

BOOK ONE: THE KALARI



PRATIDWANDI

THE OPPONENT



AMBUJ GUPTA

QUIGNOG



QUIGNOG BREAKOUTS

PRATIDWANDI
THE OPPONENT

BOOK ONE: THE KALARI

AMBUJ GUPTA

QUIGNOG
INDIA

PRATIDWANDI

Copyright © AMBUJ GUPTA 2020
www.ambujgupta.com

Published by QUIGNOG
A PIRATES Imprint.
www.quignog.com

Cover Design by Pirates
Cover Art by Arka Chakraborty and Anwasha Paul
Inner Illustrations by Arka Chakraborty and Souradeep Sinha

Typeset in Minion Pro 10.5/13
Printed and bound in India

1/21

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events, places, events, locales or incidents is purely coincidental.

Pirates is committed to publishing works of quality and integrity. In that spirit, we are proud to offer this book to our readers; however, the story, the experiences, and the words are the author's alone. The views, opinions and beliefs expressed in this book are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not express the views, opinions or beliefs of this publishing house or of Cyril Amarchand Mangaldas or any other individual or organisation.

All rights reserved.

For worldwide sale.



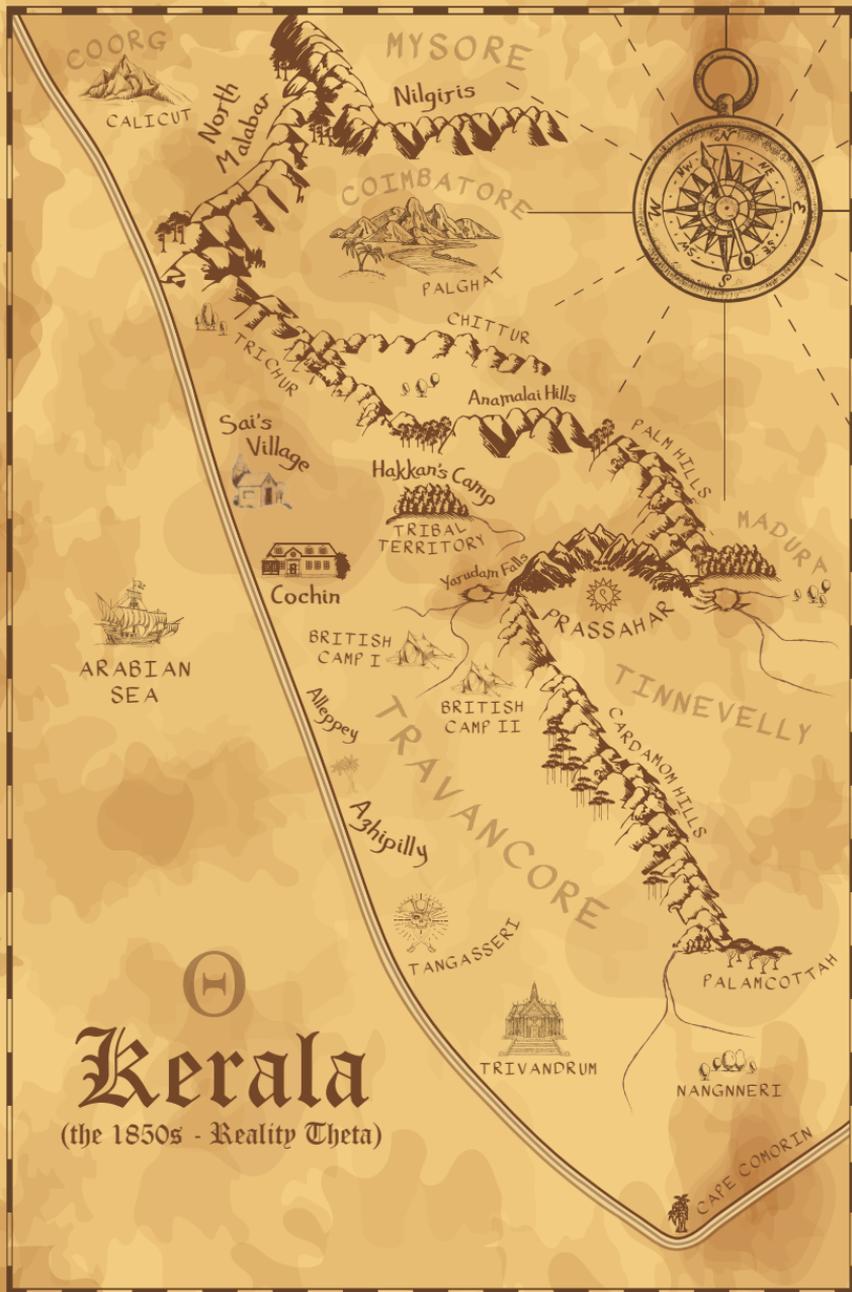
Pirates is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet.
This book is made from Forest Stewardship
Council[®] certified paper.

Mom and Dad, this is for you.

INDEX

PROLOGUE.....	1
1. THE PRISONER.....	4
2. THE PRASSAHAR.....	35
3. THE RAID.....	49
4. A NEW HOME.....	69
5. KING OF THE FOREST.....	92
6. THE KALARI.....	103
7. THE ESCAPE.....	135
8. AGASTYA TROPHY.....	163
9. BATTLE OF TRIVANDRUM.....	204
10. THE PROPHECY.....	233
11. FALL OF THE PRASSAHAR.....	254
12. NEW BEGINNINGS.....	276

*This is a work of fiction.
The following events take place in a fictional
alternative reality called **Reality Theta (Θ)**.*



COORG

MYSORE

CALICUT

North
Malabar

Nilgiris

COIMBATORE

FALGHAT

CHITTUR

TRICHUR

Anamalai Hills

Sai's
Village

Hakkan's
Camp

TRIBAL
TERRITORY

PALM HILLS

MADURAI

Cochin

Varadam Falls

PRASSAHAR

ARABIAN
SEA

BRITISH
CAMP I

BRITISH
CAMP II

TINNEVELLY

Alleppey

TRAVANCORE

CARDAMOM HILLS

Ashipilly



TANGASSERI

PALANCOTTAH



Kerala

(the 1850s - Reality Theta)



TRIVANDRUM

NANGNERI

CAPE COMORIN

PROLOGUE

The year was 1852. A fire had engulfed the entire nation. A fire, which not only burnt entire cities and villages; it was a fire which destroyed the ethos of a culture as old as civilization itself. India was under siege. The national identity was threatened. Ancient knowledge was in ruins. India was facing the *wrath* of an empire foreign.

The fire raged mercilessly taking its toll on *all*: kings and paupers, merchants and smiths, godmen and artists, no one was spared. From the peaks of the Himalayas in the north to the depths of the ocean in the south, from the basins of the Brahmaputra in the east to the sands of the Thar in the west, no place was spared, leaving no means of escape.

The Indian was slowly waking up to the realities of the British rule. Words like ‘rebellion’ started doing rounds amongst the common folk. With talks of secret organizations and federations emerging from the shadows, finding their way across villages and towns, people began contemplating all means of revolt. Bands of women and men, in the remotest corners of the country, nobility and commoners alike, were coming together, with one goal in mind:

We will rise. We will fight. We will take back what was taken. You cannot defeat us. You cannot control us. We will rise. For liberty, for fraternity and for the nation.

For the British, it was their golden age, the era of the 'Imperial Century'. The Pax Britannica ruled the world, as a single hegemon, with colonies across continents. Spanning across Asia, Africa, Australia and the Americas, it was the largest empire in the history of human civilization.

India was just another dominion for them. What started as a trading company had managed to bring the entire subcontinent under colonial rule. The British East India Company was no longer just a trading company. Trade, as a primary goal, had been long forgotten. It wasn't enough, especially, for a land which promised so much more. How could one *resist*?

The officials of the British East India Company had emerged victorious. They had surpassed their colonial colleagues, the Portuguese and the French, in terms of wealth and territory, uprooted mega regional empires, and made powerful local allies. Using the twin tenets of force and diplomacy, they became rulers of the British Dominion of India.

But the people of this dominion were rising. Whispers of a rebellion had reached the ears of the British. A rebellion which would take the nation by storm and uproot the East India Company from power, forever.

And thus, they began eliminating each and every potential threat to their power. A nationwide campaign of extermination began. Be it a kingdom, a society, an individual or an idea, nothing was spared. Any sign of a revolt or rebellion was targeted. Voices of dissent were not allowed to surface at all.

Yet, they did. Every voice quelled gave rise to ten others.

In the midst of all the *chaos*, the armies of the Company had been given a unique task, a task which involved the extermination of artists.

Amongst all the Indian art forms, the British felt that martial art was the only one which could pose a *real* threat to their power. Though bans and prohibitions had been in place since the last fifty years, the artforms still prospered, albeit in the shadows. The masters relentlessly taught their pupils, and the

pupils relentlessly learnt without fearing for their lives, keeping their traditions alive.

But the British were also relentless. If the masters were dead, the art too would, one day, *die*. With this in mind, they started hunting down the masters. What followed was a series of assassinations and massacres. Masters across the country were hunted and exterminated. Kalaripayattu, Silambam, Gatka, Paika, Mardani Khel, Kushti, Huyen Langlon and many more of the ancient Indian martial artforms faced near extinction.

The fighters went into hiding. While many managed to disguise themselves amongst the civilians to continue their art, many had to give up their art altogether. It was a *dark* age for Indian martial arts.

All but one mustered the courage to fight back. Considered one of the greatest practitioners of Kalaripayattu of the time, Master Vadu Kechary, of the Vadu Clan, stood up. In a desperate attempt, he took a band of rebels to overtake a small British outpost in Kerala. It was a courageous effort but it wasn't *enough*. All the rebels died fighting and Vadu was taken prisoner.

CHAPTER ONE

The Prisoner

W*e will rise, we will rise...*
“We will rise, we will rise, we will—”
“What did you say?”

His thoughts had unconsciously come to his lips. His murmuring came to an abrupt halt with the question asked by the guard standing next to him.

The great Master Vadu Kechary had been reduced to a mere murmuring madman. Bound to a pole with chains ordinarily used for elephants, he sat inside a tent barely wide enough for two people, in the middle of nowhere.

He had been subjected to all forms of torture one could be subjected to without losing one's life. His entire body was scathed and scarred, and there was hardly any vacant skin left. He had scars, big enough to cover entire muscles, deep enough to make veins protrude, with blood dripping from them.

For him, torture had become a part of his daily routine. Torture, accompanied by the same questions, again and again and again.

“HOW MANY OF YOU ARE THERE? WHERE ARE THE OTHERS? TELL US EVERYTHING!”

Questions even he didn't know the answers to.

Am I alone in this? Why hasn't anyone come to rescue me?

Suddenly, Vadu came back to his senses. He realized that he had been murmuring his thoughts out loud. He looked up at the guard and gave him a long vengeful stare.

"Wh—Why are you staring?" the guard asked, in a tone devoid of confidence. Even though he was the one who was free, who had a rifle, he was scared. Legends of this Kalaripayattu master had been doing the rounds in his circles. Tales of horror. Tales you don't tell to kids. Tales of him ripping people's heart out with his bare hands. He didn't need a weapon. He was *the* weapon.

Vadu smirked at him.

"Open these," he said, pointing to the chains with his eyes. "And I'll tell you."

The guard gulped and straightened the rifle hung on his shoulder. He looked away, away from those menacing eyes.

"CAPTAIN'S COMING!" came a shout from outside.

Another guard entered the tent. He looked no different from the one already inside. He eyed Vadu for a moment and then said quickly, "Why don't you simply tell us where the others are and we'll spare you this horror."

Unlike his colleague, this one did not stutter. But the briskness in his dialogue suggested an inherent fear, a fear of their prisoner.

Vadu spat a load of blood on the floor and said, "Bring me your captain."

Captain Pike wasn't as fearful of Indian martial art fighters or their masters as his subordinates were. He had spent seven years in the subcontinent. His resume boasted two full-fledged wars and multiple minor revolts. He was *seasoned* at this game. A celebrated war hero from the Anglo-Sikh Wars, he had been transferred recently to the Madras Army of the British East India Company for the sole purpose of crushing all revolts in the region and putting an end to Indian martial arts, once and for all.

It was dusk. Pike's entourage of men entered the forest clearing and stopped next to the tent. The soldiers quickly dismounted and took formations, their bodies straight as their rifles, waiting for their captain to dismount.

"This is really in the middle of fucking nowhere!" Pike shouted, as he dismounted and stood next to his troops.

"At ease."

One of the guards suddenly came out of the tent and stood in the clearing, staring at the scene. Pike turned his attention to him and saw an excitement in his eyes. The guard saluted his captain and said, "Captain, he's ready to talk to you."

Pike nodded and went inside the tent.

Inside, the other guard was crouched on the ground, checking the grip of the chains. The moment Pike entered, he stood up straight and saluted his captain. Pike's gaze went from him to the prisoner strapped to the pole – his head lowered, blood dripping from his body and his mouth.

"The guards tell me that you're finally ready to give us some information. Is that true?"

"Yes."

Vadu's head was lowered but Pike could make out that he was smirking to himself. He slowly looked up, revealing his diabolical smile through his broken, bloodied teeth. His vengeful eyes were gleaming in the dying light of the sun coming through the small window in the tent. He wouldn't have to put in extra effort to scare an ordinary bloke.

But Pike was no ordinary bloke. He stared at the prisoner for a moment without blinking, and then came closer, right up to his face. He was so close that he could feel Vadu's breath on his eyes. He held him by his hair and whispered,

"Bark!"

"When you British dogs are done hunting us, when you think that all of us are dead, that you can finally sleep peacefully at night, we will *rise*. From the darkness. From the deep abyss you have pushed us into. And we will slit your throats in deep

slumber to retake what is ours. And this is the information that I have for you.”

With a scream full of rage, Pike punched Vadu hard in the face.

“Lynch this motherfucker. Lynch him right outside. Make it slow so that he screams. Let the ethos of this godforsaken country remember. LYNCH HIM NOW!”

Pike was shaking in anger as he uttered the last few words.

Soon, his men had the setup ready. A big tree was chosen and the prisoner was dragged out of his tent. One of the guards put the noose around his neck. But right when he was about to cover his face, Pike commanded,

“Don’t. I want to see the light leaving his eyes.”

The guard obliged and left Vadu hanging, with his face uncovered, staring at the group of soldiers who were looking at him like he was a source of entertainment. But Vadu was no ordinary prisoner. He too kept the diabolical smile plastered on his face.

However, on the inside, he *felt* different. He felt the life force leaving him, felt he was approaching the end. He could see his entire life in front of him. He remembered his small village. His house, his courtyard, where he learnt the art from his father, and how he passed it on to his pupils. Those sunny afternoons spent training in his art, the art he loved beyond love itself. He remembered the peace he would feel, in his village, in his home, before all this started. He remembered his childhood, his mother, the songs she used to hum. He remembered his daughter, her grace, her poise, her dance every Onam. He saw his son, who was still young and was still learning the craft.

He should stay away from all this. Sai, Sai...

“SAI!”

It was the last word ever uttered by the great Vadu Kechary, as he gasped for breath and then, he fell silent, forever.

* * *

Not far from where the master had been executed, in a secluded part of the Kingdom of Travancore, was a small village, *his* village. In that village, a young man, in his early twenties, was sitting inside a small old hut, meditating.

The door of the hut suddenly burst open and a young girl came running in. She slumped to the floor and started sobbing uncontrollably. In the middle of sobs, she exclaimed,

“Sai, FATHER!”

Despite being the scion of the great Vadu clan, Sai Vadu Kechary was a simple boy who had recently graduated to adulthood. Though his neck had the distinct markings every Vadu was given at birth, he looked nothing like a Vadu. His body was frail and fragile, like any other boy in his village. Nor did he have the ferociousness or the rage of his father. He was still a *boy*, a boy who had just lost his father.

He opened his eyes and saw that his sister was down on the floor of the hut, crying profusely. He stood up and walked up to her. Crouching next to her, he held her in his arms and started consoling her. Each sob of hers was stroking a dormant anger within him.

“This is no time for tears, Aruna.”

Aruna looked up at her brother. To her surprise, his eyes were dry. His face was blank, solid, like a rock. With clenched teeth, he spoke in a low and threatening tone, “I will make them pay for this.”

He stood up and went straight for his sword, which was lying next to where he was sitting earlier. While taking it out of its cover and examining the blade, he started giving her instructions.

“I’ll be going away for a while. Leave the village. Go to Grandmother’s.”

Before she could even respond, the door opened once again and a man stepped inside. His gaze first fell on Aruna. She glanced at the man and started crying again, and looked away, trying to hide her sobs. The man then turned his gaze towards Sai, who was coldly cleaning his blade.

“What are you doing with that sword?”

“I’m going.”

“Where?”

Sai stared at the man in the doorway.

Vadu’s brother, Takran, was every bit like him, in height, in size, in vigour and in might. One might confuse him for Vadu from a distance, if it weren’t for his side-burns and his half-bald head. By nature, he was half as ferocious as his brother. He was a terrific fighter, yes, but, when it came to conflict resolution, he was someone who would think thrice before picking up a sword.

“To avenge his death,” Sai replied coldly.

Takran stared at his nephew in disbelief. He looked at Aruna, who was now looking at him helplessly.

“And how exactly will you do that?”

Sai kept his sword back in its cover and started making a move towards the door.

“I know where they came from. And where they took him.”

“And where is that?” Takran asked, half-mockingly.

Sai stopped to face his uncle, who was still standing in the doorway. He seemed to have no intention of giving way to his nephew.

“The barracks across the river,” remarked Sai, pointing outside.

“And then what?”

“Then—”

“What?” grilled Takran.

“I don’t know.”

Sai didn’t flinch. He was staring Takran straight in the eye, showing no signs of backing down.

“Keep that sword down,” Takran ordered, in a plain matter-of-fact tone. “And pack your things. Both of you. Quick.”

Aruna immediately started scurrying about the hut, picking up her clothes and piling them in a corner on the floor.

“No.”

Sai’s voice echoed. Aruna froze in her place.

“What?” asked Takran, in a stern voice.

That sternness was all Sai needed to lose his cool. He started shouting at the top of his lungs.

“Where were you? Where were you when they captured him? Where were you when they killed him? WHERE WERE YOU?”

Takran stood still for a moment, shocked at the outburst. He felt defeated. He felt helpless, staring blankly at a boy who was full of rage and thoughts of vengeance.

“Sai—” Takran started explaining.

“SAI! Don’t you dare talk to him like that!” came a voice from another part of the hut. It was Aruna.

Another scion of the Vadu clan, Aruna Vadu Kechary was different from most girls her age. She was ferocious and firm. Gifted with an athletic build, she would secretly train with her father’s pupils and learn the basics of the martial art. Even though she hadn’t received any formal training, she had the one thing which gave her an edge over many other formally trained pupils, the *true spirit* of a Kshatriya¹. This made her wise, wiser than her brother three years older.

“Son, I know how you feel. And there will be a day when I will tell you everything. But not now,” Takran explained calmly.

“WHY NOT?!”

“SAI!” Aruna shouted, glaring at him.

“Because if you don’t do as I say and we don’t leave in the next hour, we will meet the same fate as your father. Do you want that?” said Takran, desperately.

Sai stared at him silently.

Takran continued speaking in a soft tone, “Son, things are going to get much bigger than you have imagined. Trust me. You will have your revenge. But, at the right place and at the right time. Now is not the time.”

“Stop fooling me, Uncle. The whole community knew my father had been captured. Still, they decided to—to do nothing about it.”

1 An Indian warrior.

Takran took a deep sigh and said in a conclusive tone, “I don’t speak for the community. And I will not hear another word of protest from you. I am, as of this day, your master, am I not?”

Sai stared at him blankly.

“Yes, or no?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

Aruna had retreated to one of the rooms inside the hut and had resumed packing her clothes. Sai glanced in her direction and then replied, in a defeated tone, “Yes, Master.”

“Good. Then, you will do as I say. Yes?”

Sai looked at Takran, who was looking at him sternly.

“Y—Yes, Master.”

“Good. Grab your things, both of you, and meet me outside in ten minutes.”

* * *

It was dark. They had been travelling for a couple of hours on an unkempt road through the dense forest. Sai looked at his sister, who was asleep, her body rocking mildly in the horse carriage. He looked outside but couldn’t see much in the faint light coming from the lantern in the front. His primary guides to the world outside were the sounds and the smells, sounds of the horses trotting intertwined with the insects chirping, smells of the forest, the trees and the soil.

Sai closed his eyes and tried to sleep. A number of thoughts started racing through his head. He couldn’t remember anything about his mother who had died when he was too young. He couldn’t even recollect how she looked. Flashes from his childhood, memories with his father started springing up in his head. A particularly fond memory of his father came up.

It was a summer evening. Sai would have been seven at the time.

Vadu Kechary was elegantly pacing up and down in the courtyard of his old house, giving oral commands to a class of thirty-odd pupils, each of them practising with a Kettukaari².

“Step right, hit ankle. Retreat right, defend ankle.”

The pupils carried out the exercises diligently.

Unseen by anyone, a young Sai was watching the practice intently from behind a pillar. But unknown to him, his father had noticed his presence.

Later, inside his room, the young boy was practising with an imaginary staff, repeating the moves he saw earlier. Suddenly, his father stepped in and caught him in the act. Sai immediately stopped the practice, and stood still, his head lowered in embarrassment.

“Done with your homework?”

Sai nodded his head.

He looked up at him and with the innocence of a seven-year-old and asked, “Father, how can I become a fighter like you?”

Vadu smiled at the boy and said, “A man must never limit his skill to the sword. Nor limit his knowledge to the books. In this ever-changing world, you need to be a lethal combination of a scholar and a fighter. Both are equally important. They are the two pillars of wisdom. You will become a fighter when the time comes. Right now, you must study as best as you can.”

I will never be as good as him.

Tears rolled down Sai’s cheeks. The moistness of the tears against his warm cheeks brought him back to the present. He couldn’t stop thinking about his father’s death. He opened his eyes and realized that he had been crying for a while. He wiped off the tears and looked at his sister, who was still sleeping peacefully.

I should also get some sleep. Don’t know what lies ahead.

He closed his eyes and tried sleeping again.

* * *

2 A wooden long staff used in Kalarippayattu.

The carriage came to an abrupt halt. Sai woke up with a jerk. He looked at his sister who was still asleep. He looked outside. Pitch darkness.

“What happened?” he asked the carriage driver.

“There seems to be a blockade. A couple of trees have fallen. You stay inside, brother. I’ll go and take a look.”

Sai sat still in the carriage, tense with apprehension. Suddenly, he heard quick footsteps coming towards them. The carriage driver appeared at the back abruptly, his face white with fear. Sai jumped in surprise, his hand reflexively reaching for his sword.

“You’ll have to leave. It’s the tribals. This is the new *normal*. They’ll loot and abduct—working for those British bastards—WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR? GET DOWN!”

The driver glared at the motionless boy.

“But—but where will we go?” Sai asked helplessly.

The driver pointed to the forest and said, “You see that bush over there? You’ll find a narrow path next to it. It’ll take you to the stream. Wait for me there.”

He quickly handed Sai the lantern.

“Bu—”

“NOW!”

They heard some horses approaching.

“Quick. I’ll distract them. You run away. QUICK!”

Sai woke his sister up and covered her mouth, signalling her to remain silent.

“Collect your things quickly and stay quiet,” Sai whispered.

Both of them gathered whatever they could and dismounted the carriage. With his belongings on his back, holding the lantern in one hand, his sister’s hand in the other, Sai sneaked into the dark and made his way through the dense forest. After walking a few meters, he stopped and looked at his sister, who was out of breath. He looked around at the forest, trying to make sense of his surroundings, listening for any sounds of a stream.

Suddenly, they heard a rustle from the trees behind them.

“SAI!” shouted the girl, with horror in her voice, staring at someone behind the boy. But before Sai could turn to see that someone, he felt a blow on his head and lost consciousness.

* * *

He gave his life protecting his people. And not a single soul was brave enough to come out and fight for him when he really needed them. Such is the tragedy of a hero. He is alone. Always...

He had been dreaming about his father when Sai felt someone shaking him. He slowly came back to his senses.

He could hear chatter over sounds of a fire crackling in the distance. He slowly opened his eyes and saw two burly tribals in brown cloaks sitting beside a fire, talking.

“Brother!” came a whisper from somewhere behind him. Someone was still shaking him.

He tried to turn towards the whisper but couldn’t. He was lying flat on the ground, half of his face pressed against the dirt, his hands and legs tied. He tried again but failed. The person shaking him suddenly turned him around with a jerk.

A teenage boy, also wearing a brown cloak, was staring at him.

“Water!” Sai whispered.

The boy picked up a bowl lying nearby and started pouring water from it into Sai’s mouth. Sai started drinking with loud gulps.

“I will get you out of here, brother,” the boy whispered to him. “I promise you that for what I owe your father, I will give you one chance to escape. These people are sheer savages. If you want to live, use that chance.”

“HEY, YOU!”

The duo froze. Sai glanced towards the fire and saw the two men approaching them. Without saying a word, one of them kicked Sai in the chest with his full might. Sai started coughing.

The kid’s right. They are savages.

“What do you think you’re doing boy?” the other one snarled at the boy.

“I—I—he—”

“Fuck off from here!”

The boy gave Sai a fleeting glance as he scurried away.

Sai lay there, looking around, dazed. He noticed that he was in a forest clearing, in an enclosure made of a thick wooden fence. At one end, there was an open shed with some sacks kept inside. He couldn’t make out anything else about his surroundings.

Where is Aruna?

He turned his attention to the men, who were whispering to each other. Well, one would hardly call it whispering since Sai could hear every single word.

“He is awake. Let’s take him to the boss now.”

“Not now! And who’s the boss, anyway? Let him rot here till they come.”

“They?”

“How long have you been here?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Are you daft?”

“Why do you ask?”

“SHUT UP!”

“COME FOR DINNER!” a voice came from outside the fence.

The smarter of the two turned his attention to Sai and said sternly, “We’ll be back. If you try anything—”

He completed his sentence with a throat slitting gesture. With that, he started to leave. Out of nowhere, the dumber one came up to Sai and kicked him again. Sai howled in pain. The two men left the enclosure, giggling on the way out.

Sai was filled with an uncontrollable rage. He wanted to charge at them, screaming at the top of his lungs and slashing them all open. He tried moving again but couldn’t. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and started concentrating on other thoughts, in an effort to calm himself down.

Flashes from his past again. This time, he was older. He saw himself slashing the arm of a tribal in the middle of his village.

The tribal had been a regular, who would come asking for local tax in the name of protection, once every few days. Sometimes he would ask nicely, but there were times when he would turn nasty to the villagers, harassing girls, hitting the elderly. That day he had caught hold of a poor old woman. Sai saw him pulling the woman by the arm and dragging her in the dirt. He couldn't control himself and did the deed.

Now, he was standing in the middle of the chowk³ of the village, covered in blood, staring at the severed arm of the tribal laying in front of him. He heard a collective gasp from the villagers, who were standing on their porches, watching the spectacle.

Later that day, his father sat with him on the porch of his house, wiping off the blood from his sword, while imparting his wisdom.

“Anger is blinding for a warrior. It betrays his senses. His *control*. A warrior must never let his feelings guide his decisions. Fighting is about balance. Like the balance between the body and the soul. Between nature and man. Between the Earth and the Moon. Everything is built on a balance. And it is the duty of a warrior to maintain the balance of this world. That is our true purpose.”

His father's words were still ringing in his ears, as he felt a stream of tears trickling down his cheeks. He suddenly felt a pair of cold hands skilfully slide something into his palms. Without opening his eyes, he gripped it. It was a shard of glass.

He slowly opened his eyes and saw the same boy sitting next to him, staring at him. Sai met his glance. The boy gave a soft wink and mouthed the word, ‘*QUICK*’.

The boy had done his bit, the chance he had promised. He scurried out of the enclosure, leaving the gate ajar.

3 A central area of a town or a village, usually containing a market or important buildings for governance.

Sai smiled to himself. Keeping a close eye on the gate, he carefully freed himself, cutting the rope with the glass. He slowly stood up and looked towards the shed.

There it is.

Shining in the moonlight and glistening in the light of the flames was his sword.

He slowly crawled towards the shed. As he was about to pick it up, he saw a cloak, similar to the one worn by the other tribals. It was dirty brown and had weird markings on it. He wrapped it around himself as a disguise, placed his sword behind his back and quietly sneaked out of the gate.

* * *

The tribal camp was located in a large clearing in the forest. It was surprisingly well organized, at least for the basic purpose of holding and torturing prisoners. A large circular pit with a huge bonfire marked the centre of the camp. From it, various gullies led to the other parts of the clearing, lined up with enclosures, similar to the one Sai was held in.

He briskly made his way across a gully and towards the bonfire, where he saw a large group of tribals dancing around the fire. A dinner party was going on. As the men ate and drank the freshly made toddy⁴, local girls not much older than Aruna, danced with them and entertained them. Most of them were in chains, chains whose control rested with the men. A couple of highly intoxicated male musicians were banging on ragged drums, without any sense of harmony or rhythm.

Sai hid behind a stash of weapons placed near the fire. From there, he could see the crazy drama unfold.

Two tribals dragged a girl in chains and pushed her to the middle of the group. One of them took out a sword and pointed at her, commanding her to dance. The girl started moving to the arrhythmic beating of the drums with disinterest. The whole group

4 A traditional palm wine commonly consumed in Kerala.

gradually started circling around the girl, hooting, screaming and teasing. One of the men tried pulling at her dress, causing her to fall down. The tribal came close and started jeering at her.



Unable to continue staring at the sight, Sai shifted his gaze towards a group of men sitting in a corner, their heads lowered, huddled around a man, whose face wasn't visible.

Suddenly, a LOUD horn echoed through the forest. The dance and the music stopped immediately.

Sai saw the group of men rise and move away, revealing the face of the man in the middle. It was half-burnt, with his burnt skin glistening in the crackling light of the bonfire. The girls were immediately escorted back to their enclosures, along with the musicians, bringing an end to the party.

“Somebody, go and fetch Hakkan!” he ordered aloud to one of his men. “And where are the prisoners? Gather them near the gate quickly!”

* * *

Skarat, the man with the half-burnt face, was standing with his group, waiting expectantly, as the gates of the camp opened and a company of British horsemen started pouring in. A henchman came and whispered in Skarat’s ear, “Sir, Hakkan doesn’t want to come out. He’s asked you to take care of things here.”

Skarat heaved a deep defeated sigh and nodded at the henchman. The British started forming a circle around the waiting tribals. The last one to enter rode up to where Skarat stood and stopped inches away from him. Skarat could feel the breath of his horse on his face. With clenched teeth, he took a step back and greeted the leader, with a smile plastered over his face.

“Captain Henry.”

“Lieutenant,” remarked the lieutenant, as he dismounted from the horse.

“Haven’t they promoted you to captain yet? How long has it been? Three years?”

“Where is Hakkan?” Henry replied. He was *clearly* annoyed with the taunt.

“He—uh—he’s a little unwell. He won’t be joining us today.”

“Well, I haven’t seen him in any of my recent visits. We made the deal with him, not you. I want to talk to the man.”

“Sahib, why do you wish to waste your time? We have the tribute and the prisoners ready for you,” Skarat said impatiently.

“Well, as it turns out, Mis—”

“Skarat.”

“—Mister Skaaraat,” Henry started explaining, while deliberately mis-pronouncing his name. “We have all the time in the world to waste. We heard music playing on our way here. We would love it if your people can entertain and feed us, while we wait for Hakkan to join us.”

Skarat stared at the officer for a moment. He slowly turned to his men and said, “Take Sahib to the bonfire. Bring out the dancer and the musician. I’ll be back shortly.”

* * *

Sai had given up his cover and was now standing in the middle of the group, near the fire. Suddenly, a man came running towards the group and whistled loudly. The men sobered up to the extent they could and got into a line. Sai quietly followed suit.

“Did you not hear, you lousy scoundrels! All of you, get moving. Go and grab a prisoner each and get them to the gate!” ordered the supervisor.

The order caused a scuffle in the group, as the men rushed in different directions, following the command. Sai looked around in confusion. He didn’t want to be singled out so he approached the nearest enclosure.

Please be Aruna, please be Aruna...

But to his dismay, it was an elderly couple, lying on the ground inside the enclosure, in the same state he had been. Before he could move away, the supervisor came from behind him and snarled,

“What are you staring at?”

Sai had no option but to go with the couple. He quickly darted inside the enclosure, cut their feet open, helped them stand up and guided them outside the enclosure.

Outside, he saw one of the henchmen dragging an old man into a gully. He quietly followed him, walking with his head down, using the couple as his shield, to avoid any confrontation

with any passer-by. As he walked, he caught a glimpse of the old man's face and instantly recognized him as his village's sarpanch⁵.

Sai was shocked but kept moving slowly, keeping his distance. He remembered the day after the news of his father's capture broke out. The sarpanch had called a meeting of the village elders. Everyone was sitting like sheep in a courtyard, waiting for him to pronounce the course of action.

"If we don't do anything, the British will grow stronger. He may be the last of the great masters and that's why they caught him. But who knows when they'll stop? The next thing we know, they start taking away our women and children," argued Takran vehemently, while addressing the sarpanch, amid gasps from the crowd.

"I agree. But, what can we do? We are a community of farmers. We can't fight them on our own!"

"Sir, if you truly seek help, you will get it. I know of fighters who will come to our aid. Just say the word!"

The sarpanch thought for a moment. He sighed and replied authoritatively, "No more fighting! We are tired of it. We want to live in peace and harmony. Vadu and his band of rebels have caused enough trouble already. Maybe he *deserves* this fate!"

The sight of the village chief being dragged like a prisoner was, somehow, vengefully satisfying for Sai.

Living in peace and harmony now, Mr. Sarpanch?

The villagers were being taken out of their enclosures and thrown into a straight line leading to the gate of the camp. He led the couple to the line and then stepped aside. He looked to the front and noticed two huge wagons parked next to the gate. A few henchmen were filling one of the wagons with big sacks, while the others were shoving the prisoners into the other.

The supervisor came from behind and stood close to him. Sai looked down, hiding his face in the depths of his cloak. Suddenly, he saw one of his original captors appear from behind, looking

5 Chief of a village.

for someone frantically. It was the smart one. He came up to the supervisor and started whispering to him.

“Sir, we’re missing a boy.”

The supervisor glared at him and whispered back loudly, “How can you be so careless! Does anyone else know?”

The captor shook his head and said, “Not yet. I came directly to you.”

The supervisor took him to the side, away from all ears, and started talking to him hastily. Sai stared at the duo but couldn’t make out what they were saying. After a few moments, the two disbanded and went back to business, resuming the ordinary course, without a care for the missing prisoner.

Well, that’s the thing about *hierarchy*. The blame game is an essential part of it. No matter who makes the mistake, the senior will be blamed and reprimanded. Now, to get out of it, the senior sometimes tries to pass on the blame to his own senior. But, if you’re unfortunate enough to be working for a dangerous warlord, then who’s going to take the blame? The henchman working under you? Or the warlord you report to? Or *you*? And just like that, the news of the missing prisoner disappeared into thin air, to avoid the blame that would come with it.

Sai smiled to himself and resumed looking at the prisoners, his eyes frantically searching for his sister. His eyes fell on something which looked familiar. Couple of meters ahead, a half-saree⁶ with red embroidery was glimmering in the light from the torches.

He recognized her. She was blindfolded and her hands were tied behind her back. She was being pushed by one of the henchmen. For a moment, Sai felt like charging at him, slicing his throat and freeing up his sister.

Control your anger.

6 A traditional women’s clothing worn below the waist, commonly used in Kerala.

He decided to practise restraint. He walked up to the henchman who was pushing her and said,

“Brother, Hakkan is looking for you.”

He didn’t even know who Hakkan was. He had just heard his name a few moments before. For Sai, he could’ve been their leader or their janitor. But Sai gambled nevertheless.

“Really?” the henchman asked anxiously. “But why?”

“I don’t know, but he was making a list of people who deserve a raise.”

It was a shot in the dark, a random guess.

As most henchmen, this one was also a bit daft. If your boss was actually planning to give you a raise, will he tell your colleague? But he fell for it nevertheless and with a glee on his face, he requested, “Can you—can you look after this one?”

He was pointing at Aruna. Sai smiled. His gamble had worked.

“Of course,” he said, with a polite smile.

Handing over the reins of his prisoner to Sai, the henchman happily walked away. Sai started pushing her forward. He came close and whispered, “Don’t react. It’s me.”

“Sai?” Aruna cried, in a tone louder than a whisper.

“What’s happening?” came a voice from behind. It was the supervisor.

Sai knew that a moment’s delay could prove to be lethal. He immediately responded, “This one’s asking for water.”

“Here—” the supervisor picked up a mud jar lying nearby and was about to approach the two, when Sai remarked, “As if she’s going to get any.”

Sai hit her lightly in the knees and kept pushing her. The supervisor stood in his place for a moment, confused. He then put the jar down and resumed his supervision.

“Sorry for that. Hope you weren’t thirsty,” whispered Sai, when he felt that the eyes of the supervisor were away from them. Aruna shook her head. They kept moving.

“What does ‘*don’t react*’ mean, Aruna?” Sai asked in a sarcastic whisper.

Aruna smiled and whispered back, “I missed you.”

* * *

Skarat was walking slowly towards the gathering near the wall. He was accompanied by a gigantic, muscular man wearing an elegant coat and a heavy chain made of gold around his neck. This was the mighty Hakkan, the leader of the tribal camp. Very few people knew his original name. Most referred to him as the *King of the Forest*.

He was dragging a long metallic staff, making a clanging sound as he walked. He stopped next to Lt. Henry and nodded at him. Henry gave him a faint smile. Skarat stood at a distance, looking at the two men anxiously.

“My people tell me you wanted to see me, officer?” asked Hakkan, a particular irritation apparent in his tone as he said the word ‘*officer*’.

“Where have you been Hakkan? For weeks the Captain has been requesting a sit-down to discuss the terms of our arrangement.”

“What’s there to discuss?” Hakkan asked, confused.

“Policy changes.”

Henry’s reply was curt, and he looked away, knowing that the tribal warlord would not be pleased.

Hakkan stared at him for a moment and then looked at his men loading the wagons. His gaze travelled next to Skarat, who was looking at him anxiously.

“Tell his honour that Hakkan doesn’t have anything else to offer,” replied Hakkan, while looking at his deputy, who nodded at his decision.

“It doesn’t work that way. We are letting you operate on our territory after all—”

“*Our* territory?”

Henry didn't respond. Looking around at the forest, he casually remarked, "You know these forests grow thicker every day. One fine day we'll have to cut them down. Make room for a timber business."

"As if you don't have enough already," Hakkan replied with a similar hint of irritation as before.

"It'll be in your interest to cooperate. We'll all make some money. Otherwise, you know the consequences very well."

Henry was trying, trying his best, to put up a great show of courage in front of a man twice his size.

Hakkan ignored him. He delivered his message to Skarat, "Quickly load up the wagons. The Sahibs are getting late. They shouldn't stay out in these woods for too long. God knows the kinds of terrors that lurk in the shadows."

Henry glared at Hakkan for a moment. He was speechless.

Is he threatening me?

Skarat realized that the situation was grim. To break the uncomfortable silence, he shouted to the supervisor, "How much time?"

"Just a couple more sacks!" the supervisor shouted back.

* * *

"When in doubt, trust your instincts. It is very important for a warrior to constantly analyse the circumstances he is in and make decisions. Don't rush to judgment. Don't let your emotions overpower your decision-making."

The teachings of his father rang in his ears as Sai slowly analysed every little detail of the scene unfolding in front of his eyes. Sai and Aruna were walking together, towards the wagons.

Twenty tribals and at least ten Brits. All armed. If I try anything here, it's going to be suicide. Wait, are they not—

His gaze travelled to the other wagon, which was being loaded with sacks. He noticed that none of the tribals were actually inside that wagon. They were simply tossing the sacks into it, from the outside.

How lazy and careless...good for me...

“Aruna, listen to me. Quick!” Sai whispered to his sister, while taking off her blindfold. “Quietly follow the queue and get into the wagon. I’ve a plan and I promise I’ll get you out, but it’ll take some time. Don’t worry and don’t panic. Okay?”

They exchanged a concerned glance and Aruna nodded to the plan. With that, Sai left his sister in the queue of prisoners and quietly made his way to the sacks.

Without a word to the supervisor, who was busy counting the prisoners, or any of the other henchmen, Sai quietly picked up a sack. But instead of tossing it, he walked over to the wagon and entered it.

There was no one inside. Flies abound and it was cold and damp and smelled of rotten food. All the tossing had resulted in a pile of sacks only in the front part of the wagon. Behind the pile, there was ample room, enough to store an elephant. And this was the opportunity Sai wanted to exploit.

He went to the back, unloaded the sack he was carrying and hid behind the pile. He sat still, waiting. A few seconds passed. Half a minute went by. A minute was about to be over, when another sack came flying from the outside and landed on top of the pile.

The loading of the wagon continued as usual. Not a single soul had noticed a full-grown boy walking into the wagon as a passenger, a wagon which was supposed to be a goods wagon. Even Sai was surprised. He hadn’t expected the plan to proceed with such smoothness. He had already thought of ten excuses to give, in case someone checked on him, in case someone asked why he was behind a pile of sacks in a dirty, rotten wagon. But no one bothered to check.

Seriously? Are they underpaid or something?

* * *

The man was in position. The well-built Kalarippayattu fighter from Trivandrum had a hard time finding a bush big enough to hide his body. Finally, he had located a tree near the road, which

had a broad trunk. He had quickly finished the task he had come to do and hid behind the tree. He sat there waiting, staring at the trap he had laid out across the forest road.

Suddenly, he heard a rustling sound coming from the forest behind him. He turned around, his hand instinctively clutching his dagger. The rustling grew louder every second and suddenly a head popped out from the darkness. It was his subordinate, Kurian, a lanky boy, who looked barely old enough to call himself a man. Markose heaved a sigh of relief, let go of his dagger and resumed his watch, carefully looking up and down the moonlit forest road.

Kurian sat beside him. He was chewing something.

“Why did it take so long?” Markose asked, without taking his eyes off the road.

“Couldn’t find the right place,” replied Kurian, while chewing.

“Did you find it now?”

“Yeah, there’s a small pond nearby.”

“You can’t stick to the plan, can you?”

Markose had taken his eyes off the road and was glaring at Kurian. Kurian looked at him, confused.

“Did the plan have instructions about taking a leak as well?”

“Taking a—what? You went to take a leak?”

Kurian nodded.

“What about the wagon?”

“Which wagon?”

Markose glared at him and started shouting, “You IDIOT! The one you were supposed to park, Kurian, don’t make me hit you now—”

“Oh, Viswa’s doing that. He’s on his way,” the boy explained helplessly.

Markose resumed looking at the road, cursing under his breath, “God knows the kind of dumbfucks I’ve to put up with. I’ll tell Balaram Sir to get his brains tested.”

Kurian, who had breached all barriers of his boss’s privacy, and had come close enough to listen to his under-the-breath

rant, suddenly remarked in a loud voice, “Hey Boss! You can be mean all you want. But don’t insult my brains!”

Markose turned to look and saw Kurian breathing into the long strands of his hair. Pushing him back, he snarled, “You want to sit on top of me or what?”

Like a spider who’s been shooed away, Kurian scattered back to his original position and stared at his boss. Markose couldn’t care less about offending him at that moment and softly ordered,

“Go and check on Viswa. He should be here by now. The gate’s about to open.”

* * *

After a lot of fuss about the number of sacks in the wagon, with incompetent tribal henchmen arguing with incompetent British soldiers, it was finally decided that everyone was getting late and the trade dispute could be resolved at a later date. With that, the shutter of the goods wagon was sealed shut and locked.

Nobody, literally *nobody*, had bothered to check if any life forms had sneaked onboard. With a prisoner still missing, the convoy of British soldiers departed the camp with their wagons, carrying tribute in the form of goods and humans. Henry was at the front with his coterie of horsemen, with the two wagons trailing behind them.

Due to a dearth in the number of competent horsemen in the 52nd Company of the Travancore Cavalry, a decision had been made by their lieutenant, during one of their first visits to the tribal camp.

“All the horsemen will travel in the front, leading the way. We need to guard the front more than the back.”

It was a decision which would prove quite costly for the British in the days to come.

The only inhabitant of the goods wagon, other than the driver, was sitting inside, thinking about his next steps.

What if they shoot me the moment, they see me?

He started going through every plan and possibility, trying out different permutations and combinations in his head.

Once again, he was in the courtyard of his house. This was a recent memory of his. It was one of the training sessions with his Uncle Takran.

He charged at his uncle with a wooden sword. Takran stood his ground, smirking at the boy. With a swift jump, Sai swung his sword, landing it on his uncle's shield. Takran put the shield up to defend himself from the oncoming attack. Before Sai could withdraw his sword from the shield, Takran used a wooden dagger in his right hand, which was hidden behind the shield, and plunged it into Sai's belly.

"Game over!" exclaimed Takran. Sai threw away his sword in exasperation and slumped to the ground, disappointed with himself.

"Warfare is nothing but an art and true art is born in the shadows. A warrior waits in the shadows for the right opportunity to strike. And when the moment comes, he takes his opponent by surprise. You must wait for the right moment, Kshatriya."

That was one of the most important lessons his uncle had taught him during his short tenure as his master.

Sai looked around the wagon. It was still pitch dark, except for flashes of moonlight coming through the cracks in the wood. He figured out a plan. He took one of the sacks, emptied it and put it over himself. He made two gaping holes in the sack to see the world outside and made a hole for breathing. With that, Sai sat inside his camouflage, waiting. He soon fell asleep.

* * *

The three men stood still, in absolute silence. They had been scouting the area for months. They had seen the convoy come and leave numerous times. And as usual, the horsemen came first, followed by the wagons.

The horsemen went past them. They could see the wagons coming up from behind. Markose held onto a thick rope tightly.

“Is the plan clear? Remember, we’re going for the second one.”

“Yes. Pull the rope right after the first one crosses,” said Viswanathan, the only non-fighter in the group. As always, he was in-charge of engineering and logistics.

Markose nodded and asked, “The wagon’s ready?”

Viswanathan nodded. Markose turned his attention back to the approaching wagons, which were almost upon them.

The moment the first one crossed them, Markose pulled the rope with all his might and a huge tree fell right between the first and the second wagon. The convoy halted immediately. The driver of the second wagon got down and went to assess the fallen tree.

The three men got to work immediately. Kurian mounted the driverless wagon and the first thing he did was to blow out the lamp, giving them the cover of darkness. Viswa swiftly drove another wagon out of the forest. This was an exact copy of the original British one. Markose was waiting in the forest, on the other side of the road, observing his men carefully.

In the meantime, the driver had disappeared behind the fallen tree and was busy talking to the British on the other side.

“Quick, he’ll come back any minute! We need to make the switch now,” said Markose, in a hoarse whisper. Kurian picked up the reins of the original wagon, made a swift turn into the forest and rushed down a steep narrow path. He disappeared within the thick cover in no time.

Viswa quietly drove the fake wagon and parked it in the spot of the original one. He quickly dismounted and joined Markose in the forest cover. Though the men worked skilfully and quietly, they couldn’t avoid sounds of the wagons. And Kurian, who was supposed to ride the wagon quietly, had, for some inexplicable reason, gone racing into the forest.

The British driver of the wagon came rushing from behind the fallen tree to check on it. The sounds had startled him. But nothing had changed, except for the lamp, which was no longer lit.

“The lamp!” whispered Markose, with his eyes glued to the scene.

“What’s wrong with it? It’s the same one as the original,” replied Viswa.

“We forgot to light it.”

They were hiding in the forest and observing the scene closely. The driver mounted the wagon and started analysing the blown-out lamp. He relit it. He looked down at the horses and shouted, “Hey John! Something is wrong. Come here!”



Markose’s heart jumped a beat. He looked at Viswa, who looked equally nervous. The other driver came running from behind the tree.

“What happened?”

Pointing to one of the horses, the driver said, “I think the horseshoe must have come off this one here. We need to fix this before reaching.”

“Yeah, I’ll lend you one. I keep extras.”

Both Markose and Viswa sighed in relief. Markose gave a stern look to Viswa, who bore a sheepish expression. They quietly left the scene and rushed in the direction Kurian had gone.

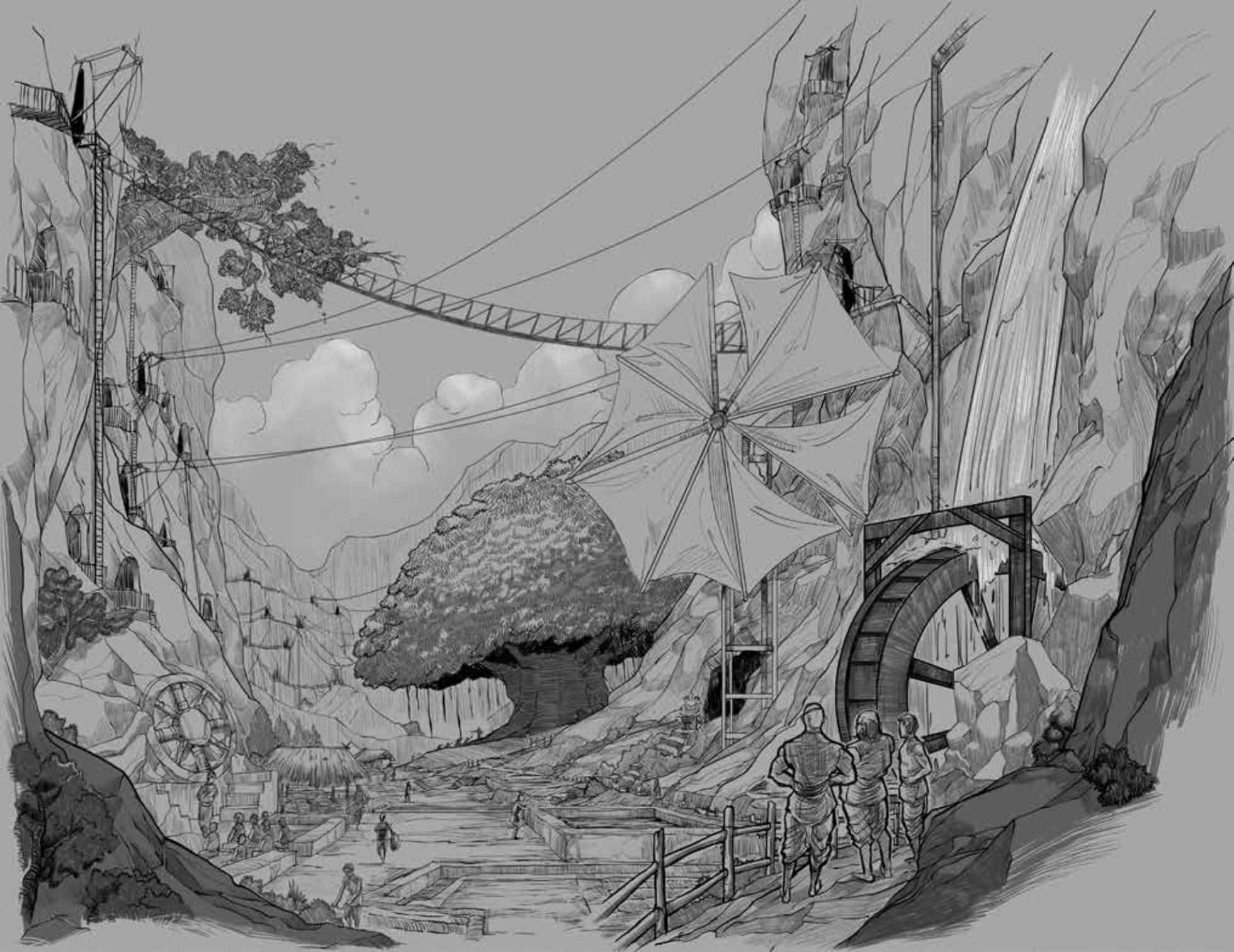
* * *

The huge crash of the tree had woken Sai up. The wagon had come to a stop. Sai tried looking out from the cracks. It was pitch dark. He sat back and tried getting back into the sack. But before he could do it, the wagon moved with a sudden jerk, took a hundred and eighty degree turn and tumbled down a path, tossing Sai around. He hit his head on one of the walls and lay on his back. He could see the world around him swirl.

The wagon raced through the forest, in the dark of the night, with its only passenger lying unconscious in the back.

“From ancient wisdom to modern technology, you will find it in Prassahar. From an army of the most skilled warriors to a community living in perfect harmony, you will find it all in Prassahar. From magnificent displays of art and architecture to advanced economic activities, you will find it all in Prassahar.”

— ‘Chronicles of a Peoples’ Revolution’ by Li Chang



CHAPTER TWO

The Prassahar

Takran was standing in the middle of a forest clearing, mounted on his horse, facing two British foot soldiers who were standing a few metres away, pointing their guns at him. The sun was overhead and the bald part of his half-bald head was gleaming in the sunlight. Since he had lost most of his hair at an early age, he had decided to get a pair of the Vadu clan markings made on the bald part to fill up the empty space. As compensation for the lack of hair on top, Takran maintained huge sideburns, stretching from the top of his ears all the way to the bottom of his chin. This made him look more menacing than he actually was.

Sounds of an approaching horde slowly filled the clearing. Yet, Takran did not draw his sword. He looked to his companion, who was chewing a load of betelnut, staring up at a tree, lost in thought.

“What should we do with them, Salem?” he asked him softly.

“Who?” questioned Salem, in his cracked voice.

Takran gave him a blank stare.

Salem got off his horse and started walking casually towards the two men. He was a big and hefty man, and like his mate, Salem was not well endowed with hair, neither on his head nor

on his face. The cuts and the marks and the scars became more prominent on the bare skin of his dry bony cheeks. A mercenary by profession, Salem Mustafa would walk casually and maintain a poker face, many a times, deceiving his actual intentions. He stopped a couple of metres away from the men and stared at them without saying a word. The silence itself was threatening for the poor souls, who looked like fresh recruits from a nearby village. In a feeble attempt at a show of strength, they held up their guns, pointing straight at him. He spat the betel on the ground and announced,

“Let us through and we’ll let you kids live.”

The sounds of the horde grew louder. One of the men declared, “Stand down! Our company will be here any moment. We will not hesitate—”

His voice was cut off by the horde. Salem looked behind the men. Nearly fifty British horsemen, all armed, started pouring into the clearing. They immediately started creating a perimeter around the clearing, while keeping their guns pointed at the men in the centre.

A horseman carrying the British flag entered last and rode up straight to where Salem stood. He stopped inches away from the mercenary’s face and dismounted. Salem didn’t move an inch. He stared at the horse for a moment, smiled at it and started petting it gently.

Henry first stared at Salem with disgust. Then, he looked at Takran, who was standing a few metres away, looking at him anxiously. Turning his attention back to the man petting his horse, he asked, “So, what are you two doing out in these woods alone?”

Salem kept petting the horse and casually replied, “How can two people be alone?”

A faint giggle came from the direction of the perimeter. Henry glared at his own men. The giggling stopped immediately. Without looking at Salem, he addressed his men, “This one has a sense of humour. That’s exquisite for these jungles.”

He came closer to Salem, breathed right into his face and threatened him, "This is your chance. Go back to whichever hole you came from before I lose my temper, you dimwit."

Salem finally turned his attention from the horse to the horseman. He stared at Henry without flinching.

"Or what?"

"Or—or I'll slice you up, you animal!"

Salem spat the last load of betelnut from his mouth, right next to the lieutenant's shiny shoes and sneered, "This is your chance. Take your shot. I won't give you this chance again."

Sergeant Henry was an ordinary bloke who had recently got married. Wanting to give his newly-wed wife a better life, Henry had no option but to opt for a job which paid more, even if it meant risking their lives. A military advertisement promising a higher wage along with a Company bungalow in the colonies had lured him into leaving his homeland to come to the Kingdom of Travancore. Three years went by and Henry managed to survive, keeping himself busy with paperwork, collecting tribute, chasing a villager here, a local thief there, all this while, trying to keep himself away from the *real* action. A month ago, he was promoted. And, like all promotions, this one also had a condition attached.

"*Lieutenant, you are hereby transferred to the 52nd Company of the Travancore Cavalry,*" were the orders that came.

Soon, he realized that he had been promoted not because he deserved it, but because more deserving officers had deserted the ranks or got themselves transferred elsewhere, away from the *real* action. So, the higher management of the Madras Army of the East India Company had no option but to promote this ordinary bloke to the rank of a lieutenant, a lieutenant who was made in charge of putting an end to the menace of Kalarippayattu.

His heart was thumping. He was looking into the face of a menacing fighter, who had been petting his horse calmly, despite all the guns pointed at him.

Henry took a step back and blurted out a laugh in a show of confidence.

“Are you fucking serious?”

Henry was proudly pointing to his men, who had the two fighters completely surrounded.

Salem turned around quietly and started walking back to his horse. No one else moved a muscle. Apart from Salem’s thumping footsteps, nothing else complemented the sound of the wind blowing through the trees. Henry kept staring at the warrior. On the inside, he felt a mix of emotions. He was a bit impressed and a bit jealous of the mercenary at the same time.

Salem reached his horse, took out his sword and mounted his shield. Takran was confused. He asked, “Hey man, what’s up?”

“I’m going to slice this motherfucker up. That’s what is up.”

“This wasn’t part of the plan,” Takran replied in a low, serious tone.

Salem pointed to the forest with his eyes and whispered, “They’re already *here*.”

* * *

MEET THE CHARACTERS



SAI

Despite being the scion of the great Vadu clan, Sai Vadu Kechary was a simple boy who had recently graduated to adulthood. Deep inside, he was still a boy, a boy who had just lost his father and was entrusted with the insurmountable task of fulfilling his father's lifelong dream of defeating the British. In Book One, he flees his native village and joins Balaram at his Kalari to train further in the art of Kalaripayattu.

BALARAM

Despite being the scion of the great Vadu clan, Sai Vadu Kechary was a simple boy who had recently graduated to adulthood. Deep inside, he was still a boy, a boy who had just lost his father and was entrusted with the insurmountable task of fulfilling his father's lifelong dream of defeating the British. In Book One, he flees his native village and joins Balaram at his Kalari to train further in the art of Kalaripayattu.



MEET THE CHARACTERS



MASTER EZHUFZI

Master Ezhufzi was the oldest and one of the greatest masters of Kalarippayattu across the subcontinent. He was the only one alive who had mastered all the four stages of Kalarippayattu and was well versed with the art of the Marmas: a collection of the deadliest fighting techniques in the subcontinent. In Book One, he runs a hidden sanctuary dedicated to Kalarippayattu, called the Prassahar.

MOHINI

Mohini was a master of her trade, a gorgeous performer, and sometimes, a lady of the evening. However, her alter ego was Lady X, one of the greatest spies in the Kingdom. Most people who hadn't met her or seen her, believed her to be a myth, believed that she didn't exist. What more of an honour could a master of espionage demand? In Book One, Mohini is running a secret tavern in the heart of the city of Trivandrum.



MEET THE CHARACTERS



SKARAT

A series of tragedy forced the boy from a good family to flee his home and become a tribal dacoit. After years of plunder, Skarat ended up at Hakkan's tribal camp and rose through the ranks to become his deputy. In Book One, he leaves the camp and joins hands with the British, becoming their top assassin, entrusted with the task of capturing Sai.

TAKRAN VADU NAIRAVANDU

Vadu's brother, Takran, was a terrific fighter, just like his brother. But deep inside, he was a calm man who planned his every move and would think thrice before picking up a sword. And in his own way, he was trying to fulfil his brother's dream, starting a rebellion against the British. In Book One, Takran sets out on the task of building an army, and ends up at the Prassahar, seeking support of Master Ezhufzi.



MEET THE CHARACTERS



KALYANI

Escaping the horrors of her father's camp, the lost girl ended up in the city of Trivandrum and made Balaram's Kalari her home. Five years later, Kalyani was one of the fiercest warriors of the Kalari, and was skilled to face the mightiest of opponents and fight the toughest of battles. In Book One, she is living at the Trivandrum Kalari, where she meets Sai and begins a romantic relationship with him.

Keep going there's more



ABOUT AUTHOR



AMBUJ GUPTA : AUTHOR

Ambuj is an author and filmmaker based out of Delhi. Till 2018, he was working as a corporate lawyer for a prestigious law firm. In 2018, he quit his job to pursue writing and filmmaking. He started working with a production house called Searchglass Films and was making low-budget documentaries and experimental films till May 2020.

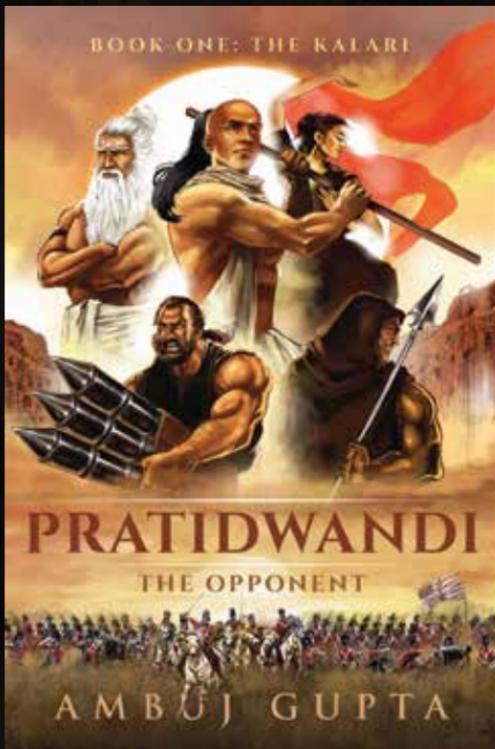
He completed his first documentary film, Community, a dog-documentary exploring the relationship between humans and dogs, and released it at some of the most prestigious film festivals across the country and on YouTube. His second documentary film, Heroes of Himalayas, which is on the Green Trails initiative of Indiahikes (the country's largest trekking organization), was released on YouTube in October 2020. He started working on two novel series in the summer of 2020, finishing a couple of manuscripts and laying the foundations for many more, Pratiwandhi being one of them.

Ambuj currently lives with his parents in Gurugram, India. He is working as a corporate lawyer and tries to juggle his time between a high-pressure job and creating stories, every day, bit by bit. In his free time, he likes to run and swim.



PRATIDWANDI

THE OPPONENT



BUY NOW

@ [amazon](#)

FIND US ON SOCIAL MEDIA

to explore the world of PRATIDWANDI

Click the icons below to
REACH OUT TO US.



or visit our website

www.ambujgupta.com