WHERE THE RIVER RUNS GOLD

Also by Sita Brahmachari

Artichoke Hearts
Brace Mouth, False Teeth
Car Wash Wish
Corey's Rock
Jasmine Skies
Kite Spirit
Red Leaves
Tender Earth
Worry Angels
Zebra Crossing Soul Song



SITA BRAHMACHARI

Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For Ada

With love and hope seeds

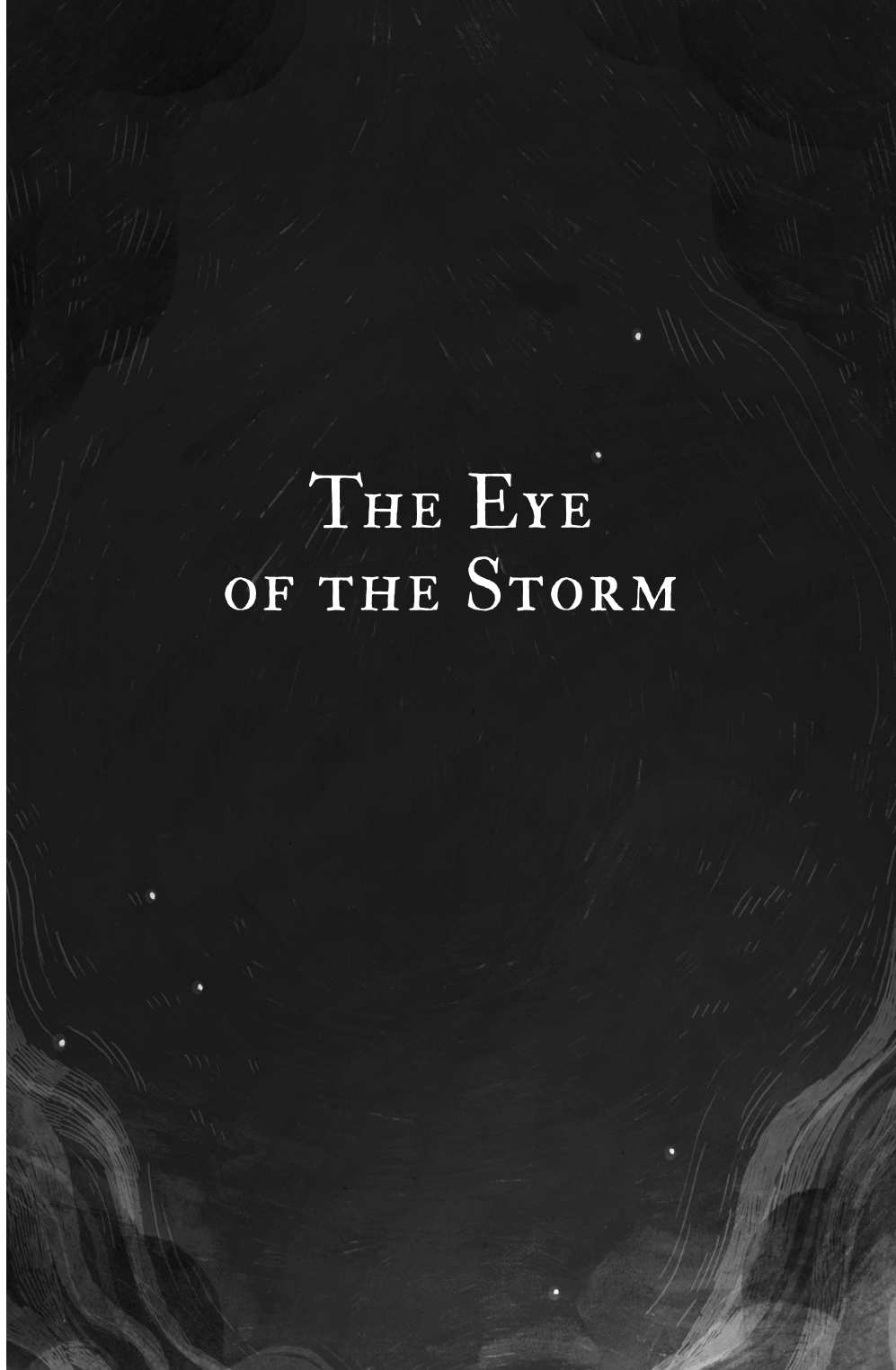
Step over the threshold.
Be brave, hold true



'We have this option ahead of us – we have to take the option to protect the natural world . . . that's where the future lies.'
David Attenborough (2019 World Economic Forum)


RIVER ORE
TO RECREATION FIELDS
ORCHARD
POLLINATION TUNNELS
SLEEP BARNS


CATHEDRAL OAK
N
W
E
S
FARM HOUSE
TO CORN FIELDS
SLEEP BARNS
BORDER TRENCH



The Eye of the Storm



Ten Years Ago – The Night of Hurricane Chronos

Nabil had been out foraging on a piece of scrubland in the Western Quarter. The air was thick with heat and dust, but otherwise there had been no warning signs. From a gasp, the storm built quickly. *Probably another false alarm*, he thought, peering up at the glowering sky, but he couldn't risk leaving baby Themba all alone in the world. He shoved the herbs and mushrooms he'd collected into his backpack, abandoned his bike, set his face to the howling wind and struggled to make his way across Kairos City.

How Nabil survived that journey through the eye of the storm he would never know. A wall crumbled in front of him; he swerved, yelped in pain as his ankle twisted, but still failed to dodge a shard of glass that sliced into his cheek. The pavement lifted from below and opened up great craters which he had to leap across, stopping only momentarily to catch his breath and wipe the cloying blood now trickling into his mouth. He stood transfixed as the face of the ancient

clock on Kairos Central Station was snatched clean away and the orb of time spun through the sky before dropping with a deafening thud in front of him.

Is this the end of time? He struggled for breath as panic and exhaustion took hold. But still he dug deep and did what he had come to do in every waking and sleeping moment in the month since Tia had died . . . so soon after the joyful birth of their baby Themba. He let the memory of the warm glow he had felt that first time he'd held Themba in his arms flood through him. Ever since, lost in space and time, he had searched and searched for signs of Tia's presence to guide him out of the darkness. Nabil fell to his knees, his hair smeared across his face, cheeks indented from the force of the gale. He tugged with a strength he didn't know he had and finally pulled the long golden hand of the clock free.

He felt as if the giant hand was anchoring him, lending him a steadying weapon in his struggle to push on through the storm. As he stared at his clasped fist, a shower of powdered masonry crumbled over his skin. Above, a loud crack shattered the air and a gargoyle fell from the old museum, splitting its head open. Its long, grey tongue shot out, mocking him. Vicious omens whispered in his ear. He pushed on, desperate to keep the darkness from his heart, but the uprooting of the great trees of Kairos City, the brutal bowing and breaking of his beloved oaks filled him with the deepest sense of foreboding he had ever felt in his life.

Nabil shunned the desperate cries, the raw stink of fear in the air, as he rose to his feet and forced himself on. His blood pulsed with one aim only: to see his baby son again, to keep the last being in the world he truly loved, safe. *Themba, Themba, Themba*, he called, begging the wind to carry his voice to his child.

With every step the wind blew stronger and yet Nabil's mind grew steadily quieter, set as it was on one single course. Time's hand, clasped in his, had grown unbearably heavy, but still he clung to it until finally, from out of the dust and debris, emerged the outline of his warehouse home.

With the windows blown out, the wind howled through the wide empty frames. Beds were upturned, abandoned blankets lay on the floor. He called out to Tia's sister, Lottie. Breathless, he paused to listen but not a soul stirred. Nabil ran to the storeroom and collapsed against the heavy metal door, screaming Themba's name.

Swiftly unbolting the door, Lottie stared in horror at Nabil's bruised and bloodied face. Afterwards she spoke of how he resembled an ancient warrior, dug up from a battlefield clasping a golden arrow in his hand. Gently she coaxed the clock hand from him and placed his son in his arms. As Themba gurgled and grinned, Nabil raised his head and listened to the piercing cries of another soul.

He kissed Themba's mop of soft curls, reluctantly handed him back to Lottie and limped on through the debris of the warehouse, following the insistent cries. Pieces of tarpaulin

and odd fragments of lives flew past the windows – a red shoe, a bright-green headscarf, a piece of sheet music. Nabil braced himself, clinging to the banister as he climbed up the rusty spiral staircase.

In front of him a ginger kitten mewled loudly, its fur blasted flat against its ribs, spine arched, clawing at a pillow. Had he struggled all the way up here for this? As he bent down and reached out towards the kitten it grew silent, but now a newly energetic cry rose from a red blanket behind the animal. Nabil moved cautiously towards the bundle and the kitten swiped and hissed. Whatever it stood guardian over felt Nabil's presence because it opened its lungs and the bleating cry grew into a full-throated scream.

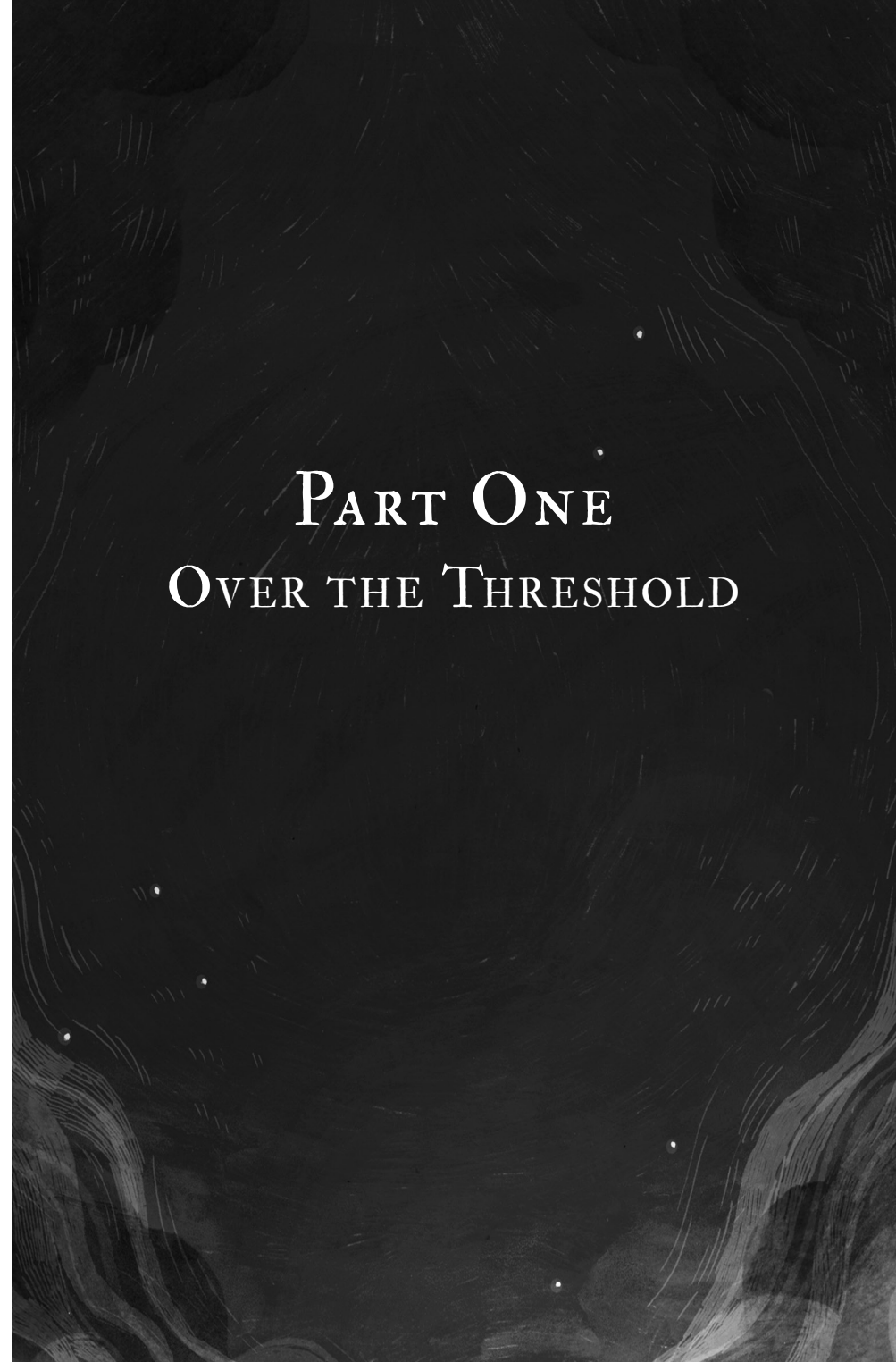
Nabil's hands trembled as he carefully unwrapped a coarse grey blanket to discover a baby girl with jet-black hair, naked except for a daisy chain strung around her body. As she peered at him with her tear-washed eyes, her expression seemed to question him: *what will you do with me?* Nabil quickly covered her soft skin, noticing that his skin and hers were exactly the same hue. Now only her face was visible staring into his. By her side was a basket containing a nest of edible leaves streaked with berry stains, with a golden locket at its centre.

'Shh, shh. Did your mama go out foraging and get caught in the storm? Shh,' Nabil repeated over and over as the kitten wrapped itself around his ankles and began to purr. Nabil cradled the baby closer. He studied her expression, so unlike

Themba's. Questions sparked from her like shooting embers from a fire. Her eyes shone sharp and bright and seemed to ask *Can I trust you? Will you keep me safe?*

Tia appeared in his mind's eye, standing behind him and smiling. He could almost feel her breath on his cheek as the darkness in his heart lightened. *Was I supposed to find you here, baby?* he whispered, cradling her in his arms. A voice floated to him through the specks of ash and dust.

We'll call her Shifa – the one who heals.



Part One
Over the Threshold



Chapter One

Shifa sat on her bed brushing her hair over and over, sweeping through the length from the crown over her shoulders, splaying it out across the tiny gap between her bed and Themba's. One side of her parting was now the tangle-free silken 'raven river' as Nabil had named it, and that her twin Themba loved to twist around his fingers to get to sleep. Sometimes she thought her hair belonged more to them than her. Her papa, Nabil, who was always saying 'never cut your crowning glory', would not be happy, but she was doing this for him as well as for Themba. In five years' time it would have grown again *if she wanted it to*.

Daisy came purring up the bed and claimed Shifa's smooth mane as her pillow. The old cat had grown so thin that she could feel each one of her ribs underneath the scraggy ginger coat that Shifa now stroked with the back of her hand. Daisy gazed at Shifa with her dull green eyes as if to say, *Don't leave me*. Shifa attempted to block the thought

that upset her the most about leaving home – unless Daisy was some kind of miracle cat and lived to a ridiculous age, Shifa knew that when she said goodbye to her tomorrow, it would be for ever.

'Should I cut a strand for you too?' Shifa sighed as she began smoothing through the other side of her parting.

'Five years away will feel like for ever for them,' Aunt Lottie had shouted at Nabil from the warehouse window as they left and Lottie's words had whirred around Shifa's mind all night. As usual at bedtime, Themba had reached across the narrow gap between their beds, taken hold of a strand of Shifa's hair and begun tangling it around his fingers. She'd lain on her side and watched her papa, wracked by tears, wrap himself in his own grandfather 'Baba Suli's' coat. *Strange how my great-grandfather can feel so real to me through Papa's stories,* Shifa mused. Nabil was clutching a tiny photomemory in his hands. What had disturbed him so much that he had felt the need to wrap himself in Baba Suli's coat, which belonged as their guardian and protector at the entrance to their story hive? At the sight of Nabil's distress Shifa had been about to climb out of bed to comfort him when Nabil, kneeling, had leaned forward, rested his forehead on the floor, rocking back and forth to do what he said he didn't believe in – pray. Shifa wondered then, *Is he praying for himself or us?* Shifa shivered and enveloped herself in her blanket. Watching Nabil she had the oddest feeling that it was not only her papa who was praying but

Baba Suli too had come to join him . . . kneeling inside his coat.

But this morning all had been restored to its rightful place and her papa had put on a brave face and set out early with Themba, giving her a longed-for birthday treat of a lie-in snuggled up beside Daisy.

'You're going to have to let me go, Daisy!' Shifa sighed when she'd finished brushing her hair. Gently she eased her hair from under her cat's tummy. Daisy miaowed a complaint and settled again in the indent that had been left by Themba's head. Shifa gave that side a final brush and smoothed over her daisy-patterned dress. It felt weird trading it for her usual shorts and T-shirt but it was her one dress and if she couldn't wear it on her birthday when could she? Despite her papa's odd reaction when Aunt Lottie had given it to her, it was comforting to know that it had once been worn by her mama, who according to Lottie, as a grown woman had been just about Shifa's size and height. In any case, she might not look too out of place in the palatial agora if what Lottie said was true and this vintage daisy pattern and material called cotton was gold dust to Paragons.

She stood up and stretched out her long, lean arms, climbing on her bed attempting to catch a glimpse of more than a fragment of herself at a time in the tiny misted mirror. She sighed, remembering how her papa's scowl had dampened her joy after unwrapping the dress. 'What's the point of that? Where's she going to wear it at Freedom Fields?' he said. Shifa

didn't see the harm in pretending to be a Paragon for a day, especially on her birthday. At least Aunt Lottie understood how much she had longed to own something beautiful just for the sake of it.

But she had to grudgingly admit that her papa was right. She knew that even in the city they couldn't afford to eat out, or visit the galleries, cinemas and theatres, let alone shop in the grand agora marketplace. The thought always lit flames of outrage in her gut and she'd be flooded with all the clamouring 'how come' questions that she'd ever asked. She got that after Hurricane Chronos the ARK Government had set out a new way, but how could it be right to divide people into 'Paragons', 'Freedoms' and 'Outlanders'? To Shifa, even the names seemed like someone's cruel joke.

Maybe this is my protest dress, my 'cotton' armour that my mama Tia once wore, to make me my most wild and rebellious!

Shifa grabbed her ARK ID and a seed-packet envelope off her bedside table and shoved them into one of the deep pockets of her dress, loving that she could stick her hands down inside them and feel properly comfortable.

Fired up now, she bent down and tied the laces on her once-white canvas pumps – her best ever clothes-bank find, but now slightly greying and worn.

She twirled around. 'What do you think, Daisy? Will I pass for a Paragon?' Daisy opened a sleepy eye and closed it again. 'Don't you judge me now!' Shifa sighed. 'It's my birthday and I'll do what I want to!'

Shifa left Daisy sleeping, wandered into the communal room and knelt at the upturned crate that her papa had cobbled into a table. Her great-grandpapa Baba Suli's coat was back in its rightful place, guarding the secret doorway to their story hive, as if announcing that normality was restored. *As if . . .*

Shifa picked up the Freedom Fields brochure, its cover adorned with yellow sunflowers and smiling faces.

Freedom Fields Family

'Stronger Together'

Education, Healthcare, Work Experience, Training

Food, Fresh (air), Fair (treatment), Freedom and Fun

A Family for Life

Saliva filled Shifa's mouth and her stomach groaned as she turned to the well-thumbed 'Catering and Hospitality' page. The image showed bronzed, healthy young recruits sitting around a table laden with glistening strawberries, apples, eggs, cereals and bread. At least from tomorrow, they wouldn't have to wait in line for hours at the food bank each week only to receive the same bland goods: a scoop of vitamin powders, rice, pasta, corn, flour – and whatever Paragon surplus 'treats' past their sell-by date were on offer.

Shifa scanned the room, taking in the rickety furniture and the stacks of bike parts, wheels and other random finds waiting to be traded. The metal water buckets for washing,

filled yesterday from the compound tap, were lined up on the cracked floor and already running low. Anyone walking in here would wonder what there was to miss in their cramped home. But then, 'just anyone' would not know about the story hive and the secret treasure that lay behind all their recycled finds.

Shifa's stomach rumbled again. She skirted around the buckets to the sink, held a cup under the tap and just about managed to quarter-fill it with a trickle of drinking water.

She reached into the back of the cupboard to find half a cob of stale bread and an unlabelled jar of something green and pickled. Shifa took a spoonful of dry vitamin powder and mixed it to a watery paste. It was supposed to dissolve but never did. As usual it coated her tongue and stuck to her back teeth. *Disgusting.* She chewed the dried-up bread and pickles as speedily as she could. *Better not to taste for too long, just get it down.* As she swallowed, she caught a flash of a blue-black uniform through the frosted glass of their window and instinctively crouched low following the silhouette of the pointy-capped beak of an ARK Enforcement officer, or 'Crow', as named by Lottie and Themba long ago. A small card dropped on to the mat, followed by a larger envelope. The shadowy figure moved on. The large envelope fell on its back with the Freedom Fields sunflower seal face upwards. Shifa turned it over.

Nabil Aziz

URGENT

Private and Confidential

Handle with care

She picked up the official-looking envelope addressed to Nabil and laid it against the bottle vase on the crate table, eyeing it suspiciously. She didn't see how it could be 'Private and Confidential' if it was about them going to Freedom Fields, but still . . .

The postcard was addressed to her and Themba.

Happy 11th birthday Themba and Shifa Aziz. Congratulations! You're trained and ready to become Freedom Fields Recruits. Take this to your food bank where you will receive your birthday celebration Paragon donation hamper.

The stirrings of excitement fluttered in her. This would mean extra food for their farewell party in the warehouse tonight! Maybe there would be enough to share with Lottie and her forager friends – in Shifa's dreams, a whole cake with icing.

Shifa shoved the birthday postcard in her pocket along with her ID and seed packet, unbolted the door and let herself out. *So annoying*, she thought, as her papa's rhymes,

invented to keep Themba on track, sprang into her mind too, uninvited, whenever she went out.

Step over the threshold.
Be bold,
Be brave,
Hold true,
To all that I have taught you.

Daisy came padding through from the bedroom and curled herself around Shifa's ankles. 'How come you always know when I'm leaving? Sorry, Daisy. I have to go.' Shifa sighed, carrying Daisy to her frayed chair cushion, where she would sit and wait for her till she returned. It broke Shifa's heart to think of how long Daisy would wait here, crying for her after they had left for the farm. Daisy set up her usual high-pitched protest that tore into Shifa and finally brought tears to her eyes. She wiped them away with the hem of her dress and opened the door.

Behind her the enormous mismatching hands of the old station clock collided into twelve o'clock.