

The Mystery of the Black Jungle

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Emilio Salgari

Translated by Nico Lorenzutti



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By Emilio Salgari

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Part I

The Stranglers

Chapter 1

A Murder

The Ganges, the great river sacred to Hindus, rises among the snowy mountains of the Himalayas and flows through the rich provinces of Kashmir, Delhi, Agra, Benares, Patna and Bengal, giving life to some of the most populous cities in India. Three hundred miles from the sea, it divides in two, forming within its branches a vast delta unique to the world.

A multitude of streams emanate from those imposing arms; large and small canals crisscross that immense tract of land bounded by the Bay of Bengal, creating an infinite number of islands, islets and sandbanks, known to the world as the Sundarbans.

No sight is stranger, more desolate or more frightening than the Sundarbans. No cities, no villages, no huts or hovels; endless forests of thorny bamboo stretch from north to south, east to west, the tops of their tall stems swaying in the wind among the deadly miasma rising from the rotting foliage and human corpses set adrift in the Ganges.

By day, a dismal silence reigns supreme, instilling terror in even the bravest of souls, but once darkness descends, the air fills with a frightening cacophony of howls, roars, and hisses that make the blood run cold.

Ask a Bengali to set foot in the Sundarbans and he will refuse; an offer of a hundred, two hundred, five hundred rupees, will not sway him. Ask a Molango¹ and he will refuse just as adamantly, to set foot in those jungles is to ask for death.

A thousand dangers lurk beneath those forests among the mire and sallow waters. Giant crocodiles swim in search of prey; tigers lay in wait

¹ A member of a tribe that lives on the outskirts of the Sundarbans.

for passing boats, ready to pounce upon the first sailor that dares get close to shore. Rhinoceroses roam the land, ready to attack at the slightest provocation; snakes abound in infinite varieties, from tiny poisonous serpents to enormous pythons large enough to grind an ox within their coils. But perhaps the most deadly of all are the Indian Thugs, dreaded stranglers that skulk in the shadows, searching for victims to sacrifice to their bloodthirsty goddess.

And yet, despite these dangers, on the evening of May 16, 1851, a large fire blazed in the southern part of the Sundarbans, about four hundred paces from the three mouths of the Mangal, a wide muddy branch of the Ganges that empties into the Bay of Bengal.

The flames shone brightly against the dark sky, casting their light upon a large bamboo hut at the foot of which slept a man wrapped in a large dugbah². He was a handsome Bengali, about thirty years of age, with muscular limbs and deep bronze skin. Three horizontal lines of ash streaked his brow, marking him as one of Shiva's devotees.

Though he slept, his dreams must have been troubling, for he frowned at times, his forehead beading with perspiration. His strong chest heaved against his dugbah, as mumbled whispers escaped his lips.

"It's almost time," he smiled. "The sun is setting, the peacocks have fallen silent, the marabous have flown off... a jackal cries... Where is she? Why isn't she here?... What have I done? Isn't this the place?... Come, sweet vision... I long to see you... I must see you... even if only for a minute..."

"Ah, there she is, there she is!... Looking at me with those dark eyes, a smile on her lips... Such a beautiful smile! Divine vision, why do you stand before me in silence?... Why do you look at me so?... Don't be afraid; I'm Tremal-Naik, Hunter of the Black Jungle. Speak, let me hear your sweet voice... the sun is setting, it's growing dark... No! Don't go! Don't go! Please!"

Suddenly the Bengali let out a sharp cry, his face twisted in anguish.

Drawn by the noise, a second Indian ran out of the hut, a shorter agile man with strong powerful legs. His proud bearing, dark eyes, earrings

² A cape made from coarse cloth

and the languti³ about his thighs, indicated he was a Maratha, a warrior from a tribe in Western India.

“Poor master!” he murmured, studying Tremal-Naik. “Another nightmare!”

He stirred the fire then sat beside the hunter, taking up a fan of peacock feathers.

“What a mystery!” mumbled the sleeping man. “Is that blood?! Are those nooses? Run, sweet vision, run... it isn’t safe!”

“Blood, visions, nooses?” murmured the Maratha, surprised. “What a dream!”

Without warning, the hunter shook himself awake, opened his eyes and sat upright.

“No, no!” he exclaimed dully, “Don’t...!”

The Maratha looked at him.

“Master,” he said, a note of compassion in his voice, “What troubles you?”

The Indian closed his eyes, opened them once again and fixed them upon the Maratha.

“Ah, it’s you, Kammamuri!” he exclaimed.

“Yes, master.”

“Watching over me?”

“And keeping the flies away.”

Tremal-Naik took several deep breaths and wiped his brow.

“Where are Hurti and Aghur?” he asked after a brief silence.

“In the jungle. They found some tiger tracks last night and went off in search of it this morning.”

“Ah!” Tremal-Naik replied dully.

He frowned as a heavy sigh died upon his lips.

“What troubles you, master?” asked Kammamuri. “You seem ill.”

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

“You were talking in your sleep.”

“What!?”

“Yes, master, you spoke of a strange vision.”

³ Short loincloth

A bitter smile spread across the hunter's lips.

"I'm suffering, Kammamuri," he said angrily. "I'm suffering terribly."

"I know, master. I've been watching you for the past sixteen days. You've grown melancholy, taciturn, and yet not so long ago you were not like this."

"That's true."

"Have you grown tired of the jungle?"

"Don't even think it, Kammamuri. This is where I was born and raised; this is where I'll die."

"Well then? What's caused this sudden change?"

"A woman, a vision, a spirit!"

"A woman!" Kammamuri exclaimed in surprise. "A woman?"

Tremal-Naik nodded then pressed his brow as if to stifle a disturbing thought.

Silence fell between the two men, broken only by the murmur of the stream and the cries of the wind.

"Where did you see this woman?" asked the Maratha after a few minutes had passed.

"In the jungle," Tremal-Naik replied darkly. "I'll never forget that night, Kammamuri! I was hunting for snakes along the bank of a stream when a vision appeared just twenty paces from me, among a thicket of blood-red mussenda. She was radiant, superb.

"I never thought the gods could create such beauty. She had large black eyes, fair skin, and long dark curly hair.

"She looked at me, sighed sadly, and vanished. Stunned, I just stood there, unable to move. Once the shock had faded, I went to look for her, but it had grown dark and she was nowhere to be found. Was she an apparition? A woman or some kind of spirit? I'm still not certain."

Tremal-Naik fell silent. He was shaking visibly and Kammamuri wondered if his master had been taken with fever.

"That vision affected me deeply," Tremal-Naik added angrily. "A strange feeling took hold of me, as if I'd been bewitched. Since that day, I see her everywhere, dancing before me in the jungle, swimming before

the bow of my boat when I'm on the river; my thoughts always turn to her; she appears in all my dreams. I think I'm going mad..."

"You're scaring me, master," said the Maratha, glancing about nervously. "Who was she?"

"I don't know, Kammamuri. She was beautiful though, very beautiful," Tremal-Naik exclaimed passionately.

"A spirit!?"

"Perhaps."

"A goddess?"

"Who knows?"

"And you've never seen her again?"

"I've seen her several times. I returned to that stream at the same hour the following night. When the moon rose over the forest, that divine apparition appeared amongst the mussenda bushes once again.

"Who are you?" I asked. 'Ada', she replied. Then she sighed sadly and disappeared, as she had the first time, as if the ground just swallowed her up without warning."

"Ada?" exclaimed Kammamuri. "What kind of name is that?"

"Not an Indian one."

"That's all she said?"

"That's all."

"Strange, I would never have returned."

"Yet, I did. A powerful force kept drawing me towards that place; I tried to resist it several times, but no matter what I did, I always went back. It was as if I'd been bewitched."

"How did you feel in her presence?"

"My heart pounded wildly."

"And you've never felt like that before?"

"Never," said Tremal-Naik.

"Do you still see her?"

"No, Kammamuri. She appeared for several nights, always at the same time, always in the same mysterious way. She would look at me in silence then disappear without a sound. Once, I waved to her, but she did

not move; another time I tried to speak, but she put a finger to her lips and signalled me to be silent.”

“You never followed her?”

“Never, Kammamuri, that woman frightens me. Fifteen days ago, she appeared dressed in red silk and remained longer than usual. The next night I waited for her again; I called out to her several times, but to no avail; I never saw her again.”

“A strange adventure to be sure,” murmured Kammamuri.

“It’s terrible,” Tremal-Naik continued hoarsely. “I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, it’s like I have a fever; I have this burning desire to set eyes upon that vision once again.”

“I think I understand your problem.”

“Yes?”

“You’re in love.”

“What?”

Several sharp notes sounded from near the vast swamp south of the hut. The Maratha shot to his feet.

“A ramsinga!⁴” he exclaimed, terrified.

“What of it?” asked Tremal-Naik.

“It heralds misfortune, master.”

“Nonsense, Kammamuri.”

“The only other time I’ve ever heard a ramsinga sound in the jungle was on the night poor Tamul was murdered.”

The hunter frowned at that sudden recollection.

“Don’t worry,” he said, forcing himself to appear calm. “Playing the ramsinga is a common skill; you know the odd hunter ventures into the jungle from time to time.”

He had just finished speaking, when they heard a bark followed by a roar.

Kammamuri trembled from head to toe.

“Master!” he exclaimed. “Hear that? There’s trouble nearby.”

“Darma! Punthy!” yelled Tremal-Naik.

⁴ A long Indian trumpet made of four pipes of fine metal which can emit sound over a great distance

A superb Bengal tiger came out of the hut and fixed her eyes upon her master. She was followed by a black dog with sharp ears and a long tail wearing a large collar bristling with metal thorns.

“Darma! Punthy!” repeated Tremal-Naik.

The tiger grunted then leaped and landed at her master’s feet.

“What is it, Darma?” he asked, gently stroking the animal’s back. “You seem uneasy.”

Instead of running to his master, the dog planted his four legs firmly on the ground, pointed his head towards the south, sniffed the air and barked three times.

“Could something have happened to Hurti and Aghur?” the hunter murmured uneasily.

“I fear so, master,” said Kammmamuri, glancing at the jungle nervously. “They should have returned by now.”

“Did you hear any shots during the day?”

“Yes, a few in the middle of the afternoon, then nothing more.”

“Where did they come from?”

“South of us, master.”

“See anyone suspicious roaming about the jungle?”

“No, but Hurti told me that one night he spotted several shadows lurking about the shores of the island of Rajmangal, and then Aghur reported hearing strange sounds emanating from inside the sacred banyan tree.”

“From inside the banyan tree!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik. “Have you heard or seen anything?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure. What are we going to do, master?”

“There’s not much we can do. Best we wait here.”

“But they could be...”

“Shh!” said Tremal-Naik, squeezing Kammmamuri’s arm tightly.

“What is it?” whispered the Maratha, growing uneasy.

“Look over there, the bamboo’s moving.”

“Someone’s coming, master.”

Punthy whimpered a third time as more sharp notes from the ram-singa filled the air. Tremal-Naik drew a pistol from his belt and quickly

loaded it. Suddenly a tall man dressed in a dhoti⁵ and armed with an axe, rushed out from among the bamboo, running towards the hut at full speed.

“Aghur!” Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri exclaimed simultaneously.

Punthy ran towards the newcomer, howling sadly.

“Master... master!”

He reached the hut in a flash. Eyes bulging, limbs trembling, he let out a soft cry and collapsed among the grass.

Tremal-Naik immediately rushed to his side and cried out in surprise.

The Indian appeared to be on the verge of death. Numerous cuts lined his blood-streaked face and his lips were covered in bloody foam; he looked about wildly, panting heavily.

“Aghur!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik. “What happened to you?! Where’s Hurti?”

At the sound of that name, Aghur’s face twisted in fear. He tore at the ground, clawing up the dirt around him.

“Ma... ster... ma... ster,” he stammered, deeply terrified.

“Yes, Aghur.”

“I’m... suff... occ... I... ran... ma...ster!”

“Think he’s been poisoned?” murmured Kammamuri.

“No,” said Tremal-Naik. “The poor devil ran here at full speed, he’s just winded; he’ll be fine in a few minutes.”

As the hunter had predicted, Aghur began to settle once he had caught his breath.

“Now tell me what happened,” said Tremal-Naik, once the Indian had rested for several minutes. “Why did you come back alone? Why are you so afraid? Where’s Hurti?”

“Master!” the Indian murmured with a shudder. “What a tragedy!”

“I knew that ramsinga was a bad omen,” sighed Kammamuri.

“Continue, Aghur,” urged the hunter.

“If only you’d seen the poor wretch... I found him lying on the ground, as stiff as a board, his eyes wrenched from their sockets...”

“Hurti’s been killed!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik.

⁵ A large rectangular piece of cloth worn about the waist

“Yes, they murdered him at the foot of the sacred banyan tree.”

“Who murdered him? Tell me and I’ll avenge him.”

“I don’t know, master.”

“Start from the beginning; tell me everything.”

“We’d set off to look for the tiger and spotted the beast in the jungle about six miles from here. It had been injured by a blast from Hurti’s carbine and was heading south, trying to escape. We tracked it for four hours and came upon it once again near the shore, not far from the island of Rajmangal; however, before we could kill it, it spotted us, leaped into the water, swam to the island and hid beneath the great banyan tree.”

“And then?”

“I wanted to come back to camp, but Hurti refused. He said the tiger had already been injured and was easy prey so we swam to the island then split up to go look for it.”

The Indian stopped. He had turned pale with fear.

“Night had begun to fall,” he continued gloomily. “All fell silent as darkness spread over the jungle. Suddenly, I heard a sharp note from a ramsinga and my eyes met those of a shadow half hidden in a bush just twenty paces from me.”

“A shadow!” exclaimed Tremal-Naik. “A shadow?”

“Yes, master, a shadow.”

“Who was it? Tell me, Aghur, tell me!”

“A woman.”

“A woman!”

“Yes, I’m almost certain it was a woman.”

“Beautiful?”

“It was too dark to tell.”

Tremal-Naik put a hand to his brow.

“A shadow!” he repeated several times. “A shadow on the island! Continue, Aghur.”

“It looked at me in silence, then raised an arm and gestured for me to go. Surprised and scared, I obeyed, but I had not gone more than a

hundred paces when a cry of agony reached my ears. I recognized the voice immediately: it was Hurti.”

“And the shadow?” Tremal-Naik asked excitedly.

“I didn’t turn to see what had become of it. I headed through the forest, carbine in hand, and soon reached the great banyan tree. Poor Hurti was at the base of it, lying on his back. I called to him, but he didn’t move; I touched his arm, he was warm, but he had no pulse!”

“Are you certain?”

“Positive, master.”

“Where had he been hit?”

“I didn’t see a single wound on his body.”

“Impossible!”

“Yet, that’s how it was.”

“And you didn’t see anyone?”

“Not a soul and I didn’t hear a sound. Frightened, I dropped my carbine, jumped into the river and swam back as quickly as I could. Once ashore, I raced back towards our hut, never once looking back, never once stopping to take a breath, that’s how frightened I was! Poor Hurti!”

Chapter 2

The Mysterious Island

A deep silence followed Aghur's story. Tremal-Naik, having suddenly grown sullen and restless, began to pace before the fire, head lowered, arms crossed, a frown upon his brow. Kammamuri had curled up into a tight ball, frozen with terror. Even the dog had fallen silent as he stretched out by Darma's side.

Several sharp notes from the mysterious ramsinga tore the hunter from his thoughts. He reared his head, cast an eye upon the deserted jungle then quickly made his way towards Aghur.

"Have you ever heard that ramsinga before?"

"Yes, master," replied the Indian, "Once."

"When?"

"Six months ago, the night Tamul disappeared."

"Kammamuri thinks it heralds tragedy."

"I'd agree, master."

"Ever seen anyone playing it?"

"No master, but I'd wager the musician is connected to the mysterious people on Rajmangal."

"Who do you think they are?"

"Spirits, master."

"What? Impossible!"

"Pirates then," said Aghur.

"Why would the suddenly start murdering my men?"

"Who can say? Maybe just to scare us or keep us away."

"Have you seen their huts?"

"No, but I know they gather beneath the sacred banyan tree every night."

“That’s a start,” said Tremal-Naik, “Kammamuri, go get the oars.”

“What do you have in mind, master?” asked the Maratha.

“We’re going to the banyan tree.”

“No, master!” the two Indians cried simultaneously.

“Why not?”

“They’ll kill you just as they did poor Hurti.”

Tremal-Naik’s eyes blazed darkly.

“I’m a hunter. I’ve never trembled before anyone in my life; we’re going to that island, Kammamuri!” he exclaimed in a tone that did not allow for debate.

“But, master...”

“Are you afraid?” Tremal-Naik asked disdainfully.

“I’m a Maratha,” the Indian replied proudly.

“Then let’s go. I’m going to find out who these mysterious people are, why they’ve declared war upon us, and who that woman is.”

Kammamuri picked up a pair of oars and headed towards the shore.

Tremal-Naik entered the hut, pulled a carbine from the wall, picked up a flask of gunpowder and tucked a large knife into his belt.

“Aghur, you’ll remain here,” he said, turning to go. “If we haven’t returned in two days, take Darma and Punthy and come look for us on Rajmangal.”

“But, master...”

“Have you lost your nerve?”

“No, master. I just don’t think you should go to that cursed island.”

“I won’t let my men be murdered at will, Aghur.”

“Take Darma with you. She could be of great assistance.”

“She’d give us away. I want to land unseen. There’s no need to fear, we’ll be back soon. Goodbye, my friend.”

He slung the carbine over his shoulder and headed off towards Kammamuri, who was waiting for him beside their gonga, a small canoe carved from a tree.

“Let’s go,” he said.

They jumped into the boat and slowly pulled away from the shore. Fog rippled over the canals, islands and sandbanks, shrouding the stars.

Vast forests of thorny bamboo stretched out on either side of them, the tall stalks tangled in vines and creepers. At times, growls and hisses emanated from among the grass and bushes lining the shore.

Rows of palms and latanie towered above the dark horizon, a few coconut and mango trees growing among them laden with exquisite fruit.

A heavy silence filled the air, broken only by the murmur of the shallow waters lapping against the mangroves and the sound of a gentle breeze rustling through the bamboo.

Tremal-Naik, stretched out on the stern, clutching his rifle, remained silent, his eyes darting from shore to shore as he scanned for hidden dangers. Kammamuri, sitting in the middle, made the small gonga fly, a long, sparkling wake stretching out behind it. From time to time, however, he would stop, hold his breath and fall silent, straining his ears to catch the slightest sound.

They had been afloat for more than thirty minutes when several notes from a ramsinga suddenly broke the silence. It had come from the right bank and sounded as if the musician were no more than a hundred paces away.

“Stop!” whispered Tremal-Naik.

He had barely uttered that word, when a second ramsinga sounded in reply. It had come from further off; a melancholy tune, contrasting oddly with the bright lively notes they had just heard.

Indian music is based on four styles, closely related to the four seasons of the year, each one having its own particular tone. It is melancholy in winter, lively in the spring, languid in the stifling summer heat, and sparkles brilliantly in the fall. Why were those two instruments playing so differently? Kammamuri feared it was a signal.

“Master,” he said, “They’ve spotted us.”

“Looks like it,” replied Tremal-Naik, listening intently.

“Should we head back? They’ll be expecting us.”

“I never retreat. Keep rowing, they can play that ramsinga all night for all I care.”

The Maratha began to row once again, driving the gonga ever forward. The river began to narrow and the air grew warmer. Several fire-

flies appeared in the distance, their light shining bizarrely over the black surface of the river. Suddenly, as if drawn by a mysterious force, they swirled before the gonga's bow then flew off as quickly as they had appeared.

"We've arrived at the cemetery," said Tremal-Naik. "We'll reach the banyan tree in ten minutes."

"Do you think we should cross in the gonga?" asked Kammamuri.

"All we need is a little patience."

"It's never wise to offend the dead, master."

"Brahma and Vishnu will forgive us. Start rowing, Kammamuri."

With a few strokes, the gonga entered a small basin; enormous tamarind trees towered about them, their branches arching over the water in a tangle of vegetation. Several corpses floated nearby, the tributaries of the Ganges having dragged them to the Mangal.

"Keep rowing!" said the hunter.

The Maratha was about to pull on the oars, when the dark canopy suddenly gave way to open sky and their eyes fell upon a storm of long-legged, black-winged birds with large sharp beaks diving towards the water.

"What now?" Kammamuri exclaimed, surprised.

"Just a few marabouts," said Tremal-Naik, "Probably come for their next meal."

Hundreds of those sombre birds, common to the sacred river, were swarming upon the cemetery, their wings fluttering cheerfully as they alighted upon the dead.

"Keep rowing, Kammamuri," repeated Tremal-Naik.

The gonga headed ever forward. A half hour later, the two men had crossed the cemetery and arrived at the mouth of a large basin. An island divided it in two, an immense tree towering a few paces from the shore.

"The sacred banyan," said Tremal-Naik.

Kammamuri shuddered at the sound of that name.

"Master!" he whispered, gritting his teeth.

"Don't worry, my good Maratha. Take in the oars; let the gonga coast

to the island. There may be someone about.”

Kammamuri quickly did as instructed then lay flat against the bottom of the boat; Tremal-Naik loaded his carbine and stretched out by his side. Carried by a light current, the gonga turned about and headed towards the northern tip of the island of Rajmangal, home to the mysterious men that had murdered poor Hurti.

A profound silence reigned over that place. The breeze had ceased to blow and the bamboo had fallen quiet, even the waters appeared to have lost their voice.

Disturbed by that eerie calm, Tremal-Naik would cautiously raise his head as they drew nearer and carefully scan the shore.

With a light thud, the gonga landed a hundred paces from the banyan tree, but the two Indians did not move. Ten anxious minutes passed before Tremal-Naik peered over the side. The first thing he spotted was a black shape lying among the grass, about twenty metres from the river.

“Kammamuri,” he whispered, “Load your pistol.”

The Maratha did not wait to be told twice.

“What is it, master?” he whispered.

“Look over there.”

“A body!” said the Maratha, his eyes growing wide.

“Shh!”

Tremal-Naik raised his carbine and aimed it at the dark silhouette stretched out before him, waited an instant then lowered it without firing.

“Let’s go see who he is, Kammamuri,” he said. “I don’t think he’s alive.”

“What if he’s only pretending to be dead?”

“Then he’ll regret it.”

The two men disembarked and silently headed towards the body, keeping close to the ground. They had arrived to within ten paces of it, when a marabou squawked noisily and flew off towards the river.

“It is a body,” murmured Tremal-Naik. “If only...”

He did not finish the sentence. Upon reaching the corpse, an exclamation of rage escaped his lips.

“Hurtil!” he cried.

The poor man was lying on his back, his arms and legs strewn about, frozen in the final throws of death. His face was twisted in terror, eyes bulging from their sockets, tongue jutting from his mouth. His knees and feet were broken; someone had dragged him there.

Tremal-Naik picked up the unfortunate Indian and looked for a wound, but at first glance could not find a single scratch. However, upon closer examination, he found deep marks around Hurtil’s neck and a large bruise on the back of his head that appeared to have been made by a rock.

“They knocked him out before they killed him. We’ll avenge him. Quickly now, back to the boat.”

“Poor Hurtil!” murmured the Maratha. “Why would anyone want to kill him?”

“We’re going to find out, Kammamuri; I won’t allow this act to go unpunished, you have my word.”

“What about Hurtil? Are we going to leave him here?”

“We’ll set him adrift in the Ganges come morning.”

“The tigers will probably get to him before we return.”

“I’ll stand watch over the body.”

“What? You’re not coming back with me?”

“No, Kammamuri, I’m staying here. I’ll return once I’ve dealt with his murderers.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed...”

A disdainful smile spread across the proud Bengali’s lips.

“I was born and raised in the jungle! Go back to the hut, Kammamuri.”

“Never, master!”

“What?”

“If something were to happen to you, who’d be here to help? Let me stay; I’ll follow your every order.”

“Even if I decide to set off and find my vision?”

“Yes, master.”

“Very well then, you may stay, my good Maratha; the two of us will do the work of ten men. Come!”

Tremal-Naik went off towards the river, grabbed the gonga’s star-board side, tipped it over, and forced it beneath the waters.

“What are you doing?” Kammamuri asked, surprised.

“No one must know we’re here. Now, let’s try to solve this mystery.”

To ensure they would not miss their first shot, they replaced the powder in their carbines and pistols then headed towards the large banyan tree looming proudly in the darkness.

Chapter 3

Avenging Hurti

Banyan trees, also known as *Pagoda fig trees*, are stranger and larger than one might imagine. Their trunks are as tall and as thick as the largest oak trees. Thin root-like shoots tumble from their infinite branches and imbed themselves in the soil, infusing the tree with nutrients and thickening as they age.

As the branches continue to spread, they generate a labyrinth of bizarre columns, at times an entire forest can be comprised of a single tree.

In the province of Gujarat a banyan tree named *Cobir bor*, revered by the Indians, for it is believed to be more than three thousand years old, extends for six hundred metres and has no less than three thousand column-like roots. It covered even more ground in ancient times, but part of it was destroyed as the waters of the Nerbudda River eroded its island home.

The banyan beneath which the two Indians were about to pass the night was enormous, it having more than six hundred columns. Its immense branches were laden with small vermilion fruit, and its strong thick trunk appeared to have been severed at the top.

Having carefully scouted their surroundings to ensure they were alone, Tremal-Naik and Kammamuri sat down before the base of the tree, side by side, their loaded carbines resting upon their knees.

“And now we wait,” whispered the hunter. “I wouldn’t want to be the first person to come within range of my carbine.”

“You think Hurti’s murderers are going to come back here?” asked Kammamuri.

“I’m certain of it. We’ll solve this mystery before the night is up.”

“So, we’ll kill the first man that dares show his face.”

“It depends on the circumstances. Now keep your eyes open and try not to make any noise.”

He pulled a betel leaf out of his pocket, added a bit of walnut and some lime to it and began to chew.

Two hours passed slowly. All remained quiet beneath the giant tree. It must have been close to midnight when Tremal-Naik, who had been straining his ears to catch the slightest sound, heard a strange rumble emanate from beneath the ground.

The hunter began to grow uneasy.

“Kammamuri,” he whispered, “Stand ready.”

“See something?” asked the Maratha.

“No, but I heard a sound.”

“Where?”

“I think it came from underground.”

“Impossible, master!”

“I doubt I was mistaken.”

“What do you think it was?”

“I don’t know yet, but we’ll find out soon enough.”

“Master, I don’t like this place.”

“Are you afraid?”

“Afraid? I’m a Maratha.”

“Then let’s see who’s behind all this.”

A second rumble emanated from beneath the ground. The two men looked at each other in surprise.

“It almost sounds as if someone’s playing a hauk⁶,” said Tremal-Naik.

“It couldn’t be anything else,” replied Kammamuri. “There must be some caves beneath this island. What are we going to do, master?”

“We’ll stay right here. Someone’s bound to come out from somewhere.”

“Tikora!” yelled a voice.

The two men jumped to their feet. The voice had come from nearby, so close in fact, it sounded as if the speaker were standing behind them.

⁶ A sacred ceremonial bass drum of enormous proportions

“Tikora!” murmured Tremal-Naik. “Who’s calling out?”

He scanned his surroundings but could not see anyone; he looked up and saw only the tangled branches of the banyan tree stretching out in the darkness.

“Could someone be hiding among the branches?”

“I don’t think so,” said Kammamuri, trembling. “The voice came from behind us.”

“It’s strange.”

“Tikora!” repeated the same mysterious voice.

The two Indians looked about once again. There was no mistaking it; someone was close by, but to their surprise and terror, that someone remained invisible.

“Master,” whispered Kammamuri, “It’s probably a spirit.”

“I don’t believe in spirits,” replied Tremal-Naik. “It’s a man and we’ll find him soon enough.”

“Oh!” exclaimed the Maratha, stumbling back three or four steps. “Look up there... master! Look!”

Tremal-Naik raised his head, fixed his eyes on the banyan tree and spotted a sliver of light rising from inside the severed trunk. Despite his courage, his blood turned cold.

“A light!” he stammered, dismayed.

“Let’s get out of here, master!” begged Kammamuri.

For the third time, a mysterious rumble emanated from beneath the ground, but this time it was followed by the brassy notes of a ramsinga. The music seemed to come from inside the banyan’s trunk. Instantly, a reply sounded off in the distance.

“Let’s get out of here, master!” Kammamuri repeated, terrified.

“Never!” Tremal-Naik exclaimed resolutely.

He placed his dagger between his teeth and grabbed his carbine by the barrel, planning to use it as a club, but quickly changed his mind.

“Come, Kammamuri,” he said. “It’s best we learn who we’re dealing with before we start a fight.”

He led the Maratha to a spot behind four thick roots about two hundred paces from the banyan tree, from where they could spy on the large

trunk without being seen.

“Not a word now,” said Tremal-Naik. “We’ll attack on my signal.”

One last sharp note emanated from the colossal trunk and was greeted by wild cries from the Sundarbans. The sliver of light projecting through the tree’s summit went out, and a head wearing a yellow turban appeared in its place.

It scanned its surroundings for a few minutes, as if to ensure that no one was lurking about beneath the giant tree, then it protruded further, and a man, an Indian judging by his appearance, came out, and grabbed onto one of the branches.

Forty Indians followed, grabbing onto the roots and sliding to the ground. They were naked to the waist, each man’s chest marked by a tattoo: a series of ancient Sanskrit letters encircling a Nagi, a snake woman with a coiled serpentine body. They wore dhotis of yellow cloth about their hips and silk rumaals⁷ weighted with a lead ball about their waists, their sharp daggers peering menacingly from behind those strange belts.

The band of Indians silently gathered round an old man.

“My sons,” he said gravely, “Our mighty hand has struck down the wretch that dared set foot upon our sacred shores. Another victim for the altar, but our work is not yet done. Our beloved goddess demands more blood.”

“Command us, great leader, and we shall obey.”

“You are brave,” said the old man, “but this is not the time. We face a grave danger, my sons. A man has dared to look upon the Guardian.”

“Blasphemy!” exclaimed the Indians.

“Yes, my sons; a man has dared look her in the face. He will not escape the goddess’ wrath!”

“Who is this man?”

“You’ll know all in time. Bring me the victim.”

Two Indians stood up and headed towards the spot where Hurti’s body lay. Tremal-Naik had watched that strange proceeding without batting an eyelash, but as soon as those two men grabbed the body by

⁷ A kerchief used as a strangling cloth

the arms and began to drag it towards the banyan tree, he shot to his feet, carbine in hand.

“Wretches!” he murmured, taking aim.

“What are you doing, master?” whispered Kammamuri, grabbing the rifle barrel and pulling it down.

“Let go, Kammamuri,” said the hunter. “They killed Hurti and I’m going to avenge him.”

“You’ll get us both killed! There are forty of them!”

“You’re right, Kammamuri. We’ll wait for better odds.”

He lowered his carbine and crouched back down behind the roots, biting his lip to reign in his anger.

The two Indians had dragged Hurti’s body into the middle of the circle and dropped it before the old man’s feet.

“Kali!” he exclaimed, raising his eyes towards the heavens.

He drew the dagger from his belt and plunged it into Hurti’s chest.

“Wretch!” howled Tremal-Naik. “This is too much!”

He jumped out of his hiding place. A flash of light tore through the darkness followed by a loud discharge. The old Indian, struck in the chest by the hunter’s bullet, fell forward onto Hurti’s body.