dark and cloudy, and a dust storm brewed low, Tarak knew that the time had come. They met the sadhus, took their blessings and were prepared to face a dozen Professors.

The strangest of creatures came flying towards them; they could recognize some names from the movies and the pictures they had seen of mythical creatures. Dozens and dozens of curious beings appeared from nowhere. The boys stood with Tarak, poised and unafraid, their magic weapons in their hands.

They saw serpents and dragons that looked like Chimera, Basilisk, Hydra and Gorgon, they also saw a Centaur, a Sphinx, a Satyr and a Moon-Woman, followed by Griffin and other winged creatures.

Then they saw the Professor leading an army of doppelgangers and fierce dragons breathing fire and sending flames in their direction. Anthony held up his sword and said "Strike the enemy!" A blinding light obliterated many of the dragons and creatures, but the Professor had dodged away cleverly.

He hurled towards the boys a volley of stones and rocks, but Michael held out his shield and they were safe. The sound was deafening, it thundered, lightning struck at the boys, but the shield thwarted it and once again they were safe.

The boys were enjoying it, but they had to be really alert. Several creatures were already destroyed, but more seemed to appear. They saw the Gryphon, Dragon, Phoenix, Gargoyle, Unicorn, Pegasus, Chimera, Kraken, and Cerberus.

There were the Keepers of the Earth that resembled stones and rocks in the texture of their skin. Although they appeared to be somewhat human in appearance, they moved very slowly and could smash their targets into bits. Anthony directed his powers at them

and soon they were obliterated too.

Then the Professor sent towards them the Earth Elementals which had the power to direct earthquakes at various places. Michael with his silver shield made sure that they weren't affected, and Kyle used his bracelet to mitigate their work. When the earth shook, he calmed it, until finally Anthony directed such a powerful beam of light on the creatures that they crumbled to dust.

The boys were accosted from the air as well, by cloud-like beings that were swift and transparent. They could create paths for wind-storms and tornadoes in order to destroy targets. Keepers of the Flame directed fire towards them, shooting and spreading flames, trying to destroy their powers. But the golden sword was more powerful than all of their powers put together.

Even the Keepers of the Sea were no match for the boys. All the waves, hurricanes and whirlpools sent out by them were dealt with by Kyle who calmed them with his bronze bracelet.

The battle continued. The Professor sent Gargoyles which dived down upon them like birds of prey, and Tarak took Michael's hand and pointed the shield upwards. The Gargoyles couldn't destroy them either.

Giants, gnomes, griffons, and ogres — all tried to crush the boys — but the combined power of their gifts was so great that they were fully protected. All that remained to be done was to completely destroy the Professor's powers.

After a long and arduous battle that lasted four hours, they succeeded at last. The Professor lay motionless on the ground, not dead, but completely powerless. He had used up all the powers that he had, and the creatures that he could command were killed and destroyed.

And, although the boys had the power to kill the Professor, they had not done it.

They asked Tarak what they were to do next. The sadhus appeared

and asked Kyle to put a blanket of snow on the mountains to cover all traces of the fierce battle that had just taken place. Kyle happily did that by tapping into his powers and there was a sudden burst of soft snowflakes that descended and swathed the mountainside.

The sadhus placed the unconscious Professor on a mat and dragged it to the cave and waited for him to regain consciousness. If he ever did.

The boys were told that they would be taken back to where they had come from. One of the sadhus would accompany them on the white light. He would bring the complete set of the magic weapons back with him to Ladakh, where all the artifacts and the amulets would be destroyed. The world was not yet ready for these weapons, they said.

The boys said nothing, they merely nodded. They prepared to return, standing close together. One of the holy men stood with them. They took blessings from the old sadhu, and waited for him to issue the command.

“Until next time,” he said, smiling mysteriously.

The boys and Tarak looked up, surprised, but didn’t say anything.

“Go in peace,” he said, placing his hands on their heads in blessing.

Kyle was already thinking of Mom.

