Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

---

**Opening Extract from...**

# River of Ink

Written by Paul M. M. Cooper

Published by Bloomsbury

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

'Immersive, illuminating and captivating' *The Times*

# RIVER OF INK

'Masterly' *Financial Times*

PAUL M.M. COOPER

BLOOMSBURY

Praise for *River of Ink*

'Potent, beautiful and wholly absorbing, Cooper's portrait of a reluctant revolutionary had me in thrall from its first chapter. A wonderful, memorable debut' Madeline Miller, Orange Prize-winning author of *The Song of Achilles*

'A highly accomplished debut: Cooper's writing glides from moments of grace and beauty to pure horror in this enthralling novel' Mahesh Rao, author of *The Smoke is Rising*

'Cooper vividly reconstructs a long-buried society and creates in Asanka – a coward reluctantly forced into acts of courage – a likeable, multifaceted narrator' *Sunday Times*

'Cooper endows his work with persuasive historical accuracy and detail, but the "juice" of his own work is the intensely poetic quality of his prose' *Independent*

'An author with a rare skill for deploying heavy research with a light touch, for revelling in the seductive possibilities of style without losing sight of narrative drive, and for making profound points while also delivering first-rate entertainment. Cooper's own pen is certainly a formidable weapon and it will be exciting to see him wield it again in years to come' *Asian Review*

'Polonnaruwa is resurrected with its alleyways, gardens, palaces and teeming inhabitants . . . Yet the research is displayed with a light, effective touch, never holding up the action. This intricate, interlayered tale harks back to a time when the written word held unstoppable power and prestige' *Financial Times*

'Cooper's *River of Ink* is an exquisite offering whose words sing in the blood. This is a tale of ancient Sri Lanka, a tale of conquest, change and forbidden love' *Manhattan Book Review*

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

**PAUL M.M. COOPER** was born in south London and grew up in Cardiff, Wales. He was educated at the University of Warwick and UEA, and after graduating he left for Sri Lanka to work as an English teacher, where he took time to explore the ruins both ancient and modern. He has written for magazines, websites and also worked as an archivist, editor and journalist.

@PaulMMCooper
paulmmcooper.com

# River of Ink

Paul M.M. Cooper

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Paperbacks
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

BLOOMSBURY and the Diana logo are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain 2016
This paperback edition first published in 2017

© Paul M.M. Cooper, 2016
Map by Emily Faccini

Paul M.M. Cooper has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work.

Every reasonable effort has been made to trace copyright holders of material reproduced in this book, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers would be glad to hear from them.

Extract on page 102 from *The Song of Songs and Ancient Tamil Love Poems* by Abraham Mariaselvam, copyright © 1988 by Biblical Institute Press. Reprinted by permission

Extracts on pages 142, 224, 265 and 339–40 from *Kuruntokai*, translated by Dr M. Shanmugan Pillai and David E. Ludden, copyright © 1997 by International Institute of Tamil Studies. Reprinted by permission

This is a work of fiction. Names and characters are the product of the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

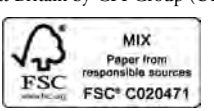
No responsibility for loss caused to any individual or organization acting on or refraining from action as a result of the material in this publication can be accepted by Bloomsbury or the author.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4088-6218-6
TPB: 978-1-4088-6222-3
PB: 978-1-4088-6229-2
ePub: 978-1-4088-6223-0

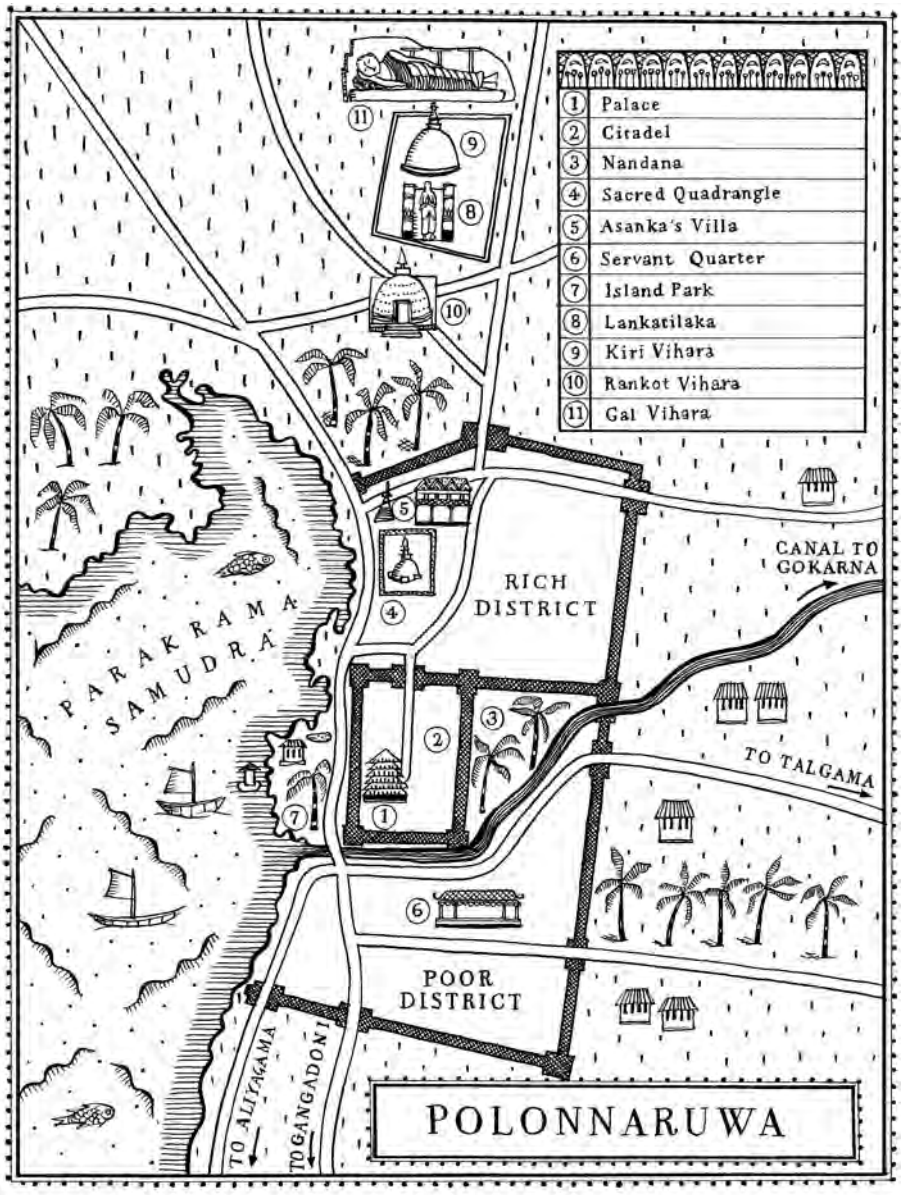
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY




To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com.
Here you will find extracts, author interviews, details of forthcoming events and the option to sign up for our newsletters.

To Sarah, who was worth it all


1 Palace
2 Citadel
3 Nandana
4 Sacred Quadrangle
5 Asanka's Villa
6 Servant Quarter
7 Island Park
8 Lankatilaka
9 Kiri Vihara
10 Rankot Vihara
11 Gal Vihara
RICH DISTRICT
POOR DISTRICT
PARAKRAMA SAMUDRA
CANAL TO GOKARNA
TO TALGAMA
TO ALIYAGAMA
TO GANGADONI
POLONNARUWA

රට වටකර වැට බැන්දත් කට  වටකර වැට බඳින්න බැහැ

*Rata watakara weta bendat, kata watakara*
*weta bandinna beh*

'You can build a fence around the country, but you can't build a fence around the mouth'

– Sinhala proverb

'. . . and there landed a man who held to a false creed, whose heart rejoiced in bad statesmanship, who was a fire in the forest of good . . . who was a sun that closed the night lotuses of wisdom, a moon that closed the day lotuses of peace, a man by the name of Magha, an unjust king sprung from the Kalinga line'

– *The Chulavamsa, the Chronicles of Sri Lanka*
Chapter LXXX – The Sixteen Kings

# Book I

# *Smoke*

# Chapter One

Do you remember the mynah birds that used to live in the courtyard outside your room? On the day the city fell, they were all twittering louder than I'd ever heard them, and flying from tree to tree in a flock. The noise was tremendous. While I watched them through the lattice, I was thinking about what would happen if the King had cords tied to each of their tails, how it wouldn't be long before the net they wove would wrap up the sky and black out the sun. There was a man out there too, a Muslim man, sitting beneath a shade tree with lamps lined up on a blanket, singing in a slow, cracked voice. 'Little lamps, buy your little clay lamps for the long, dark nights.'

You must remember this. You were sitting right there beside me, your back straight and your forehead furrowed, murmuring the letters to yourself as you cut them.

'Ma–ha–ra.'

You were a quick learner, and by then I didn't have to guide your hand. I did sometimes, though, because its back was smooth and freckled and cool to the touch. I would glance at your moving lips, too, and the winding interlaced

ribbons of hair that rolled down your back. That hair – I still dream of that hair sometimes. When I do, it melds with my dreams of rivers, so I am floating in it, then drowning. It was hot, and I was losing control of myself, sitting so close, so I tried to watch the mynah birds instead.

'You've been looking out there for so long,' you said. 'What's so interesting?'

'Just the birds,' I said. 'Have you ever seen so many flocking inside the city?'

You didn't answer. I listened to the noise they were making and the sound of your stylus slicing paper, a scratching like the insects that burrow through the palace woodwork at night.

A girl of your position should never have been writing; a man of my position should never have been teaching you. We both knew these things, and so fear was our constant third classmate. Sometimes, maybe once or twice a week, we would hear footsteps outside the door of your room, or the sound of raised voices in the servant quarter outside, and we would hush each other. One of us would be overcome by panic, and then the other would always follow. We would fumble to pack everything away – the charcoal, stylus, oil, paper – cramming it into my bag, shovelling it under the table. Then the footsteps would pass, or the voices would start arguing about the price of a cupful of millet, and we would catch sight of each other, hearts pounding, hands dirtied with charcoal dust and oil, and breathe out.

But when the bells began to ring on that day, it was different. You didn't stop writing. You barely moved, and I'll always remember that. Even the birds outside faltered in the air, swung around and weaved back to their branches, as though they knew the difference between the bronze bells in the temples and the heavy iron ones on the walls. Those short, yelping peals.

Soon the bells were joined by shouting in the distance, and the sound of hooves in a nearby street, but it didn't immediately occur to me what was going on. In the courtyard, the Muslim man stopped his singing. He wrapped up his lamps. Before long, some common people ran out of a door and down the street with their children, then I could see the King's soldiers out on the main road. It was then I knew. Kalinga Magha, the man they were calling 'the demon king', had arrived.

'Watch the curl on your lha,' I told you, and heard my voice high and reedy, like a boy's. I coughed, and touched your hand as though to guide you through the letter's tail. Your skin was cold. I could feel you shaking. I was going to say something else, though I didn't know what, when a boy in red-brown servant's clothes ran into the courtyard outside and began shouting my name.

'Asanka!' he shouted. He sounded scared. 'Master Asanka!'

You ducked your head a little, though it was impossible for anyone to see in through the lattice.

'Who is it?' you hissed.

'I don't know,' I said. 'He looks panicked, though.'

'Maybe he's one of the King's new messengers.'

'Maybe. I should probably—'

'Will you come back?'

I stood up, and you stayed where you were, looking up at me.

'Yes, of course. You know I will. What about you? Will you still be here when I do?'

'I'll be right here,' you said, and after holding me for a long moment in your gaze, you turned back to your writing.

'Pi–ri–tha.'

Right then, right at that moment, I could have changed everything: grabbed your wrist, told you to pack your bags. But I was never the kind to take sharp turns in life, any more than the water in a river decides one day to flow over the hills. That was the time to escape, and I let it slip away.

I pulled aside the curtain, squinting in the daylight, and the boy shouting in the courtyard caught sight of me with relief. He scuffed the dust with his heel.

'Master Asanka! The King wants to see you,' he said, his eyes wide with fear, a bead of spittle on the corner of one lip.

'What's so urgent?' I said, but before I'd finished saying it, the boy turned and began to run back in the direction of the King's Highway. 'Where are you going?' I called after him.

'His Majesty said that once I'd told you, I could leave!' the boy shouted back. 'He said there are already too many ghosts here!'

The boy disappeared around the corner before I could answer, and I felt fear lurch inside me. King Parakrama hadn't been himself recently, not since the army had come back beaten or since the monks had taken the Buddha's tooth from the city to hide it from the invader among the high passes of Mount Kotthumala. I looked up at the lattice of your room, where I knew you were looking back. The Muslim man had begun to pray beneath the shade tree, but he looked up at me for a second, as if to say, 'Well, the King's orders are the King's orders', which they most definitely are. I turned and made my way up to the palace.

As I write this, I realise that I am a man with more regrets than scars.

The King's Highway was full of people flooding towards the south gates with their belongings piled on to carts or loaded on their backs. There were soldiers with spears and dirty cloths, too, and men on horses and all kinds of holy

men among the crowd. I had to push through the whole unclean mass to cross the road, and none of the peasants paid any attention to my fine robes or ruby earrings as they pushed and ran and shouted past me. They were all babbling like fools, and the words that were passing between them were: 'Kalinga Magha. Kalinga Magha. Magha from Kalinga is coming.'

I looked to the north, and saw columns of smoke rising above the walls, a haze of red dust darkening the sky. The citadel wall bristled with spears beneath its canopies. And the palace, *aiyo*, it was so beautiful back then. On my way up to the royal quarters, I saw maybe a dozen or more breathless messengers taking the steps three at a time. I didn't need to knock when I got to the top: the guards at the King's chambers nodded at me and pushed the door open.

When I stepped inside, I found King Parakrama standing at the balcony with his back to me, the city stretched out before him. He was trembling. In the distance, past the white domes of the temples and the clutter of clay and leaf rooftops and the snaking outer walls, the largest army I have ever seen was gathering in the rice fields.

I could hear them now: the rumble of fifty-thousand footfalls, the conches, throbbing drums and voices, the spears bashed on shields, the trumpeting of many elephants. All of it like the sound of a high waterfall after rain. Sweat rivered the King's back, and his shoulder blades were almost touching.

'Asanka,' he said, and combed a hand through his hair. 'When you were a child, did you ever think that you might live for ever? Not for ever, maybe, but do you know what I mean?'

When the King asked me this kind of question I had learnt to agree, then to keep quiet and let him speak.

‘Yes, Your Majesty,’ I said. ‘I’m sure I can remember the feeling.’

It was a lie, though. Since my father died when I was six, I have always been aware of my own death, lurking some day in the future. The King grunted.

The throne room wasn’t usually so hot. That day there were no servants operating the fan, or carrying water. I felt a blind, liquid fear filling every corner of my body. I watched the army massing outside the gates like the shadow of an enormous cloud, and knew without doubt that the walls would be overrun, the guard would fall, and the city would burn. Every moment I wasted in the palace was another moment closer to our deaths. The itch went right down to my fingertips. I had to get back to you. We had to escape.

‘Great lord, I apologise, but I need to return to my apprentice as soon as possible,’ I said, trying to keep the fear from my voice. ‘He’s the – the son of someone important, you understand, and I’ve left him waiting there with no guidance at all—’

‘Asanka,’ the King said, choking a little. His back was still turned to me. ‘When a king – there’s something – there’s something I have to tell you.’

But he didn’t get to finish. There was the sound of running feet outside, the doors were pushed open, and two generals burst into the room with heaving chests. I could rarely tell the generals apart, all thick-bearded and dressed for war even during festivals, but they knew who I was. They both glanced at me and I felt as detested as a stray dog.

‘Great King, my radiant lord,’ the taller began, ‘we had no idea – the heretic from the mainland – he marched nearly two *yojanas* overnight. Nothing – nothing is ready!’

The King said nothing. He didn’t turn from the balcony. The generals took it in turns to ream through a list of all the

weak points in the defences, every gate unbarricaded, every division that had fled south or been wiped out, the dry wells, the soured rice, the number of horses, the number of elephants. With every item, I felt a cavern yawn a little wider inside me. The King's legs were shaking now, and as I watched another bead of sweat slide down his back, a mantra began in my head.

*I've led a good life*, I told myself. *I've never hurt anyone. Let him dismiss me soon, Lord Buddha. Let him dismiss me soon*.

'My King,' one of the generals said, 'we don't have the rations. One month rice, one millet. Four months, if you close up the citadel and let the farmers go hungry. After that, it's bark and jasmine buds, even for the swordsmen. And the rains will end soon. You know the way this goes, my lord – and once the elephants start to weep, the mahouts will have to butcher them. For the meat, Your Highness.'

'I saw a calf weeping just yesterday, My King,' the other said. 'All of them are already thin and yellow-eyed. Ellu the trainer thinks the hunger will make them fiercer, if it comes to fighting, but weaker too.'

'And tougher as meat. You should see the monsters the Kalinga brought with him. Juice streaming from their temples, people are saying. Tusks like bargepoles. He'll take from the villages: food, water, whatever he needs. Magha can outlast us, my lord.'

'We beg you, Your Highness, great lord of the three lands. We live to carry out your orders. But what should we do?'

Nothing. I moved to let the breeze pass over my skin, let it cool the beads of sweat that were crawling out of my armpits and down my ribs. I watched the dust and smoke of the enemy army furrowing the sky, marking time. Then, without turning, the King spoke.

'There's nothing we can do,' he said. 'What kind of king would I be, to watch my people starve? How would they

remember me?' The silence was as thick as earth. 'Pamu, Tharupiyam, how would they remember me?'

'I don't know, great King,' they each said.

'Asanka?'

'I don't know, my lord. Please, my lord, I have to—'

He raised his hand. Oil dripped in the lamps, and from outside the far-off sound of a child crying drifted up to us.

'Open the gates,' the King said. 'Open them and leave them open. We can only pray that this boy from Kalinga, this Magha, has mercy somewhere in his heart.'

'Great King!' one of the generals almost shouted, forgetting himself. 'They'll burn everything. The schools, the temples.'

But the King finally turned around then, and we all saw that his eyes were full of tears.

'All I want is to make love with my wife for the last time,' he said. 'These are your king's orders. Tharupiyam: send for the Queen. Pamu: tell the men to throw down their arms and open the gates. Then do what you will.'

My heart was beating as if trying to climb up my throat. I watched the generals' faces, the muscles twitching in their jaws. I wanted them to tell the King that he was mad, that they would never open the gates to a savage from the mainland who had spent half the rainy season pillaging our holy sites. But, after a moment, one of them stood to leave with his head bowed. Then the other stood, and they backed out of the room, neither of them meeting the King's eyes. Once they shut the door, I felt desperately alone in the silence.

King Parakrama turned to me. 'In the end it's all we can ask, Asanka, to die in a woman's arms. Get out of here, forget your apprentice, and be with your wife while you can.'

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' I said, hoping he wouldn't see the guilt in my face. I gave a hurried bow, but before I could

turn away, King Parakrama rushed forward, right across the room in great strides. He took me by the shoulders as though to kiss me.

'Asanka!' he whispered in a voice glazed with tears. 'You're the most enlightened man I've ever met. The beauty of your similes has overjoyed my every step. Tomorrow you'll write your poetry in heaven.'

It's strange: after three years of service this was the first time that the King had ever touched me. I saw my own embarrassed surprise in the glassy curve of his pupils, and had to gather together my words like dropped apples.

'Thank you, Your Majesty,' I said, and his eyes became full of simple fears. I remember thinking, in that moment with his face a handbreadth from my own: *all my life I've done nothing but imitate my betters*.

Nobody knows what happens after death, even the most well-read philosophers. As I left the throne room, it wasn't the peace of nirvana that calmed me, not the silence of peace, or the weary duty of rebirth, but the thought of heaven the way the mainlanders and Tamils describe it. A terraced mountain watered by many rivers, with women and men cooling in the shade of pavilions and flowering trees. The golden city of Indra, with gardens and floating palaces cut from crystal. All of it so different from the world around me, which was dusty and cruel and nothing at all like a story.

I lifted my sarong to hurry down the palace's many steps. If I were a good man, which I am not, I might have gone back to my villa, with its climbing flowers and shaded courtyard. I might have dismissed the servants, comforted my wife and prayed in our shrine until the enemy came for us. I think my life would be a very different thing if I were such a person.

Instead, I hurried back to your room in the servant quarter, to tell you that we had to escape the city.

On my way back, I saw Her Majesty Queen Dayani in the palace forecourt, attended by ladies, walking to the arms of her husband. Her face was hard. The face of a girl, I often thought, though I wasn't much older. I often spoke with the Queen during my time at court, but that day when she walked past me and only bowed, I knew to my depths that everyone in Polonnaruwa would be dead by sunrise. I felt the city close around me like a tomb.

The streets were empty now. Even the King's Highway was almost deserted, and the sound of the gathering army was growing louder. There was blue smoke in the air from some abandoned clay oven, and I passed many shops and houses broken into by looters, picked through by the red monkeys, littered with unswept fruit skins and alive with flies. On street corners, the shells of gamblers were left scattered on their tables. For calm, I made a list of splendid things.

Water drunk when you've woken in the night.
The glass beads rich women wear in their hair.
A basketwork litter hurtling down the street at speed.

I remember how, on my way back, I passed a militia band, all white cloths and bamboo spears. They were using slaves to haul a spiked woodwork wound with thorn scrub up to the Mahatita Gate. They hadn't got the order yet. I wanted to shout out to the warriors that the King had surrendered, that they were lashing the labourers for nothing, but an old black-and-pink-dappled elephant was dragging a felled tree behind them. Leaves scattered everywhere between the cobbles, and the sound of the mahout's hammer thudding at the beast's skull made me want to scream.

My hatred of elephants . . . it may seem ridiculous to you, but at the time it was one of the strongest fears in my heart. That day I remembered what Ellu the trainer had told the generals, and I tried to catch the rage of hunger behind the monster's black eyes before I darted down a side street. What a shameful secret. Because of this encounter, my chest was heaving even before I passed through the canal district, and the enemy host began to chant all together: '*Va! Va!*' or something like that. A dread throbbing sound.

I broke into a run, skidding in gutter clay, knocking over piles of oyster shells, and taking short cuts through alleys I would never dare to enter on a normal day. Every door and window was closed. By the time I got back to the servant quarter, there was no one around, no Muslim man with the lamps, no smoke of fires, no voices. Even the mynah birds had flown off to wherever they go when they're not ruining people's lessons with their twittering. I saw only one person on my way back to your room: a wine-tapper I recognised from the baths, hunched over in the corner, whimpering and trying to bury something in the earth with his hands. I walked up the steps, and called in through the curtain.

'Sarasi? Sarasi, are you in there?' No answer. 'Sarasi?'

My heart was sinking into my stomach. How could I be so stupid? I drew the curtain aside, and stepped inside to find your cushion empty. The room was still in darkness with only the light from the lattice spilling into the shadow, illuminating that small corner by the window. I knew it then: you had tricked me, you had pretended to love me so I would teach you to write, and now you were gone. I had been the world's greatest fool. I went over to the desk where a single leaf of paper was left, a short poem scratched into it. It was the story of a pair of lovers who die unmarried and spend the rest of their new lives trying to find each other.

‘I told you I’d be right here,’ you said from behind me. I spun around. I could just about make out your shape, kneeling in the shadow at the back of the room. ‘You thought I’d gone, didn’t you?’

‘I – no, I—’

‘It’s all right, Asanka. I didn’t think you were coming back either. I wrote a poem while I waited, but it’s all wrong.’

Steel flashed in your hand.

‘What are you doing over there?’

You brought your face out of the shadows, and I raised my hand to my mouth. You were holding a blade. You had sliced off the sleek ribbons of black hair in your plait, and hacked at what remained so that your scalp showed in patches through the remaining tufts. You looked like a beggar. I felt a knot in my throat.

‘Your hair! Your hair – *anay*, Sarasi, why did you do that?’

‘You know why,’ you said, and dropped the knife on to your mattress with a thud, throwing your long braid on top of it like a killed snake. ‘Oh, but you’ve never been in a siege before, have you? You’ve never seen what happens.’

I shook my head glumly, and knelt down to stroke the limp braid.

‘The King’s going to surrender, isn’t he?’ you said.

‘How – how could you know that?’

‘A king who’s going to fight doesn’t summon his poet.’

I stared into the darkness around you. ‘He wanted to say goodbye.’

You shrugged, and went to where I’d been using charcoal to mix new ink. You crumbled some in your hands and began to smear it on your cheeks and arms.

‘He was a good king,’ I said as I watched you, and even though it wasn’t true, I realised then how much I had liked him.

‘He wasn’t the worst,’ you said.

I stepped towards you and reached out my hand to touch your head. Ran my fingers through the coarse, tufted bristles that spilled out in clumps like the fur of a diseased dog.

‘We have to get out of here,’ I said. ‘They’ll be here soon. If we leave now, we can—’

‘It’s already too late,’ you said, and looked up at me with eyes bright like newly blown glass. ‘If we leave now, they’ll kill us.’

‘But the south gates – we could—’

‘Anyone who left by the south gates is already dead,’ you said, as though it were obvious.

‘The canals—’

‘Blocked by felled trees, I bet.’

‘But the – we could—’

‘We can’t go anywhere. Sit down. Change out of those clothes if you don’t want to be ransomed.’

I looked down at my gold-and-green sarong, felt the weight of the jewels in my ears. You were right. My hands were shaking as I unpinned my earrings. I turned my sarong inside out so its embroidery was hidden, and you sat back down at your cushion.

‘Why did you write a poem?’ I said, dazed. You shrugged. I wiped my forehead and sat down beside you. You didn’t say anything for some time, so I read your poem again.

‘You’ve made many corrections, many false starts,’ I said. I had to strain a little as the light was dim, and the cuts in the paper hadn’t been inked yet. ‘You’re using farmer’s grammar here, but here – this line is very musical.’

You were silent for a moment longer.

‘You sound so funny when you speak Tamil,’ you said then. Our talk always seemed to go this way: I insulted you by accident, and you stung me back in revenge. You did an

impression of my speech, puffing out your cheeks and putting on my accent. 'It makes me laugh.'

'I'm still learning,' I said.

'You speak the way a dog walks when it has a front leg missing.'

'Ha! Your language is difficult, all lips and roof of the mouth. Pa-ha, la-ha, ba-ha – all breath.'

Our words trailed away into silence.

'Don't be afraid,' I said then. What a useless thing to say.

'I'm not afraid,' you said, but your voice was tiny. Out of habit, I took your hand and ran my lips along the valley of your palm, up to your long fingers, your broken nails. Today, it's these details that paint you into my memory.

'Half these mainlanders speak Tamil, anyway,' I said. 'You'll be fine.'

You shrugged, took an ink cloth, soaked it, and dabbed your poem with black. The ink soaked into the cut letters, and they bled into sight, leftover globules wobbling on the waxy paper. Then you smeared the remaining ink on your forehead.

'They'll be kind to us,' I said. 'On my way to the palace, I saw an omen.'

'An omen?'

'Yes, and a good one, too. Unmistakeable. You know that tall paper palm by the guardhouse?'

'The one where the monks sit to beg?'

'Yes. Well, it burst into flower as I walked past it. I know, just like that, cascades of yellow, white, orange,' I said, pretending to mistake your doubt for wonder. 'I wish you could've seen it. Then, when I passed that old wheel maker by the canal, I saw that by some miracle all sign of his disease had disappeared – he was out stripping saplings in the sun. He even waved to me, and then when I looked down into

the canal, I saw a lotus growing, with a bee trapped inside the flower.'

You looked up, parted your lips and kissed me.

'You're such a good liar,' you said. 'Tell me more. Why don't you tell me about our wedding?'

I breathed in the slight scent of sweat on your skin, and the attar the queen sometimes let you try on when you brought her water in the mornings.

'I can't lie about something that's certain,' I said. 'We'll still have our wedding. I bet my wife's already returned to her brothers in the countryside. I bet she'll never come back. It'll be a marvellous Deepavali.'

Deepavali was two whole seasons away, and I knew neither of us even expected to see the dawn. You wrapped the charcoal, ink palette and stylus, stood up and hid the writing materials back in your wall, kneeling to slide out the loose bricks near the floor one by one. I could never see what else you kept inside: you always concealed the hollow's contents with your shoulder, replaced the stones with care. When you stood up, you brushed the brick dust from your hands.

'Will there be drummers and dancers?'

'What kind of wedding would it be otherwise?'

You sat down on the bed. 'What kind of food will there be?'

'All the best kinds. Peppered mangoes, coconut daal, five kinds of rice.'

I sat beside you, ran my hand through your shorn hair, my fingers coming away black from the charcoal and ink. Then we lay down, and I let you curl up beside me and burrow your head into my chest. It was then that a deep sound shivered up through the floor: the Hanuman Gate opening in the north like a pair of gigantic wings. I tried to breathe away the quaking that rushed through my body, and went on in my loping Tamil.

As I described how we would say our vows, how I would tie a white sash around your waist and remove your anklet, a voice inside me spoke in Sinhala, asking all the questions I had never dared to ask you. I wondered who your parents were, and why they had left you without dowry; why you had come to the city of Polonnaruwa from whatever rich earth had given birth to you; where you went on those nights you disappeared into the forest; why you risked punishment and disgrace just to learn how to write; and whether you told the truth when you spoke about the Buddha or whether in the cool black water that sits at the bottom of every person you believed in the old gods, the gods of your people, and their ancient wars. I knew that now I would get no answers.

'It's not important where I came from,' is all you would ever say, or 'It's not important where I go. Are you taking a census, taxman?'

I'd long ago learnt not to ask questions. As my thoughts chased each other through thick jungle, my mouth seemed to work on its own. I was telling you that on Deepavali you would wear a skirt of blue water lilies, that we would live together in a grove of rosewood or perched somewhere high up in the hills. I didn't know if you were still listening. I felt the cool of tears leaving tracks along my temples, felt the weight of my exhaustion and your breathing on my chest. And then – wasn't it the strangest thing? Despite the heat and the shadow of death that hung over the city, we both drifted to sleep. The deepest, most dreamless sleep.

We would wake to the sound of screaming.