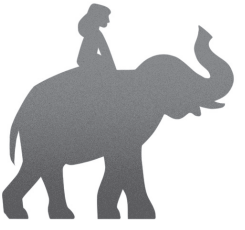
The Destiny of Minou Moonshine



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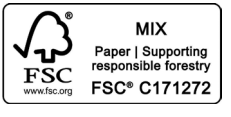

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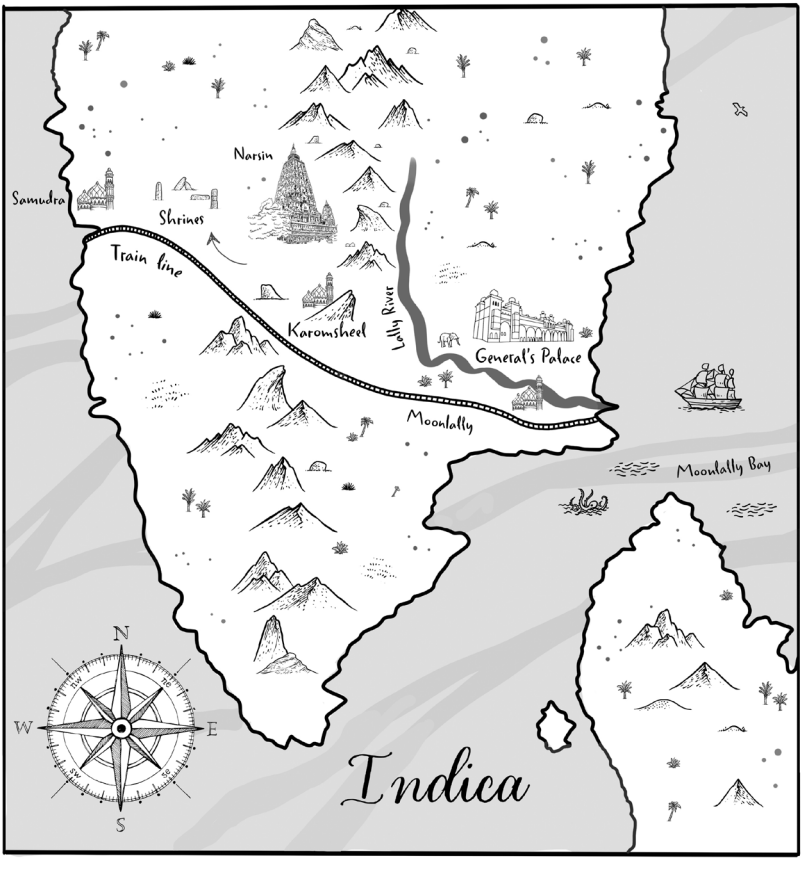
For Rohan and Leela




Narsin
Samudra
Shrines
Train line
Karomsheel
Lolly River
General's Palace
Moonlally
Moonlally Bay
N
W
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Indica

Song of the Dark Lady

Dark Lady, born of the clouded hills,
whose songs summon the rains down still,
whose third eye spears as lightning strikes,
whose powers turn back the highest tide.
Your radiance rivals the silver moon,
your anger brings tempest with monsoon.
Grant us blessings in pearls from oceans deep.
May your amber gaze heal those that weep.
Beloved of poets, weavers of words,
your soft voice tames wild elephant herds.
When the floodwaters rise at year thirteen,
to renew red earth and clothe her green,
then anoint our queendom's rightful queen.





Queen Tara, Pearl Diver

In days of old, when pearls were plentiful as pebbles on the ocean floor, Queen Tara slicked her skin with charcoal against the sharks, gripped a shucking knife between her teeth and plunged beneath the waves for so long, there were rumours she was part mermaid. The largest pearl she found was the size of a hen's egg.

From *A True History of the Queens of Moonlally*



1

By the River







One

The gunshot's crack and boom woke Minou with a start. She blinked in the darkness, thinking at first she'd been dreaming. But the air was hazy with smoke and she could smell the acrid burn of gunpowder. Outside, wildfowl on the river squawked and beat their wings in alarm and a troop of monkeys shrieked noisily from the treetops. Minou yawned, pulling herself up out of her hammock and calling to her grandmother, a dark outline at the entrance to their houseboat.

'Dima? What was that noise?'

'Nothing. Go back to sleep, child.'

Minou collapsed back into her hammock. Dima had most likely scared off a crocodile again, she decided, her eyes growing heavy with the sway and dip of the water. If only she'd been awake to see, for it was a rare thing to see the great muggers in the city. She remembered the last time one of the armoured beasts had ventured this far, though she'd been tiny. She'd

stood on deck, clinging to her grandmother's legs and watched its wide snout drift through black water, like a monster from an old tale. Dima had told her to cover her ears and then fired her old pistol in the air to scare it off.

Dima was Minou's adopted grandmother. She had been a foundling, an abandoned infant, discovered after the great storm thirteen years ago. Father Jacob, the Whitetown priest, had found a rowboat washed up on the muddy bank, Minou a helpless baby bawling inside. Thinking her parents had surely drowned, he'd taken her to Dima's floating shack which, though battered, had miraculously survived. The two of them had lived on the Lally River ever since.

Next morning, Minou stirred in the stifling heat. She'd overslept. Both she and Dima usually woke at dawn when the air was cool, disturbed by noisy parakeets stealing guavas from the trees. She peeled herself out of her hammock and swung down, crouching over the copper bowl of water to splash sweat from her face. Today was Sunday and there was no school. She didn't want to waste a single moment of freedom.

Minou and Dima's home, lodged like flotsam at the riverbend, was not strictly a boat or a house, and houseboat was much too grand a word for it. Dima had built it herself. The base was wooden planks, nailed together and tarred to make a deck, the roof an upturned boat, with canvas tacked over it. The wooden walls of the cabin were patched with packing

cases, gaps sealed with mud, baked hard by the scorching sun. A rusted metal pipe was their chimney, and six car tyres roped to the deck kept it afloat. The shack was firmly anchored and chained to the trees, so it wouldn't be swept away by the current. On the wooden cases, a faded image of a baby, with shiny black curls, advertised: **MIGNON EVAPORATED MILK.** Mignon was the name Dima had given her and one she did not like. She preferred Minou, which she'd called herself as a baby. Her second name, Moonshine, came from the old Whitetown name for their city: Moonshine-on-the-Lally.

Minou pulled the hessian curtain aside and stepped on to the freshly scrubbed deck. Dima was sitting cross-legged, gazing peacefully over the green water and puffing at her pipe. A wreath of smoke hovered in the air. For a moment, Minou wondered if she'd dreamed the gunshot. Then she saw Dima had taken apart her ancient Hungama 19 flintlock pistol to clean it, the parts neatly arranged on a cloth before her.

'What happened last night, Dima? Did you scare off a crocodile – was it a big one?'

Her grandmother shrugged. This might have meant *yes* or *no* or simply *don't ask so many questions.*

'How come you have that old pistol, anyway?' Minou asked.

Dima sniffed. 'Tigers.'

'From when you were a postie in Rangila district?'

Dima had once been postmistress of an area of scattered villages in deepest jungle. Armed with her

antique pistol and a boneshaker bicycle, she hadn't let wild dogs, snakes or the odd tiger hold up the mail once in forty years. Her grandmother nodded curtly, and took the pipe from her mouth. 'Go and eat breakfast,' she ordered. 'It's late.'

Minou sighed. She wouldn't get another word out of Dima, not until her grandmother was good and ready. And she was famished. Her stomach yowled like a stray cat. She swallowed the rice porridge that Dima had left on the iron stove and rinsed her battered metal bowl in the river, leaving it in the sun to dry.

The morning sunshine was thick and golden like melted sugar. Bright red dragonflies flitted over the deck and frogs croaked from the tall grass. Minou wiped her hands on her tunic and slipped on her sandals. The rice porridge had taken the edge off her hunger, but today was Sunday – which meant the churches of Moonlally served food after morning prayers. Dima cooked good, simple meals, but there was never quite enough for a growing girl like Minou.

'I'm off, Dima!' she called. The rusted chains that tethered their houseboat clanked and rasped as she stepped across. Dima turned her head.

'Where are you going?' she called sharply.

It was so unlike Dima to ask this, that Minou teetered and almost slipped off. Righting herself, she swivelled round on one foot.

'Church, Dima – it's Sunday. If I don't go now, I'll miss the food. Shall I bring some back for you?' Dima

rarely attended church, preferring to pray at her own small altar, although she'd taken Minou when she was younger.

'Come here!'

Minou heel-toed back along the chain and sprang on to the deck. Dima's old brown face was creased with worry, like a crumpled paper bag. Minou ran to sit beside her. 'What is it, Dima? What's wrong?'

Her grandmother reached up to pull off the tin elephant she kept strung on a bootlace around her neck. She pressed it firmly into Minou's palm with her rough, gnarled fingers. 'You were too small to look after this when you came to me. Almost thirteen years ago! But you're old enough now. Keep it safe. It's all you have of your mother. If anything happens…' Dima took a long draw on her pipe, as if talking had exhausted her.

Minou examined the tin elephant, small as a baby's fist but surprisingly heavy. Dima had not let her wear it before. The amulet was black with age and the red glass beads that once studded it had fallen out. It had been tucked in her swaddling shawl when she was found – placed there by her mother.

She looked at Dima. In the silence, crickets chirred and a hoopoe made its whooping call. Her grandmother's eyes were watchful, her gaze on the huge, rusted gates that barred the way to the General's palace. In the old days, a stately procession of palace elephants would walk through the Elephant Gates into the Lally to bathe, each grey

trunk holding the tail of the one in front, splashing and squirting water at passers-by. But for as long as Minou could remember, the gates had been chained up and overgrown with vines.

'If anything happens… like what, Dima?' she asked, scratching a mosquito bite on her neck. She looped the bootlace over her head, tucking the tin elephant safely beneath her tunic. 'What's going to happen?'

Her grandmother shook her head. 'Thirteen years since the last floods. The Lally's rising, the Dark Lady grows restless. This monsoon will be powerful, after so many dry years. Remember, she watches over you, child. Ever since the night you were found! If she appears to you, pay her proper respect.'

The Dark Lady was an old goddess of Moonlally, whom Dima prayed to every morning. Although Blacktowners attended church, most kept a small icon of her hidden in their homes – she was the goddess who protected their city. Dima claimed to see the Lady when she smoked her pipe on deck at night – a dark shape between flashes of lightning, eyes glowing like coals – but she'd never appeared to Minou.

Minou's stomach gave a pained growl. 'Can I go now, Dima?'

Her grandmother nodded. 'Go to Whitetown Cathedral today. Father Jacob is a good man. You can trust him if you ever need help.'

'I will, Dima. See you later!'

Without another thought to the night's events,

Minou hopped along the chains and on to the bank. She turned to wave, but Dima's attention was elsewhere. Minou followed her gaze to the vast purple balloon hovering above, its engines rumbling like thunder. The General's airship was named the *Napoleon*, though Dima called it the Eggplant because of its purple colour and shape.

Minou glanced back at Dima, who scowled and brandished her fist at the sky. She hated the General and cursed him whenever the blimp passed overhead.

'A ruler without justice loses his realm day by day!' she spat. 'Your days are numbered, tyrant!'

Minou sighed. Dima's curses had about as much effect as raindrops did upon the fat old toad who never strayed from their deck. The General remained in his palace, powerful as ever.

She twisted a ripe guava from a low tree branch that had somehow escaped the monkeys. Munching its pink flesh in three bites, she considered her choices. Whitetown Cathedral or Blacktown Church? Dima had told her to go to Whitetown, which meant cake, as Whitetown ladies prided themselves on their baking. Cinnamon wafers, pastries dipped in icing and once – her mouth watered at the memory – once she'd been given a nutmeg-dusted custard tart.

But Blacktown food was more substantial if you were hungry: rice flour pancakes stuffed with spiced potato and a cool bowl of yoghurt. Blacktown Church ladies always gave her second helpings too, pinching her arms and threatening to take her home

and feed her up. Minou hurled a flat pebble across the river where it skipped, once, twice, three times, before sinking. She'd do as Dima had said – today, anyway. Whitetown it was.