

pouring over bathers.

Shouts echoed in the distance. Chaya ran down the pebbly paths towards them, her satchel slapping against her leg. A dense knot of people blocked the view.

Chaya pushed her way to the front.

The King's men were here.

They were outside one of the little houses. The front door was open and the family's possessions had been thrown outside. Chaya recognised the house. It was Bala's, from school.

A soldier tossed a small sack of rice out of the house, spilling the contents on the ground over a heap of reed mats, pillows, and clothes spotted with lentils. A woman threw herself on the rice, sobbing, and tried to scoop it up with her hands.

No, no, *no*. This couldn't be happening.

General Siri was standing by his horse, dressed in his high-shouldered purple jacket, an embossed-leather dagger sheath strung at his side. Father was next to him and they seemed to be arguing, Father jabbing his arm towards Bala's house. General Siri sighed and turned away.

"You'll all be next," he yelled at the silent crowd. "All of you. Unless you give up the thief."



went up to the shelves and moved some trinkets to the front. "Please choose any one you want. Or two, three, whatever."

Nour stepped around the work table to the shelves.

Chaya marched after her. "Wait a minute, *wait a minute*. Neel, what's this about two or three?"

Neel closed his eyes. "Chaya, I'm *begging* you—"

"But then *you'll* have to pay your master with your wages. As it is he pays you so little."

Nour ignored them and rummaged on the shelves.

"Stop it," Neel hissed at Chaya. "We got the jewels. Don't ruin it now."

Someone cleared their throat behind them. Chaya turned around to see two men had walked into the workshop. They were dressed in identical guard uniforms, and they stamped their shoes on the coir rug, looking around with interest.

Behind them some more people followed through the fields. And in the distance beyond the paddy fields Chaya could see a group of riders on horseback. The ground listed under her feet as a wave of dizziness swept through her.

It was the King's men.

"We're just searching the area," said one of the guards who'd come in, nodding respectfully at Chaya



men and back to the waterfall.

They couldn't get caught now. The King would have them put to death at once.

Chaya reached out and pushed Nour into the waterfall.

Nour's scream died on her lips as she tipped down into the abyss of crashing water.

Chaya jumped in after her.

She felt herself whistle through the air before plunging into the water below and slicing down into its cool, swirling depths. The deafening roar muted as she plummeted to the sandy bottom. She kicked hard and surfaced quickly into the rumble and spray, looking around for Nour through hair plastered across her eyes. The current pulled her down the river with the gushing water.

Eventually she was spat into a narrow stream of water. Where was Nour? The water was fast-flowing, but the river was narrow here and the banks were fairly close. Chaya looked up and saw the ledge they'd jumped from high above her. It would take at least half an hour for the men and their horses to find their way down by land.

Something brownish pushed past her downriver, and a cold fear seized Chaya. A crocodile, here? She



malkoha chirps echoed from their tops.

"Stop, Ananda," called out Chaya, squeezing her legs together gently.

Neel slid down Ananda's side. "Chaya, you'd better stay on. Miss Nour and I will walk."

He helped Nour off the elephant. She practically skipped down as if she couldn't wait to get away.

Chaya watched Neel and Nour's heads bob beside her as they walked. They kept a leisurely pace now. The air was thick with the smell of lush greenery and damp earth. The forest was getting denser, although Ananda made short work of knocking down any obstructing foliage in the way. One foot crunched through a rotting log on the ground as easily as an axe through a plantain tree.

"OK, we need a plan," said Chaya.

"Yes, we're as safe as we can be for the moment," said Neel. "But once the King's men realise that we're not on the High Road they'll start to search the jungle."

"I have an idea." Chaya rubbed Ananda behind his right ear with her foot, steering him gently round to the left of a fallen tree. "If we keep heading south we could get to Galle. It's far enough for us to be safe from the King's men, and we can hide there till we



they avoided Jamis and his warning horn, which he used to scare wild animals away from his crops.

Spiky pineapple crowns scratched against Chaya's ankles as they walked, and Nour suppressed a few gasps.

They were approaching the village now, the rows of tiny wattle and daub houses squatting to their right and left in front of them.

A gentle breeze from the river in the distance whispered through the houses, lifting up strands from their thatched roofs, and then all was still again. Chaya tried to make out the river in the darkness. There was a gentle lap-lap of water, and she could faintly see the muddy bank where Vijay was attacked by the crocodile.

"Let's go to Siva," said Neel. "He's one of the village elders so we can speak to him first and then spread the word from there."

"Yes," said Chaya. Siva was reasonable, she liked him. "It's that house there."

She followed Gamage, Rameez and Leela, and they tiptoed towards the line of houses. *This one?* Gamage mouthed, holding up his torch at the door.

The flame of his torch caught the thatch, and a spark licked its way across the roof. Gamage swore