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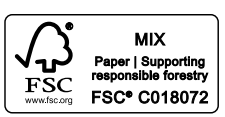
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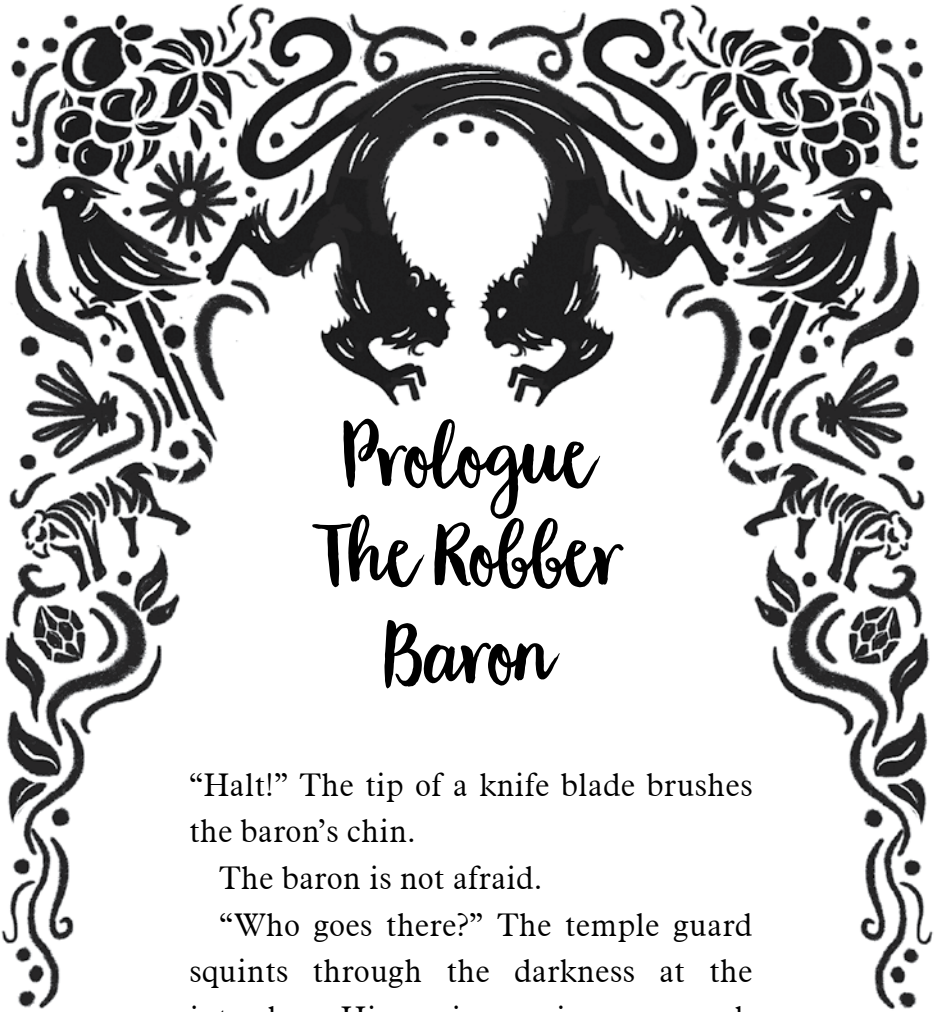
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For my mother, Sarah DasGupta, née Ivatt

Who in this world am I? Ah, that's the great puzzle!
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass*

Illusion is the first appearance of truth
Rabindranath Tagore, *Chitra*


Tusks, Tigers & Tea: Selected Animals of the Indian Subcontinent *
HIMALAYAS
DELHI
JAIPUR
DARJEELING
CALCUTTA
N
W
E
S
*As observed from a safe distance by Sir Horatio Bancroft-Pratt CBE, 1853



Prologue The Robber Baron

"Halt!" The tip of a knife blade brushes the baron's chin.

The baron is not afraid.

"Who goes there?" The temple guard squints through the darkness at the intruder. His voice quivers enough to tell the baron that he is young and inexperienced.

"It is I, Baron Henri Le Vandale!" The baron draws his sword. The blade catches the moonlight. "Let me pass, and you will come to no harm."

The baron glances over the guard's shoulder. A fire glows in the temple courtyard. At the far side towers a statue of Brahma, the four-headed one, all-seeing and all-knowing. He is squatting upon a giant lotus flower. The statue is shrouded in shadow save for a single gemstone the size of a hen's egg in Brahma's central forehead. It gleams in the firelight with a strange greenish-yellow light.

The guard trembles. The baron pushes past, thrusting him aside and striding forward towards the statue.

"HALT!" The guard rushes to stop him.

But it is too late. The baron leaps on to the statue's plinth and stretches to his full height. He reaches above the god's stony gaze to grasp the yellow gem. Pulling a penknife from his pocket, he slides it behind the metal prongs holding the jewel in place. The gem falls from its setting into the baron's outstretched hand.

"STOP!" The guard has reached the statue. He stands trembling, looking up at the baron, eyes bulging with terror.

The baron grins. "It's nothing, my dear fellow. All in a night's work for Henri Le Vandale."

The guard points a warning finger at him. "Be very careful, foreigner. That is the Snakestone, the sacred stone of Brahma, the all-seeing and all-knowing. Its curse will fall upon any presumptuous mortal who dares lay hands on it. For your own sake, put it back!"

The baron roars with laughter. "Dear fellow, you're taking this far too seriously. What good is this splendid jewel doing in this lonely temple, with nobody but yourself for company? Far better for it to be seen and admired, which it will be, once I've sold it for a thousand francs to a member of royalty. So don't trouble your head about the Snakestone, or whatever you call it. I'll be giving it a new lease of life."

Chuckling to himself, the baron leaps down from the plinth. He swats the guard aside like an annoying mosquito and strides out of the temple into the darkness of the forest.

The guard falls on his knees before the statue. "Brahma, the Lotus-born, arise in vengeance!"

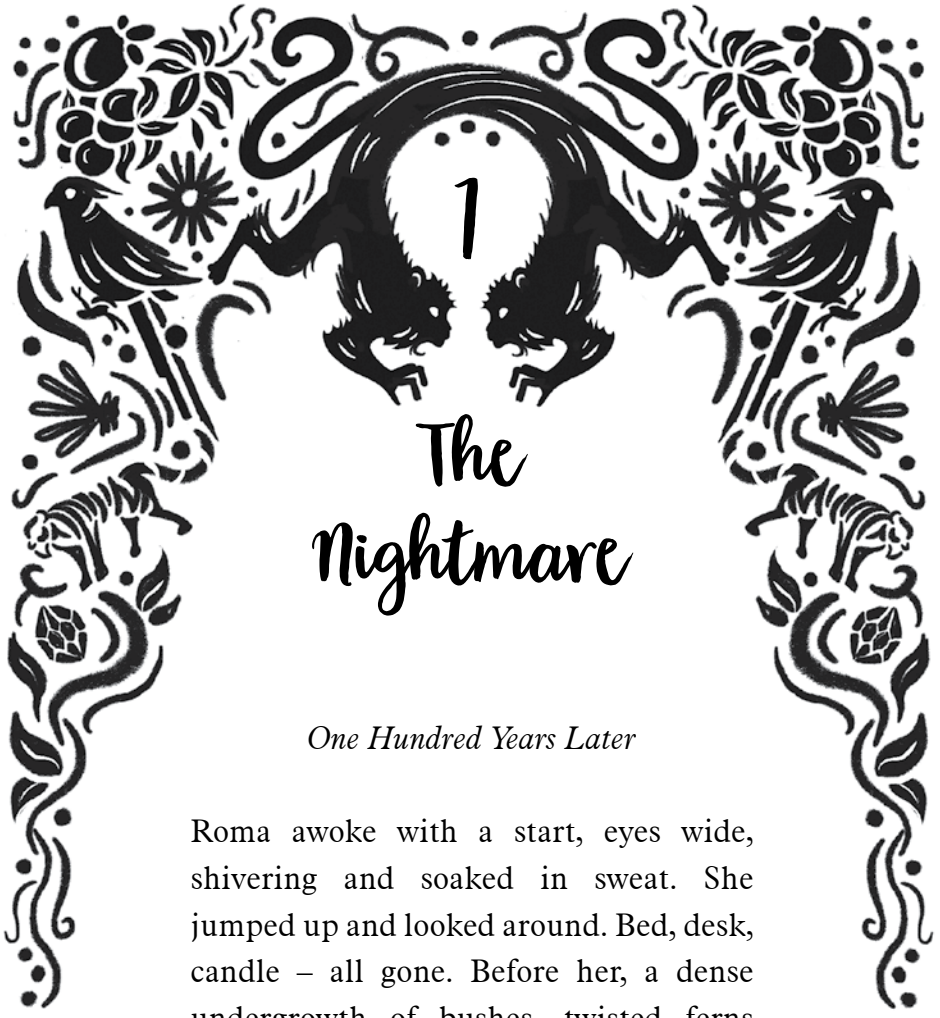
A hush falls on the forest. The chattering of birds and monkeys is stilled. From the swift-footed chital deer to the lumbering elephant, all creatures fall silent as their eyes turn to the temple on the hill.

Pouf!

The fire in the courtyard goes out. A chill wind stirs the leaves of the banyan trees.

"Brahma, all-seeing and all-knowing, arise in vengeance!" Once again, the cry rings along the marbled temple corridors and echoes through the branches of the trees.

There is a rustle and a soft, slow creak. Limbs long immobile grind stiffly into action. Roused from centuries of slumber, the eyes of the statue jerk open.



1
The Nightmare

One Hundred Years Later

Roma awoke with a start, eyes wide, shivering and soaked in sweat. She jumped up and looked around. Bed, desk, candle – all gone. Before her, a dense undergrowth of bushes, twisted ferns and tall bamboo. Flame-coloured orchids glowed in the darkness.

Two of the orchids blinked. Not orchids, a pair of red eyes. A bright green pit viper glared at Roma from the shadows.

The viper growled sleepily. She must

have woken it. The snake swayed for a minute and slithered grumpily back into the undergrowth.

Roma peered around. How had she got here, to the edge of the jungle? A trail of footprints in the dust leading back to the huddle of school buildings gave the unwelcome answer. As did the red scratches on her legs.

She had walked here herself. In her sleep.

There was a sharp stabbing pain in her leg. Roma bent and pulled a thorn out of her calf. It was long and hooked, the type of jungle thorn called "wait-a-bit". Because if you get caught in them, you have to wait before you can extract yourself from their cruel grasp.

That dream again.

The forest, the moonlit temple.

The statue of Brahma, with the great hole in its forehead where something had been ripped out.

A huge gemstone on the forest floor, winking and flashing in the moonlight, vanishing the moment it was grasped.

The dream that had haunted her for so many nights.

Roma plodded back to the schoolhouse. A chill wind blew. She pulled her night shift tightly round her. Despite the heat during the day, it was still cool after sundown on these summer nights around

whose edges the approaching monsoon prowled like a waiting tiger.

At the school gates, under a peepal tree, a lean, wizened old man in a dhoti with grey hair twisted into a topknot was standing on his head.

"Good morning, Goswami Dadu," Roma said to the old man politely.

The upside-down face of the old man grinned back. "Good morning, Roma."

"Does your head not ache, Goswami Dadu?" Roma frowned, remembering the old man had been in exactly the same position outside the school gate the previous morning. Goswami Dadu was a travelling yogi, following the spiritual life. Villagers would leave him offerings of food in return for prayers.

"No headache at all." The old man smiled. "Being upside down is good for you. Inversions allow the body to purge impurities, building strength, calmness and clarity of mind." He wiggled his feet. "Besides, we see many things, when the world is inverted, that we would not see the right way up. The red scorpion that just scuttled across the ceiling of the porter's lodge, for example. I must warn Abhijeet."

"Eeek!" Roma carefully skirted the lodge where Abhijeet, the porter, nodded sleepily. She waved

goodbye to Goswami Dadu and slipped through the gates. Crossing the leafy school compound, she slunk back to her dormitory, tiptoeing past the snoring figures in charpoy beds to slip into her own.

But she couldn't sleep. Daylight was beginning to filter through the drawn shutters, so Roma slid back out of bed and pulled on her clothes. Heading out of the dormitory, she padded down the deserted school corridor to the room next door. The one place where she knew she would find peace.



The school library smelled of mildew and magic. Shelves crammed with dusty tomes glowed pale gold in the dawn seeping through the shuttered windows. Roma made for the big writing desk in the middle of the room and pulled a sheet of letter paper out of the drawer. She began writing in a neat spidery script:

The Library
Miss Oliphant's School for Young Ladies
Kalabon Forest,
Bengal
Monday,
27th June 1881, 6 a.m.

Sir Horatio Bancroft-Pratt CBE,
"Westward Ho!"
5 Chowringhee Square,
Calcutta

Dear Sir Horatio,

I am writing to you as a pupil at Miss Oliphant's School for Young Ladies with a burning desire to become a doctor. Of course I am aware that this path is barred to persons of the female sex. But I beg you to consider some exceptional circumstances in my case:

1. I have read and am familiar with current works on anatomy, physiology and herbology, including your own excellent book, "Tusks, Tigers & Tea: Selected Animals of the Indian Subcontinent".

2. I recently exploded a mango using molten salt, measuring the effect on my pulse rate of the blast. Damage to the school laboratory was unintended and accidental.

3. I have read and can recite by heart "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" by the much-respected scholar Mary Wollstonecraft.

4. I have demonstrated the cross-lateral control mechanisms of the brain by testing the difficulty of

various bodily actions. For example, the near-impossible feat of drawing a circle with one's foot at the same time as writing one's name.

5. I have it on the good authority of my father that a soothsayer predicted me to be a boy in the womb. The unfortunate occurrence of the opposite was an aberration of nature and not my fault.

Finally, I should like to draw your attention to an observation of the great Greek physician Hippocrates, the Father of Medicine. Namely, that where the art of medicine is loved, there is also a love for humanity. Surely there could be no better example of this love than to reveal the secrets of the healing art to the female sex?

Your humble admirer,
Roma Moreau

Roma blotted the letter carefully and put the pen back in the inkwell. Rising from the table, she padded over the rush matting to the glass-fronted bookcase. She pulled open the door and took from the shelf a large leather-bound volume. *Tusks, Tigers & Tea: Selected Animals of the Indian Subcontinent* by Sir Horatio Bancroft-Pratt CBE.

On the first page was a portrait of Sir Horatio himself. A large red-faced man with a bushy beard and eyebrows that sprouted like hedgerows. Sir Horatio was Roma's hero. He had travelled all over India, discovering miraculous cures and healing potions from plants and animals. Then he had retired to found the Bengal Medical College, a pioneering medical school.

Roma dreamed of going there someday, but women were not allowed at the Bengal Medical College, nor any of the schools that prepared for its entrance exam. And Papa wasn't of a mind to help her get the rules changed.

"Medicine and adventure are not for women, Roma," he would say, ruffling her hair. "Miss Oliphant's is the proper place for young ladies. Leave the blood and dirt to the men."

So Roma was left to vent her frustration by causing minor explosions in Miss Oliphant's small school laboratory.

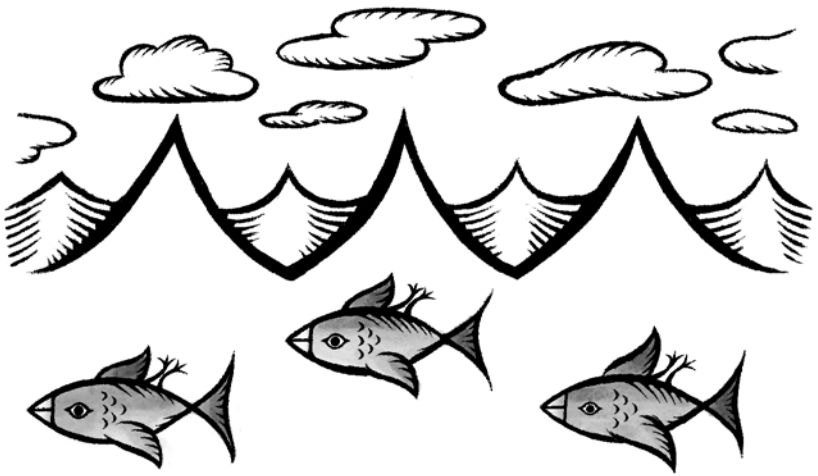
Roma flipped through the pages of Sir Horatio's book. Pictures of brightly coloured animals and birds danced past. Bengal tiger, cloud leopard, black bear. Roma called this book *The Bestiary*. It was her favourite book. Even better than her second-favourite

book, *Lectures on Phrenology with an Analysis of Parts of the Cranium* by the Reverend Jeremiah Boggis. When she reached a particularly large full-colour illustration, she stopped flipping the pages.

A small wrinkled black face with beady eyes peered mournfully out at her from a golden cloud of fur. The golden leaf-eating monkey. The rarest monkey in India. A species on the verge of extinction, only to be found in one mountain range, hidden near Darjeeling in the wild Himalayas. A creature so rare as to be a legend, worshipped for its almost magical powers: the ability to warn of the presence of snakes, and its apparent immunity to disease.

Sir Horatio Bancroft-Pratt had dedicated his life to finding the breeding grounds of the golden leaf-eating monkey, in order to study it and discover the secret of its mysterious immunity. He had failed, and had declared in his retirement speech at the Bengal Club that it was his one great regret over a long and splendid career.

Roma flipped back to the beginning of the book, which contained a fold-out map: a large map of India, with the habitat of every species Sir Horatio had encountered on his travels labelled. All, that is, except for the golden monkey. For this, there was only a question mark in the region of the Himalayas near Darjeeling. There was also a picture of fish swimming beneath waves along the coastline:



The picture was based on a drawing in an ancient Indian scroll. But, as Sir Horatio noted in his introduction, it made no sense. The golden monkey was not an aquatic animal, so could not possibly live in the sea. What did the picture mean? Did it contain a clue of some sort to the monkey's breeding grounds? It was impossible to tell. Roma had never been to the Himalayas, but she had listened to her father talk about his adventures there. Hair-raising treks on the trail of poachers. Watching the orange sunrise strike the snow-capped peak of Mount Kanchenjunga from

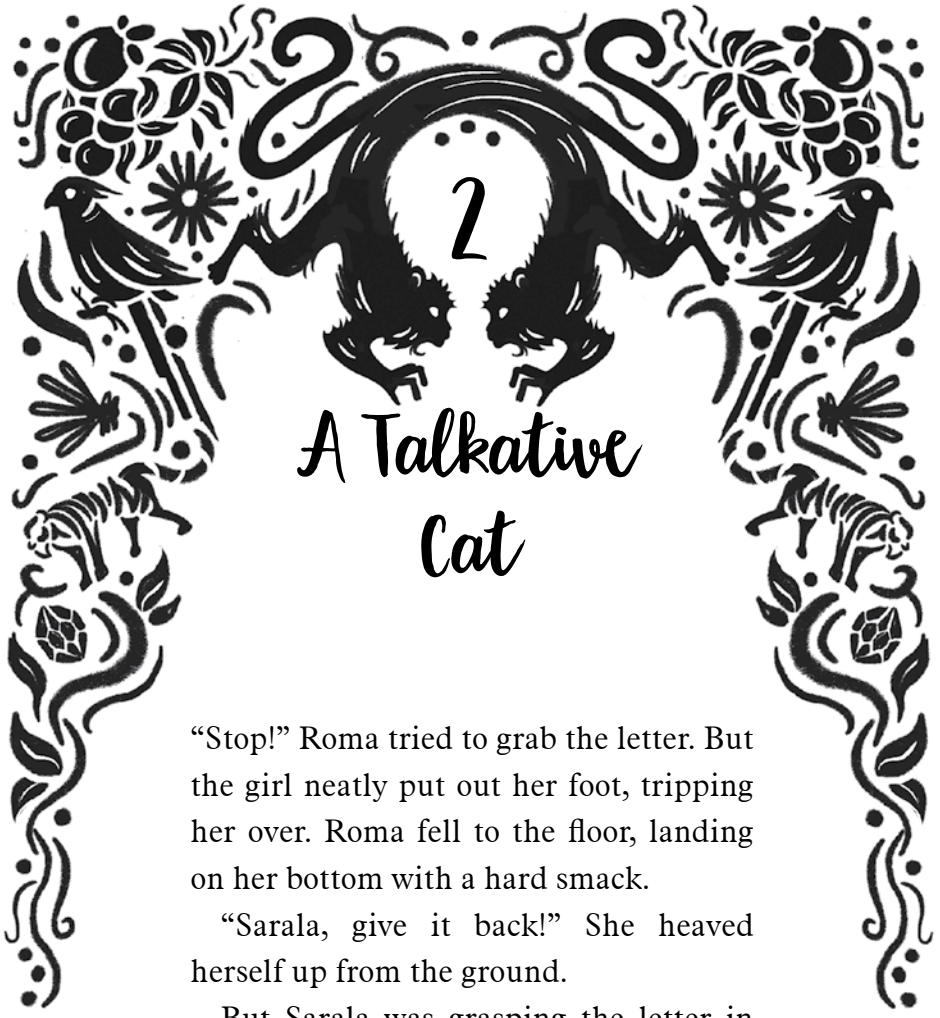
the summit of Tiger Hill. One day, she had decided, she would witness this breathtaking sight for herself. Why, perhaps she might even discover the secret breeding grounds of the golden monkey and the source of its immunity! They'd have to let her into medical school then.

Roma slipped the book into her satchel. Nobody would notice it had gone missing. She would study the map later. She went back to the desk, sat down and began to reread her letter.

A sharp hiss in her ear cut Roma's daydream short.

"Ha! What have we here?" a snide voice whispered.

Roma jumped up from the desk and spun round. A slim girl with long black hair and her lip curled in a snarl stood before her, hands on hips. Roma turned back to the desk to grab her letter. But she wasn't quick enough. It had already been snatched away.



2 A Talkative Cat

"Stop!" Roma tried to grab the letter. But the girl neatly put out her foot, tripping her over. Roma fell to the floor, landing on her bottom with a hard smack.

"Sarala, give it back!" She heaved herself up from the ground.

But Sarala was grasping the letter in her fingers. Her eyes narrowed as she scanned the contents. "What's this?" The snarl became a smirk. Sarala turned to the dozen-odd huddled figures that had appeared in the doorway of the library. "A letter to the honourable Sir Horatio