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The
Gatekeeper

A NOVEL

Nuraliah
Norasid

“*The Gatekeeper* is a marvellous blend of home comforts and pains, and the strange treasures of other realms. It’s a skilled writer indeed who can make fantasy sing with so much real-world truth and delight.”

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“I love how Nuraliah has created this imagined but totally plausible world which is both strange yet familiar. An impressive piece of writing—confident and effortless.”

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EPIGRAM BOOKS
SINGAPORE · LONDON

*For my Mama who has survived so much
and looks set to survive still more.*

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ria I: gembira, girang, riang, sukacita
(Translation: happy, cheerful, carefree)

—from *Kamus Dewan: edisi keempat*

What is life's greatest illusion?
Innocence, my brother.

—Dawnstar Sanctuary riddle from *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*

And to this day, Minerva, to dismay
and terrify her foes, wears on her breast
the very snakes that she herself had set—
as punishment—upon Medusa's head.

—from Book IV of Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*

The interrogator switched languages. “Ria, you like to story, yah? Tell lah. Tell us,” she urged.

No clipped, controlled tones of a second tongue, learnt in schools. They were done with objectives, done with questions of what Ria did and why she had done it. They knew hurting her, only to receive silence in return, was not going to work. So they’d changed the interrogator to this one who spoke with familiarity: using Sce’ dal, the lingua franca of the Layeptic region, instead of the colonial-born Ro’ dal; breaking words, shortening sentences, barely obeying the laws of grammar.

In the light-hearted music of the new interrogator’s voice was the indulgence and comfort of a glutinous rice and coconut milk dessert. Ria could almost forget the tight cap suffocating her hair, the immobility of her clamped-down limbs, and the collar that was fitted just tight enough to remind her where she was every time she swallowed.

She’d pissed herself a few times and had been constipated for days. She could not see, for her eyes, too—her eyes *especially*—were bound. Judging from the hollow ring of the space, she guessed that she was in a too-large room with an ominously high ceiling.

“Tell lah,” the interrogator said again. In colloquial Sce’ dal, the word *cerita*, for “story”, was shortened into *c’ita*, “create”.

Ria smiled, lips cracking. To tell—no, create—a story like hers, was to tell of regrets from first beginnings, perhaps even when the country was called by a Tuyunri name that linguists could only transliterate as Ma(an) TisCera—The Land(of) SkyHills.

And what a peopled land it was.

Early records called the scaly, reptilian Scereans the “dragons of the waters” and the first book written about the pre-Human history of the land spoke of them as if they were devil spawn. Back then, most of them had inverted knees and leg spurs, and long snouts filled

with sharp teeth that they used to snap up fish in the Su(ma) Uk'rh, or Lower Marshlands, where the soft ground ate boots and plant- and animal-life ate everything else. It was a time when everyone kept to their dwellings and settlements: the Screeans in the northeastern side of the island country, near Su(ma) whence they came; the agile, cat-like Feleenese to the northwest where they fought wars with their canine Cayanese neighbours for control of the fertile land around the Anur Delta. The river systems ensued from a convergence of the clear streams within the land's rainforest centre. Ma(an) TisCera's first inhabitants, the Tuyuns, existed to and past their decline there, atop mouldering, ancestral ruins. The Tuyuns were almost Human-looking, but they wore scales of *tur* and *yun*—rock and wood—upon their skins, so that they might camouflage into the land that was theirs by right of precedence.

The Humans only arrived much later, coming from lands high up in the north and far west across the seas, though they were quick to take things for their own. No one noticed the pig-fleshed things in their villages, or how their centre in Krow City grew as time went by, forcing the other races into tight, defenceless corners. But in no time their arrivals were forgotten and it was as if they had always been there: raising buildings, laying down pipes, making laws and governments, and getting things done the way they saw fit.

When the country was populated enough and important enough in the larger scheme of *dinya*—the world—someone declared its birth as if it had never been there before. The country was later named “Manticura”, for a poisonous flying Human-headed lion made for a much stronger symbol than disappearing skies and deflating hills inhabited by savages.

Screean (me-tura). In official Manticurean records, that was what Ria would be named, though her being was more than a composite image of a snake and a woman.

Ria had only seen herself in reflection once. Her widely-set, slanted orange eyes with their starved pupils and her flat nose made her more Screean than Human. And yet, the oily black serpent coils falling to her shoulders made sure all of that didn't matter.

Once again: “Tell lah.”

Ria conjured for her listener a memory of rustling undergrowth and a lone attap hut on stilts in a small jungle clearing. Chickens pecked in the courtyard dirt and in the shaded kolong beneath the hut. A few times she had darted in among them from behind the moss-covered roots of a meranti tree, dragging cans strung on a length of white twine, to watch them scatter in a flurry of clucks, wing beats and feathers.

Sometimes her Nenek, grey hair in a snail knot, sat on the short flight of steps that led up to the veranda, chewing on her sireh while she watched Ria play. Sometimes Nenek wore her baju opah; most times, Nenek wore only her sarong, hitched up high over her freckled and wrinkled breasts, her ankles skinny and her veins tracing bulging courses across the tops of her bare, rough-soled feet.

Barani never watched, but when Ria did something wrong, her sister was always there, waiting just inside the veranda and frowning at the top of the steps. Tall Barani, with her serious eyes like brilliant purple stones, her pupils tiny triple knots and the slight jut of cheekbones that seemed to trace their way to her full lips; different, beautiful—“Enchanting,” as Nenek pointed out to Ria once.

Ria had none of that beauty. All Ria had were the laughter and smiles, and the silent feet that let her creep about the kolong unnoticed, above which Barani could be heard screeching, “Ria! Where are you, you little devil? Come inside now!”

To be quiet, Ria would have a hand pressed over her mouth, cupped to keep her voice in as her sister screamed again:

“Ria!”

Then, Ria, who was named for old, forgotten joy, would open her hand and let her laughter ring out for all nearby to hear.



It was joy that Eedric tried to remember, as the hours, perhaps even days, in lockup started to feel like months. He sat in a large crowded cell, caged in by bars with white paint peeling off, revealing grey metal in places. The dark walls were nothing but ravaged, windowless expansions of those bars, keeping him packed in with the other men awaiting second judgment.

He leaned his head back and glanced about at the other occupants of the cell. They were a threatening mixture of almost every non-Human race that existed on Manticura, reeking aggression and menace as they squatted or stood clustered in their groups. One man was taking a piss in the far corner, either oblivious to the guard banging the bars with his truncheon, or deliberately ignoring him. Behind the man, two others—a midnight-coated Cayanese and a Tuyun, his grey, rock-like *tur* scales rough and scratched, the row of spikes along his arms blunted—were going at it, their foreheads mashed together as they argued, their respective hodgepodge band of “members” adding to the cacophony with trash talk.

Eedric didn't see how it would be a fair fight, because the Cayanese, like all of his kind, was a hulking figure, twice the Tuyun's size. Granted, he was not a pure-blooded Cayanese. There was a Human face seamed into his canine features: his brown eyes large, furry brows drawn low; nose protruding and pert though not like a snout, beneath which his mouth was drawn into a tight line. Eedric saw how, within offspring of mixed blood, the Human bits always struggled to be present amongst those of the *anir*, or for want of better a Ro' dal word, the “creature”.

The midnight Cayanese's ears were perked into tall triangles. A

mane of grey, darker than the rest of him, swept back from around them and down to where his chest began. His legs grew straight down to flat Human feet with small toes, which were quite likely the only Human parts of him that managed to really assert themselves.

A group of Feleenese men sat against an adjacent wall near Eedric. They watched the fight with disinterest. They wore their shirts with the sleeves rolled up high on their upper arms and Eedric noticed the matching triangle of spirals burnt into their short brown fur. One of them saw Eedric watching and shot him a look, calm yet confrontational. Eedric turned away, to the austere, white walls of the corridor outside.

So far none of them had picked on Eedric yet. Strange, seeing how his was the only Human-looking form in the room.

Perhaps the whispers had got around about what he really was: a *Human-minora (survivalist)*; meaning “minor Human”, signalling a mixing of blood, that last bit tacked on like a warning or an insult. And no one was desperate, angry or bored enough to provoke him into a fight. He wouldn't have minded though. It would certainly beat waiting about for a verdict, or for a next-of-kin to care enough to bail you out. Occasionally, a guard came around to open the gate and announce a name, and Eedric would watch the person depart to a rapacious display of spread arms and small cheers, as if freedom was around the corner rather than prosecution and punishment.

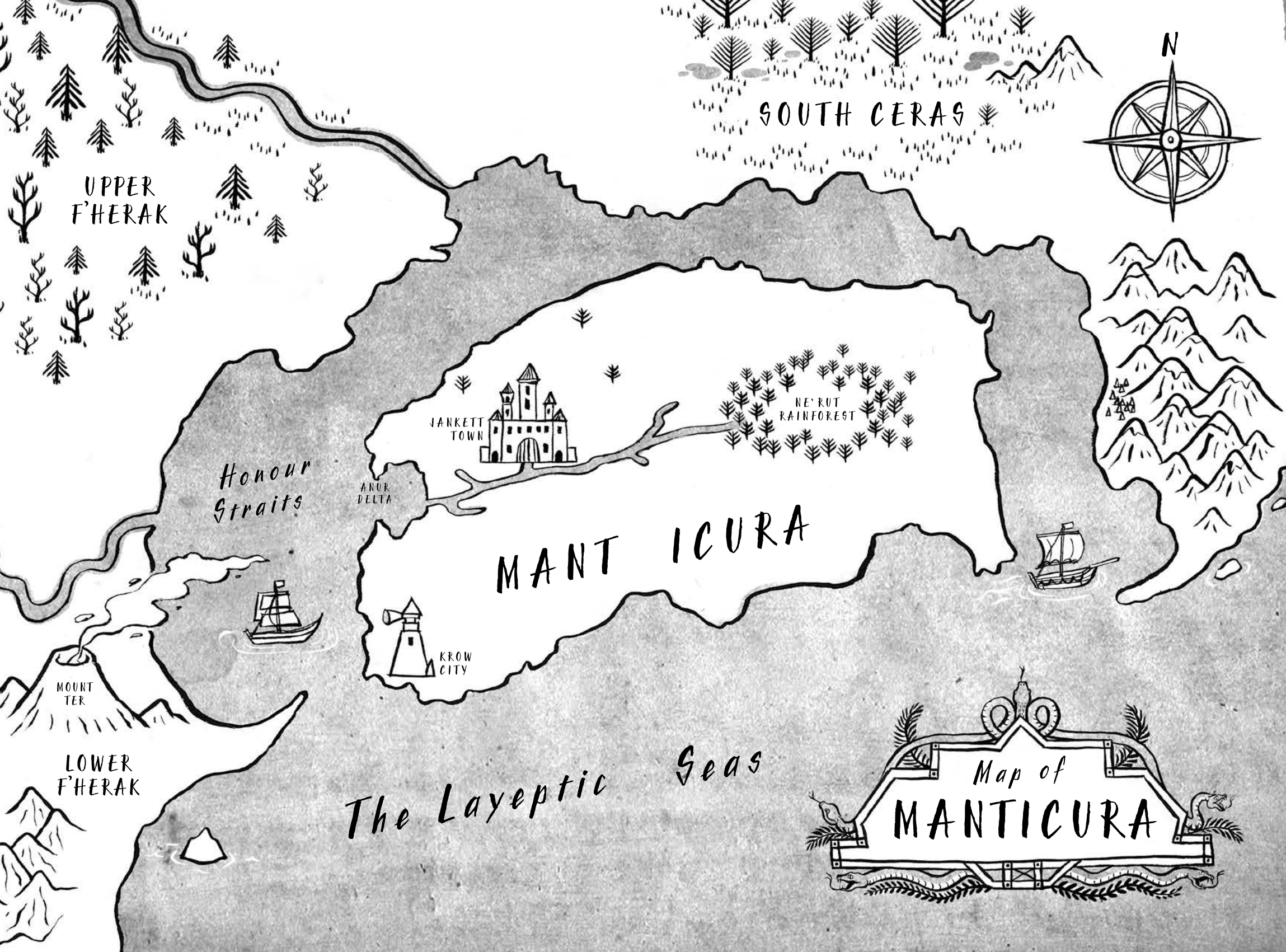
He closed his eyes and let his mind wander to a certain medusa. Ria, with her name like smiles freely given, and her half-moon eyes the colour of the sky at sunrise. He recreated his mental image of her with the single-minded purpose of remembering only the best of her in quiet hours. He could forget the reek of urine around him and smell instead the salty musk of the valley between her breasts, the fullness of them in his hands; the valley that began the invisible line down her stomach, to the pubic triangle wedged between

warm thighs, which sloped to perfect knees. Her laugh had its own characteristic timbre, resonating in his head long after the last note had floated away in conversation. He thought of the two moles on the left side of her face—the one in the corner of her lips, a hint away from the dimple that appeared when she smiled, and the bigger one at the corner of her eye, bisected by her ragged scar. The snakes that frequently touched her face on the side with the moles seemed to have a single white mark on the backs of their heads, as if in a conscious effort to match.

He got to thinking of the way her hair was attached to her head: not like hair with roots, but extensions of her skin, growing out into each serpent body. The scales were sparse where the strand began at her scalp, closing up into tight patterns, nearly imperceptible in the uniform green-sheened black over the whole of the visible creature.

How did one explain what seemed like a lifetime of presence? It struck him that she could have been there, all that time: the mother by his bedside, his first love from days of innocent youth, a remembered act of kindness and—at the same time—of complete and utter cruelty.

In spite of his best efforts, every one of her faces in the album of his mind—in laughing moments, and in the sad and distant ones—were sombre black-and-white snapshots, her eyes averted just a little so as to not dazzle and petrify. It was not memory, not really. It was the desperate creation of one from the starbursts of joy that her presence had once brought him as the pain of her recent betrayal threatened to flood over him once again.



UPPER
F'HERAK

SOUTH CERAS



Honour
Straits

JANKETT
TOWN

NE'RUT
RAINFOREST

ANUR
DELTA

MANT ICURA

KROW
CITY

MOUNT
TER

LOWER
F'HERAK

The Layeptic Seas



5064-5068 CE

Wash Feet

Ria raced past the earthen container with its wooden cover, up the steps and onto the veranda before entering the house to sit across from Barani and Nenek at the woven tikar. She held out her enamel green plate to her sister. Barani did not even give it a glance, scowling at Ria's feet instead. Ria looked. They were dusty from the outside. Something was stuck to the sole and in between her toes. Might be a leaf, or a squashed fruit; *as long as no smell*, Ria figured and took a sniff just to check.

Holding the rice spoon high above the steaming pot, Barani admonished Ria with a loud, "*Kan* dirty!" extending the last syllable until she sounded like an annoying trilling bird.

When Ria didn't move to wash her feet, Barani went around the tikar and took the younger girl by the ear and forced her to stand. Ignoring the violent, protesting hisses from Ria's hair, Barani marched her to the container at the bottom of the steps.

Ria clutched at her tender ear as she scooped water onto her feet. She rubbed the soles against her shins to get rid of the dirt and the unfortunate specimens she had picked up earlier, muttering the entire time—about Barani being a monster, a devil, a no-good busybody. She never saw the logic of this foot-washing regimen. What difference did it make if she were to wash them only right before going to bed? All in one, no trouble. She was only going to

get them dirty again anyway, when she had to go out later to get the chickens back into the coop beneath the house and to take in the laundry. Foot-washing was a stupid rule someone had made up—must be Barani who was too lazy to sweep the house. One of those silly bits of nonsense that stated you could do something, but not something else, all for someone's benefit—must be Barani's. "This cannot. That cannot. All cannot."

Barani shouted at her from the top of the steps, "Eh, what you muttering about?" And she went on—"Just now just come back don't want to wash, now suka-suka take your time to wash, you think what? Time your mother make is it?"—such that even if Ria wanted to tell Barani what she was mumbling about, she wasn't given a chance to.

Nenek always said Barani had a beautiful voice: lemak manis, they called it; coconut milk rich and sweet as sugar—like that singer, Salo... Salom... somebody. But right then, Barani's voice grated on Ria's ears. Not nice at all.

Walking damp-footed past Barani, Ria remarked, "Voice not nice *tu*, be quiet only lah."

Barani flared into a new temper and, hitching up her sarong with one hand, snapped her body around. "This child!" she exclaimed. "So insolent already! Come here!" And gave chase.

Ria, small and lithe, sprinted into the house, screaming with gleeful panic, "Nek! Kakak want to beat Adik, Nek!" Barani was red-faced. Her hand was raised. She had taken five unsuccessful swipes at Ria, who had counted.

Nenek, who liked to begin meals with sireh, was in the process of spitting out her chewed clump of leaf and betel nut into the spittoon by the time Barani got inside and settled back down, seething, beside the elderly woman. Barani spooned rice for Nenek first, who serenely took her plate, before snatching Ria's out of the girl's outstretched hands. While she waited, Ria sniffed at the dishes served in their

little bowls: cassava leaves cooked in coconut milk, sambal belacan to make it spicy and boiled sweet potatoes for afters. It was rare to be having rice, and rice was always Ria's favourite.

Later, Ria would ask for seconds. Barani, scolding, "Later you fat, then you know," would always give her another helping. Fat or not fat was of no concern to Ria, who was small and so thin everywhere that Nenek had once thought she had stomach worms.



Everything was routine around the house. Barani and Nenek woke up early every morning to cook and pack lauks, to make kuihs and some shell ornaments for sale. Then, while Nenek trekked to the coastal village to sell their goods, Barani tidied their home, which was the easiest part of the morning. The hardest part was getting Ria to wake up. Often Barani had to grab the girl by the ankles and heave her off the sleeping mat. Ria, still sleeping, protested by lashing out arms and feet at her sister, all the while shouting like she was battling sea monsters in a dream. When she finally woke, it was with her face partly on the mat, partly on the floor, and Barani very close to kicking her out onto the veranda and down to the courtyard where they would have their morning baths.

Ria hated these baths because mornings were cold, and the girls would be shivering in nothing but their sarongs. Ria's sarong kept slipping off her flat chest, so she had to hold it up while she splashed water over herself. Barani had no such concerns. *Dasarkan tetek besar*—breast big, always no problem.

Nenek was used to them fighting. She rarely ever reacted to it. What Nenek would not tolerate, however, was when they turned their gazes to each other; both locked in a battle of who would channel that petrifying energy better—Barani, obviously. Those were times when Nenek, who was always benign and understanding, would roar, "Don't play with eyes!" and twist both girls' ears until they stared

back at her, red-faced, red-eared and ready to cry. Those times when Nenek got angry, not even Ria could laugh at the double meaning of “playing with eyes”. No matter how much they tried to deny it, Nenek would have caught the twin clouding of their eyes and the raising of their hairs. To the old woman, it did not matter that their gazes would not affect either of them, or even Nenek (not that they had ever tried). She did not want them to make a habit of it.

“Because you live with people now,” Nenek explained later when all the sniffing subsided. “They may not like you. They may not want you near them. They may not want you near their children or their chickens, whichever is more important. But you cannot stone people.”

It was the year of the “Mati-kura Tra-jadi”. Ria didn’t know much about what a “tra-jadi” was, but from the way Nenek was so strict about things, Ria guessed it had something to do with girls like Barani and herself getting into trouble for the things they could do with their eyes. There was also “Mati” in that “tra-jadi” somewhere, which meant “die”. So that “trouble” likely involved dead people.

“But what if they deserve it?” Ria asked. She was already bright-eyed, sitting straight, fingers of one hand picking at the nails of the other.

Nenek slapped her hands apart without having to look. “Don’t argue. People don’t do anything to you, you don’t do anything to them. In life, you must be patient. You must accept. Be kind and some day, someone will be kind back.”

Whatever Nenek might say, Ria was sure they did not live among people. They lived among chickens; chickens they let out of the coop every morning. Into their clucking fray, Ria would secretly throw the clumps of rice that she knew had weevil larvae in them. They had many hens and this one cock Ria wanted so badly to kick for the way it walked, breast out, tail feathers arced and shaking.

Ria could if she wanted to—kick the cock, that was. Unless it was something she did wrong, no one in the house really paid attention

to her. Nenek placed all her hopes and expectations on Barani, raising her to take charge of the household and to set a good example for Ria. After Nenek’s lectures Barani would be quiet for hours, sitting on the veranda with her back to the entrance. Ria could not even think of anything annoying to do. She could only watch her sister silently, nothing but her eyes peeking past the rough-hewn wooden doorjamb, body crouching on all fours just inside the ibu rumah. She wanted to call out “Kakak” to her older sister but the words always withdrew, back into some far corner of her mouth.



When Ria turned seven—“Count-count, about seven,” Nenek told her, holding up one hand, fingers splayed, and another to resemble a pair of scissors—she climbed her first tree.

They were to have tapioca again because their rice had finished. Ria had caught a caterpillar—the fat, furry kind Bara was always afraid of. This she put down the back of Bara’s baju when the older girl wasn’t looking. The sight of Barani twisting and squirming, all while she screeched and cried, was funny right until she rounded up on Ria who was laughing behind an open hand. Ria thought she was going to get it then, but instead of beating her, Barani issued a dare: “You see that tree?”—Bara pointed at a tree—“You so smart, you climb lah. I want to see.”

Bara was herself an expert tree-climber and kept goading Ria with, “Scared right? Scared right?”

To prove herself not scared, Ria hitched up her sarong and climbed the tree Barani had indicated. The branches were thick and the first of them were low enough for her to grab and hoist herself up with. She clambered up with some difficulty, legs spread too wide and sarong pushed scandalously high around her thighs, until she reached a broad branch some ways off the ground. She stood on it, trumpeting her success while Barani looked on, unimpressed.

In time, Barani turned to go, saying, “Come down lah. Go home.”

It was then that the distance Ria had climbed caught up to her and became terrifying. The ground seemed so far away and everything below her so small.

Barani turned back after a bit, saw Ria still up in the tree and needled her with, “Ah, climb so high, and then don’t know how to come down.”

Torn between a fear of falling and the pressing need to return to the safety of the ground, all tangled together with the determination to not be shown up by her sister, Ria shouted even as she began to cry, “Kakak ask Ria to climb, Ria climb lah!”

Barani, still amused, held out her arms. “Jump!”

“Don’t want!” Ria cried out, hugging herself closer to the tree.

“Jump! Kakak catch!” Barani called out again. She made a motion with her hands—jump, come down. Don’t worry. Kakak catch. There was no uncertainty in her countenance or bearing. So Ria finally closed her eyes and leapt. And Barani did catch her. The impact of the drop and meeting bodies sent Barani into a half spin as her arms closed around Ria. Ria held on to her, taking in the smell of the jasmine oil that her sister liked to dab in the crevices of scalp between the serpent bodies.

“Alah...not so high also...” remarked Barani, smiling.

After that, Ria had no problems climbing trees. Whenever Ria found flowers, she held them to her nose, trying to find a matching scent because back then she didn’t know what jasmine flowers looked like.



When Nenek decided that they must have an education, Ria wondered if it had anything to do with how much time she had spent playing in the forest lately. Barani said it was so that they could read the words in the newspapers. Ria didn’t argue.

One day Nenek had them dressed in their nicest baju kurungs and wrapped their heads with the new shawls she’d got for them, before trooping them with her along a narrow dirt path that cut through a long stretch of forest. Barani held Ria’s hand throughout the walk. Ria kept trying to tug herself free, so that she was angled away from Barani the whole time.

She saw a troop of macaques sitting on their haunches and watching them pass. One had a baby clinging to her, its large eyes in a tiny face staring at Ria. Nearby, a group of young monkeys were engaged in a game of mock wrestling. Ria bared her teeth at the lot of them. Barani pulled at her hand so hard that Ria collided into the taller girl’s body as she jerked upright. But Barani was not looking at her. Rather she was keeping her eyes firmly fixed on the oversized basket strapped to Nenek’s back. Ria looked back and saw that some of the macaques were frozen in place, and those that weren’t were bounding about the stone ones in the beginning stages of a frenzy.

The path they were on led to a perpendicular tarred road. It ran along the back of a row of conjoined ground houses, each one thatched-roofed, marked by a barred window and bigger than the one she’d known all her life. A rusty bicycle sat propped against a wooden wall, its front wheel squashed into an eight that was fat around the middle. Its seat was missing, though its bell was still intact. Ria wanted to reach out and ring it, but Barani did not slow her stern pace. Discarded paraphernalia lined the path, pressed up against the houses. She lifted her nose to the smell of fried banana fritters, trying to detect which house it came from. Ria peered into each window but save for a hint of light from one open door or other, the houses’ interiors were dark and offered nothing more than glints of pots and woks, outlines of things kept and the occasional silhouette of their tenants.

To the other side of the path was open ground covered in patches

of dark grass stretching out to a line of distant, but familiar forest.

Nenek went down the path, and the sisters followed. At one point they came alongside a group of children—all boys, dressed in buttoned shirts tucked into shorts worn high on skinny waists. One boy wore shoes—too big for him—with white socks. The others wore slippers, the blue-and-white rubber kind like hers. Too big on some. Too small on another. Soles too thin on one. Like hers.

They watched goggle-eyed as Ria passed them with Barani and Nenek. Ria snapped her eyes away when her sister reached down to grasp the point where the two ends of scarf were knotted under her chin, so that it was pulled tighter over the undulating mass on her head. She wanted to cry out in protest but saw that Barani was doing the same to her own scarf, seemingly unaware she was only making her hair more visible through the cloth.

When they came to the end of that dirt road, Nenek went around the corner of the last house and it was not long before Ria got her first glimpse of Kenanga.

The whole village was set on a huge clearing of dusty dry ground which the sun bore down upon, unimpeded. Tall sticks of coconut trees rose between the houses. Ria bent a little while she was being pulled along, so that she could look into the kolong of the raised houses—no chickens, but there were more children, playing together, squatting about, returning her wide-eyed stare in kind. She peered into the houses with their broad areas of veranda; wondered at the legged furniture and the bits of patterned curtains she could see in a few of them. Near the village centre, there was a sheltered area with a dark green awning held up by thick poles. Two bicycles and a motorcycle stood slightly tipped beside one of these poles. Further in, within the sheltered space itself, a group of men sat at a long table while someone appeared to be pouring drinks at a metal stall behind them. Their voices rumbled over to Ria, though they stopped altogether as she came near with Nenek and Barani.

They turned their heads in sync, to watch Barani—Ria, too, but Barani more—as they passed.

There was a discomfiting quality to their gazes that Ria couldn't pin down. So she stared at them instead. Or tried to, because Barani placed her hand on Ria's cheek and turned her face away.

“Enchanting”, or “*menawan*”: Ria remembered the word Nenek used. Barani was like that; Ria too, perhaps, but Barani more.

The schoolhouse was a single-storey building, raised on a concrete platform. There were two doors—front and back—and an ample amount of windows, their shutters opened so that Ria could look into the classroom. A long dark board spanned the whole of one wall, while another board, a green one tacked with papers and drawings, spanned another. Students sat on high stools around the rectangular tables they shared. One or two tomes—*kitab*s, she thought Nenek once called them—lay opened at each table, shared between eight students. The younger ones sat near the front, while the older ones—some adults too—sat in the back. Each only had thin, bound folds of paper, into which they were inscribing, Ria guessed, the symbols that were written on the board.

Ria saw the tall, pretty Cikgu with her thick, close curls and plain, off-yellow baju kurung, smiling at them from behind big black-framed glasses. Feeling suddenly shy, Ria scratched at her hair through the scarf. Barani nudged her to stop. So she stopped.

Cikgu beckoned them in, saying, “Ah! There you are! Arrived already! Come in lah. Don't be shy.” Ria stumbled slightly from Barani's push as they entered. Once inside, Cikgu introduced them to the rest of the students in the class. The students all slouched forward a little more on their stools, eyes wide with fascination, as seemed to be the common reaction amongst people in the village when they saw the sisters.

Ria heard Barani draw in a breath as she returned the students' stares. Ria waited for the tell-tale clouding of her sister's eyes,

preparing to turn her head and find all the students cast in stone.

Cikgu assigned them their seats then and Ria took relief in that.

Barani took her seat at the back among gaping boys who would not stop staring at her, while Ria was made to sit in front, so close to Cikgu that she could reach out and touch her if she wanted to.

Midway through class, Ria glanced to the back of the room to look over at her sister. Barani's scarf-covered head was bent over a table much too low for her, as she laboured over the small board Cikgu had given out earlier, her grip on the chalk awkward, white-knuckled. A persistent pair of eyes watched her from a corner of the classroom; some stupid boy with ears that stuck out too much through his head of tumbling hair. Stubborn, *degil* ears, Ria remembered Nenek calling those types. So, in class, she tried her best to keep an eye on him.

Grasshopper Army

By what Ria could discern of the calendar and the way time and days were marked by it, she and Barani had been in school for a few weeks, probably nearly a month. In that time, Ria picked up on symbols and numbers, and their set sequences that were not supposed—she was told—to vary even as the moments or the reasons for their use changed.

Cikgu was always kind, always patient; always wearing her simple baju kurungs over her small-chested, big-hipped frame. And Ria would try to do things right just for the warm smile Cikgu would give her.

But there came a morning when Barani did not ask Ria to pack her board and the homework she had prepared so meticulously the night before, and did not pass her a packed lunch of fire-baked cassava to take to school. Ria sat folding grasshoppers out of coconut leaves by the door, eyeing her school things and her sister, who was sweeping the house with all the air of a brewing storm during monsoon time. It was the same sort of air that would hang the smell of rain around them and point a warning finger at Ria, telling her that she couldn't play outside. So vigorous was her sister's sweeping, and yet so brooding, that Ria tucked her feet away without being told to.

Finally she dared ask, "Kakak, not going to school *ke?*"

Barani replied without looking at Ria, “School? People like us, what for need school? No need school!” Every word sounded like Barani was biting into it, vicious as an attacking roc, those reptilian pets that people liked to keep to guard their property and chase innocent school kids up trees. Her hair hissed a drawn out chorus, ready to attack and spit their venom at anybody who came too near. Barani continued to sweep the dust and dirt out the door, her face set neutrally. The broom scratched at the wooden floor, seeming to scrape the words “sweep, sweep, sweep” all out the door. Ria could only pout, but turned her face away so Barani could not see. Secretly she wondered if them not being able to go to school was her fault, because whenever she tried to talk to one girl, the girl proceeded to cover her work with a shielding hand. And no one would lend her their eraser when she asked.



Ria missed learning. She was just getting good at addition: one leaf grasshopper add one leaf grasshopper was two leaf grasshoppers. She badly wanted to know how to read and write, and every day she would look to Barani, hoping to see her sister change her mind about “people like us” not needing to go to school.

In answer to her wish, a day came when Ria, sitting on the veranda, spotted Cikgu walking down the dirt path, an umbrella over her scarf-covered head. Ria saw that Cikgu carried a bag in her free hand. Before Cikgu could reach the house, Ria dashed into the house, crying out breathlessly, “Nek! Nek! Kak! Kak! Cikgu come!”

Nenek continued to chew calmly on her sireh, instructing Barani to go prepare coffee and something to eat for Cikgu. Barani flitted back and forth from the ibu rumah to the kitchen, getting ready to serve the guest even as she tried to throw on her scarf and help Ria put on hers at the same time, scolding, “Do work a bit faster can or not? People come, no drinks, no food...” Ria tied a firm knot under

her chin to secure the scarf. She thought Barani was going to have a seizure from all the worrying about the state of the house and whether Cikgu liked her coffee black or with milk. Amidst Barani’s flurry, Nenek rocked where she sat on the floor, her red-stained mouth chewing and chewing.

Nenek met Cikgu at the top of the stairs and invited the young woman in. Cikgu spoke to Nenek and then to Barani for what seemed like a long time before she sat down and took out books from her bag to spread on the tikar that had been rolled out on the veranda for her. Ria was made to wash her face and then sit across from her. She watched, chewing on a fingernail, as Cikgu slipped her own scarf off to let it hang around her shoulders. Her wavy locks were glossy black, loose and free. Looking right at Ria, she asked gently, “Do you want to learn, Ria?”

Ria glanced at the books. She had never held one before. In class, no one sharing her desk would let her. She looked up at Cikgu and wanted to be just like her: hair big-big and curly, bespectacled, poised and smart. And pretty. Not beautiful like Barani but pretty in a way that felt just right. She quickly removed her finger from her mouth before nodding. Cikgu reached out and pulled off Ria’s scarf with a smile—“At home, no need to wear. Hot outside, or raining outside, then wear. Don’t worry.” Which was how Ria became the first of the two sisters to receive home-schooling.

In time, symbols—those curves like smiles, lines like tree stems, diamond marks and tiny snails that hung mid-air—gained meaning, pointing at things. Even her name became tangible, contained in a page she could give to anyone. She wrote her name first on the chalkboard and then made meticulous copies on slips of lined paper. She gave the slips to Nenek, Barani and Cikgu. When those symbols became something called the “alfa-birds” after the school system changed, the words she spelled still sounded the same. She was still “Ria” and for that she was glad.

Cikgu taught her another language too—made of squarish symbols of whorls-and-dots, and branching twigs with crowns of eyes—a language she said no one had any use for any more because the people who used to speak it were quickly dying out of their traditions, forgetting their language. There were not many books to teach it with, but “there’s value in Tuyunri. If you don’t speak it, who will?” Cikgu said. “You are special and that is why I will teach you.” Ria wanted to ask Cikgu how she came to know the language in the first place, but wasn’t sure it was at all right to ask anyone how they knew anything. However, what Cikgu had told her made Ria feel extra special and she took to learning the language with zeal, knowing to spell her *apis* for “fire” in Sce’ dal, and her *krik-eks* for the same in Tuyunri. She was happy—happy to know the many ways to speak the same.



Cikgu was not the only person to venture down that path from Kenanga to the isolated house. For all of their isolation and for all of the sweeping that Barani had done, there was one unpleasant thing that persisted in coming.

He first came on a bicycle, meandering over the unevenness of the path, and almost falling more than once. Ria saw him while working on her penmanship at the veranda. His bicycle jolted sideways. He twisted the handlebars as he shot out a leg to stop his fall. He looked up and, seeing Ria, smiled, righting his bicycle before pushing forward until he was just below the veranda. He must have been sixteen or so. The teeth in his smile were very white against his brown skin. His *degil* ears still stuck out and his hair was still ruffled. When he greeted her, Ria felt like throwing her pencil at him. Useless Boy. But before she could think about not answering his greeting, she had to remember to pull her scarf from around her shoulders to throw it over her head. By that time, Barani came out

with her own quiet greeting. Her scarf was already in place and she appeared so composed that Ria suspected she must have spotted the Useless Boy from a distance. The Useless Boy handed Barani sweet potatoes wrapped in tempeh leaves—his excuse for being there.

He always visited when Nenek was not around, his arrival announced by the grating of wheels over the sand covering their small courtyard and then affirmed by the sharp chirp of the bicycle’s bell. Barani would fumble for her scarf, throw it over her hair, tuck in any that tried to wriggle free and rush to the door to greet him. He didn’t seem to mind that Barani’s scarf undulated like a sack full of pythons. He also never asked about the colour of the sisters’ eyes, or why they lived all the way out here. Never. He wore a wristwatch with straps made of “ladder”, like the thing people climbed in the village; an actual watch with moving hands, unlike the one Ria had tried to make out of drawing block paper, which always showed 3.30 morning, afternoon, or evening; a watch he was always consulting when he was with them.

Once Ria carried a pot, ladle and wooden spoon to the veranda, where Barani and the Useless Boy were sitting close together and talking. She drummed a steady “pom-pom” rhythm on the bottom of the upturned pot as she belted out medleys she’d heard before. The Useless Boy clapped for her, which only made Ria sing worse. Barani tolerated it for a while before she snapped her head back and shouted, “Noisy lah!” Other days she wedged herself between them. Still others, Ria spent her day inside the house, reading or writing, sometimes telling stories to herself or folding and lining up armies of coconut-leaf grasshoppers.

Maybe he sensed her boredom and pitied her, because the Useless Boy would at times turn away from Barani long enough to teach her how to make matchbox cars and ice-cream stick guns that shot rubber band bullets. He was attending a public school in a town an hour and thirty minutes away by then, the one with windows that

had open-shut glass panes, many classrooms with ceiling fans, a great thing called electricity and a big man named Principal. When he came bearing toys and fascinating new gadgets like ballpoint pens with tube ink encased within hard, transparent outer bodies, Ria decided she liked him a little. Those times, and that time when she had managed to cycle his adult-sized bicycle into a mangrove swamp.

He was smart, Ria often heard Barani praise him in a gentle voice that made Ria's hair shiver. But Ria recalled the way he had struggled through the swamp mud at low tide to get his bicycle and didn't think she could agree with her sister. Still, he said a great many things to Barani that Ria, crashing matchbox cars and throwing sticks to bring guava down from trees, did not understand. He would gesture excitedly as he spoke and Barani would listen, watching his face intently. He spoke and she listened, listened until he glanced down at his watch and said he had to go, because he had homework to do and because Nenek would be home soon from her market stall.

Once Ria saw them approaching the veranda after feeding the chickens, and she saw the boy take Barani's hand. Barani pulled away, staring at him in shock. Ria was watching from the open door, just peeking over the doorjamb, and saw the boy lean in to say something to Barani. Whatever he said, it made Barani run up past Ria into the house. The Useless Boy followed at a leisurely pace, his hands clasped behind his back, chest pumped out full of air. Barani stopped and stood just inside the house, wrapping her scarf tighter around her head, trying to catch her breath.

The boy stared at Barani, as if he wanted to memorise her. Before he left, he said to her, "Ani, wait for Abang eh? When Abang become a doctor, Abang will come back and cure Ani."

Ria turned away from the scene, mouthing "abang" like it was distasteful question. *Disgusting lah*, she thought. She popped her head back out. Barani might have replied if Nenek wasn't suddenly seen hobbling down the dirt path towards the house. Barani threw

him a quick glance before darting across the ibu rumah to get to the kitchen. Ria watched the boy mount his bicycle and push off, riding past Nenek with a nod and a greeting. He probably action-action asked Nenek, "Nek, back home already?" but Ria could not hear.

It came to be that he did not return for a long, long time. He was away furthering his education. Some place where they could give him even more homework. Barani pined for him, Ria knew. The older girl seemed to have lost all of her purposeful briskness and went about her chores so distractedly, pausing to gaze out the door so often, that Nenek yelled, "Like there is no other boy *tau!*" For all his watch-consulting, Nenek knew about the boy anyway. But not from Ria. Ria had kept quiet, swarming matchbox cars with her grasshopper army and bringing down still more guavas with her well-aimed sticks.

Stone People

Sometimes, Ria wished that the Useless Boy would return, if only to make Barani smile again. Barani went through mute periods where she scratched at her arms, as if plagued by rashes, until blood ran. Ria often watched her cook, cry and scratch herself in the gloom of the kitchen. Ria would be on all fours as she peered down the steps, the rest of her body in the ibu rumah and her heart, it seemed, held between crab pincers. If Nenek was home, Nenek would shoo Ria and her questions of “Kakak why, Nek?” away from the kitchen entrance before going down to speak with the older medusa. Those nights Nenek patted Barani to sleep like the latter was still a child. Ria would lie on her side, her hand cradling her head through the flattened pillow, and watch her sister fall asleep in the light from the small oil lamp. When Barani finally lulled into slumber, Ria inched closer and snuggled into her sister’s side, because it was only in sleep that Barani would not push her away.

When Nenek took ill and could no longer go to the market to peddle her wares, it was Barani who undertook the task, strapping a basket to her back and winding her scarf tightly over her head, as if to suffocate her snakes into stillness. Maybe it was because she was a good businesswoman or maybe it was because she was so beautiful, but her returns were always enough for them to live on,

albeit simply. Ria had to give up her childish play so that she could be at home in case Nenek needed anything. There were days when she wasted soap while washing clothes, and days when she was too slow in taking out the firewood, so that the rice at the bottom of the pot ended up a blackened crust that she would later spend hours trying to scrape off.

During the afternoon quiet, while waiting for her lessons or for Barani to return, Ria liked to unroll her sleeping mat beside Nenek’s, and lie on her back to be made drowsy by the empty attap roof and the quietude of the jungle sounds. If Nenek was awake, she would ask Ria for stories: “Ria like to story right? Ria story-*kan* Nenek.” So, Ria told her the stories she’d made up and the ones she’d read. And always the happy ones: those about Feleenese princesses and Screean princes who would sweep the former off their feet, and about foreign families who lit special, non-cooking fires in their homes and who always had lots of cake to eat.

Nenek died in her sleep.

Every night since Nenek fell ill, Ria woke up to put a saliva-wet finger under Nenek’s nose to check her breathing. And still Nenek had passed away without her knowing. They only found out after their morning baths when they could not wake Nenek up to be washed and fed breakfast. While the sun was changing into its burning afternoon skin, Nenek’s was cold. The old woman lay in repose, hands clasped over her stomach the way they always did when she slept. Neither of the sisters had known that Barani’s usual leave-taking—“Nek, Ani go first eh?”—and Ria’s gift of a leaf grasshopper that had her best saga seeds for eyes, would be their last. Nenek had never complained, never lamented her lot, never spoke of pains. She had expired in the same quiet, a leaf grasshopper arranged by her head.

The sisters found themselves orphans. They stared at their lost parent before Ria started to cry. Her voice rang from the silence of

the small house to the surrounding forest bathed in the light of a bright afternoon.

Nenek should have been buried near their house, where her grave could be taken care of and read to everyday. However, things were changing far beyond the spaces they moved within, radiating from a centre and reaching towards the peripheries of the land they lived on. Cikgu told them that someone called the Gavermen would have none of it. Strange, fancy name this “Gavermen”, and stupid, Ria thought, to not allow loved ones to be buried where loved ones wanted them to be buried. Gavermen had set aside land with plots for every dead body. Plots, Ria thought. A great big collection of stories for passed loved ones, which did not feel quite as comforting. Not knowledgeable enough to argue and with a grandmother waiting to be buried, they agreed to let Cikgu get them a plot number for Nenek. She also helped them arrange for the cleaning of the body and the imminent burial. She advised them to stay at home while some men from the village bore Nenek’s body to her plot. The body was seen into the ground by people who claimed blood relation by husband’s mother’s sisters or brothers, but who had never come to visit, or even liked her presence in the village, let alone that of the two strange creatures in her care.

The day the burial was to take place, Ria threatened to wail, turn Gavermen to stone. However, Barani told her, patience. *Sabar*. Accept. Some things in life we cannot change, and others don’t do anything wrong to you, you don’t do anything wrong to others.

Because that was Nenek’s moral lesson, Ria listened, slipping her hand into her sister’s as she stood in the shadows just inside the doorway, watching the last of the funeral congregation disappear around the bend in the dirt path. And she accepted.

Then *he* came, when Ria was crying into Barani’s lap, soaking the material of her sister’s sarong. Barani was stroking Ria’s head, letting the strands slide over her hand, not saying a word. Positioned in that

way, Ria almost did not hear the quiet wish of peace upon them. She felt, however, her sister give a start. Ria sat up; wiping her wet cheeks with her palms as she automatically pulled the scarf from around her neck over her head. Eyes heavy and nose feeling swollen, she saw that Useless Boy from years ago peering in from the veranda. Ria glanced to Barani, who stared at the young man like she did not know him, before recognition swept across her features and confused them—with sadness from Nenek’s passing and gladness from seeing him after a long time. She slowly got to her feet as she bade him to enter.

He was dressed in a pressed white shirt, through which his white singlet was visible, all of it tucked meticulously into ironed dress pants. He wore his hair parted to the side, oiled and combed so severely that it looked fake. He wore only his socks into the house, his footsteps feline-like, quiet as a stalking traac’s. He asked after Barani—“Ani *baik?*”—and hearing the familiar voice was enough to make Barani’s defences crumble.

Ria watched her sister’s face crumple up as sobs racked her body. The man went up to Barani and broke an unspoken house rule when he embraced her. Ria stood rooted while Barani towered, crying into the Useless Boy’s chest. It left Ria feeling a little nauseated. The beginnings of a migraine caught at the areas around her eyes and the top of her head, threatening to culminate at such a point that she had to pick herself up and leave.

Ria walked across the courtyard and ambled into the jungle where she proceeded to pluck fruits she would never eat and to frighten animals on a whim. However, always mindful of Nenek’s rule to never be in the jungle at twilight, she returned home when the day was nearing dark to find the man gone and her sister looking freshly-bathed and smelling of talcum powder. Barani did not scold her for being out so late, but Ria found herself wishing that she had.

For days after, she found it repulsive to be near her sister. He came every day. No longer wobbling down the dirt path on a bicycle,

his arrival was now always heralded by the steady sputtering of his motorcycle, still on two wheels but moving fast enough so that he could balance himself. He called her “Ani”, sometimes “Sayang”, and Barani called him “Bang”, like she was already his. Ria had never seen the ocean, but if she was to describe it based on what she had read of it, the Useless Boy would be like the ocean, drowning her sister in murk and birthing an alien woman in her place: soft, fragile and silent as a corpse.



Change came to the household suddenly, when the Useless Boy came one day with five other men, one riding pillion with him and the others on their own motorcycles. Barani heard the furore of motors and hurried out, only to halt at the top of the veranda stairs when she saw the strangers. Ria stood in the ibu rumah, her head peeking around the threshold of the front door, watching their approach from behind her sister. Barani eventually descended the steps to meet them, slow and wary.

Two of the men were dressed like the Useless Boy, in short-sleeved shirts tucked into pants, while the other three wore shirts with too many metal buttons and too many pockets, tucked into shorts that fell to just above their knees, with black boots and berets. Ria recognised that they were policemen and she tried to recall any bad thing she had done to have them coming for her. Stretching her neck out, she saw the policemen standing at the back of the group, feet apart and hands clasped at their belt buckles.

All the men were staring at Barani, to whom the Useless Boy was excitedly speaking. Barani listened, shaking her head for the duration of the conversation. Soon the two other men started to speak to her as well, first earnestly, then furiously, showing her papers that Barani would not look at.

In time she turned and stormed up to the veranda. Her scarf

had come loose, some of the snakes slipping out from under it to dart tongues about her ears. The Useless Boy came in moments after Barani, forgetting to remove his shoes. Ria scrambled further into the ibu rumah when she saw the others come up as well.

The Useless Boy motioned for the others to remain outside as he reached out and grabbed Barani by an elbow to make her turn. “Ani! Don’t be stubborn, Ani. This is all for Ani’s own good!” Ria listened as he spoke about a shelter for them—her sister and herself. He made promises: *You will be happy there. It’s better there, and it’s safe. Got electricity, buses and cars, schools!*

“Is that where we are going to live? A shelter?” Barani asked in a quiet voice. Looking up to face the Useless Boy squarely, she added, “You said we live with you! In *your* house!”

The anger in her tone shocked him. It even shocked Ria, who had been on the receiving end of Barani’s disciplining for a long time. After a bit, he relaxed, shaking his head and smiling as if he found it all very amusing.

“Wah,” he replied, appearing impressed as he leaned back to assess Barani from head down. “Ani so smart now. Talk back to me. Where did you learn all this?” When Barani did not answer, he went on, “Ani, we discuss that later. Abang have a deadline. Development is coming. Everyone is going. The shelter is only temporary. You can work and then buy a house for you and Ria. The city is a place of opportunity, trust me. You don’t have to worry.”

“You promised,” Barani said through clenched teeth, “to cure me when you come back!” She took him in with disbelief before continuing, bottom lip quivering, “I let you—I let you because you said you were going to *marry* me!”

It frightened Ria to see her sister so angry and so desperate in the way she tried so hard to keep herself from crying. It frightened her even more to know the implications of those words. There was a pause, long and uncomfortable. The Useless Boy made noises in the

back of his throat that could be laughter or questioning “uhs” as he kept glancing over his shoulder at the others.

“Life is not that easy, Ani,” he said finally, gripping both of Barani’s arms, his voice hardening as he shook her, as if he was trying to sift into her the complexity of that life. “Ani, you have to understand! I know—Abang know why you can’t go to school. With these ears, Abang hear what the kampung people say, about you, about Ria... Not everyone is like me, Ani. You like or not they will take you away. Better I do than they do. Over there, there will be many people you can be friends with, all really nice people.”

“People like us,” Ria remembered her sister saying when she first found out she couldn’t go to school. It dawned on her why that one girl’s parents said she shouldn’t speak to Ria, and why no one would lend her their eraser. There were no others like them, with snakes for hair that they had to constantly hide, and eyes with which they had to be careful in how they looked at things, especially at people.

The Useless Boy cried out in a last ditch attempt to convince the older girl, “Come on! You will be protected there, Ani!”

“With guns? By people like your friends? People like you?” Barani shot back.

For all the revelations emerging, Ria only saw the way the Useless Boy was treating her sister—holding her, spewing anger at her. Ria wanted to reach out, remove his hands from her sister’s arms and tell him that he had no business using that tone on Barani. But there was only Ria’s uncertain silence.

The Useless Boy caught sight of her. He let her sister’s arm go—just one, not the other—and instructed Ria, in a voice an adult would often use on a child they thought should not know any better: “Ria, be a good girl and go to the kitchen, eh?”

Ria did as she was told and made for the dark depths of the kitchen. There she could hear a rush of voices, but refused to make them out. Her chest rose and fell fast but the air could not catch up.

Her eyes fell on the square of light on the kitchen wall and it drew her to the window, its single shutter propped open by a metal prong. She remembered the policemen. The shelter couldn’t be anywhere nice if policemen were involved. When she was being naughty in the past, the three things she was told could carry her off were the devil, jungle people who only came out after dusk, and the policemen—devil to a hell palace, jungle people to another realm and policemen to a square hole underground called the jail. No way home from any of them.

There was a table underneath the window where her sister kept packs of salt, sugar and dried spices. She pushed these aside, cramming them into a corner. Bracing her feet on the wall, she managed to haul herself up and climb out through the window. The shutter slammed shut just as she came to a painful, crouched landing on the ground outside. The stick ended up beside her but the window was too high up for her to replace it.

Going around the house, she saw that the rest of the men were no longer at the veranda. One of the policemen had also left his post to join them inside. The other two guarded the dirt path to the inland village. They were still in the same pose as before—feet apart, hands clasped—neither of them speaking as they idly watched the house. There was a pompous air about them, and the handcuffs they wore at their belts had the same evil gleam as the shiny black bodies of their batons.

She walked up to them. Seeing her, one of them held out his hand telling her that everyone must stay inside until the business had been concluded. What business-business, she didn’t care. All she knew was that they had no business wearing their handcuffs, harbouring plans to haul her and her sister off to the jail when they didn’t do anything wrong.

When she came near, the policeman who had been warning her froze, hand out, eyes and mouth opened wide in surprise. She didn’t

have her scarf on, so maybe that was why. Every strand of her hair was clustered around her face as if they all wanted to take a harder look, weighing her head down as they did so. She felt the tug of migraine again, though not so intense this time that she had to close up around herself and grit her teeth, and the policeman greyed over, outwards from his face to the rest of his body. His upper body had already hardened, but his feet continued to move towards her, so when they, too, became stone, he fell over. His companion watched his body fall, saw parts of it break on impact, before he raised his own eyes to hers—only to meet the same fate.

Ria stepped around their stone forms and made her way down the path to Kenanga, where children were taught that *people like her* were not to be spoken to, or to be associated with, and where someone had decided that people like her did not deserve a roof over their heads, by marriage or by birth.



Barani vaguely heard the kitchen window slamming shut but couldn't move herself away as all the men around her tried to convince her into signing an agreement to give over Nenek's land to their fancy urban development plans. It wasn't that she hadn't expected it. On her odious errands to Kampung Kenanga, she had already seen the beginnings of the plans creeping in with surveyors and the officials going from door to door, talking to people, taking photographs of various paths and corners. People at the outskirts were already being moved out. The coastal village was still largely untouched but no one could ignore the increased number of tugboats and cargo ships on the water's horizon. It was a sign of things to come, the mostly-Screean villagers would say as they stared out to sea from the rickety verandas of their homes, and in low rumbled whispers near her corner stall in the marketplace. Even Cikgu had left shortly after Nenek's death to

take up the post she'd been offered at a government school in the city. Barani remembered Ria clinging to the teacher, pleading with the woman not to leave, as if she, her own sister was not good enough company.

She had thought—no, hoped—that she would be married, that Abang would have a home for her and Ria. The way she saw it, that was not happening. He was not the doctor he said he would be when he left her those years ago. And two girls with snakes for hair were not the family he'd imagined, and that was what really pained her. She was beautiful, yes, but she was not good enough to be a respectable wife.

He'd taken hold of her arms when he began shouting again after Ria left. Barani shrugged them off, the force of her action sending him reeling slightly. Giving him one hard stare, she turned to check on Ria in the kitchen.

She had expected to see Ria: if not helping herself to the boiled bananas under the straw food cover, then at least sitting in a corner narrating stories, or just generally talking to herself the way she always did when left on her own. She found only an empty room. Nothing seemed disturbed at first, but then her eyes were drawn to the window with its single shutter down and the packs of cooking ingredients out of place. There were marks on the table's surface that looked like they had been made by grimy feet. Barani rushed to the table, her breath in her throat, and pushed open the window to see the unstimulating forest.

Barani ran back up to the ibu rumah, pushing past the men to get to the veranda. She could sense Abang behind her; heard him above the cloud of noise in her head, demanding she tell him what was going on. She saw the two policemen with the mark of her sister's gaze on them.

She did not bother with the steps when she made her way down. Instinct told her that she would not find Ria anywhere in the

compound. Trying not to look back at the house, she hurried down the bald path towards Kenanga.

She peered into houses and under kolongs, over crude window stalls and into houses that had been improvised into shops, later around the newspaper stand located in the village centre. She went up several sets of stairs to several verandas before she slowed down in the courtyard of the final house, staring out at the patchy grass field that stretched to an empty horizon.

All the people were frozen in place, as if they were entities in a photograph. Barani walked back to the village centre where she spun herself round, staring up at the moving roofs and the circling clouds on the sheet of blue. If she shouted, she was sure her voice would echo back and so affirm what she was trying not to see, even though every shadowy interior of every home, every open veranda, every courtyard and kolong told her the same story.

Men and women stared, some surprised, some appearing like they were just looking up to see who was greeting them at the door or the foot of their steps. A woman still held in her hands a long bean stalk she was breaking into smaller pieces for cooking. A man had a chicken ready for slaughter on a large cutting board, the edge of his knife at the edge of its throat. An umbrella still shaded the head of a young woman who had been walking alongside her bare-headed friends.

She found Ria halfway down the single tarred road that ran along a row of ground houses at the eastern edge of the village. She was clomping around on homemade stilts made out of tall milk cans, manoeuvring them with the twine strung through holes punctured into the bottom. Stillness reigned around her, making her movements strange and out of place. She played by herself among children, all stringy in build and uniformly grey from head to toe, and even to the clothes they wore. Some stood watching her as if in amazement and others peered up at her over their shoulders from where they

squatted. Those children would never move, would never grow to adulthood. Ria raised her eyes to her sister and even as she smiled at Barani, the cheeriness she had always kept in those eyes was no longer there.

Barani saw what her sister was capable of, but could not comprehend it. She tried to see if the smile held malice, a reason perhaps for turning the villagers to stone, and how, *how* it could have taken place as fast as it did, how Ria had not missed a single person and raised no alarm. Yet, as if her vision had tunnelled, all she could see was a deep regret that could not muster itself into a proper expression. She didn't know if the regret was her sister's or really her own.

Barani bent over and grabbed her sister by the shoulders. She wanted to ask, "Why?" but the word died in her throat and she knew from Ria's steady eyes on her that she was staring. Instead, giving the girl an unrestrained shake, she asked, "Ria, are you mad?"

Even as she asked it, she retracted. Madness? This was not madness. Angry shouting manifested in silenced heartbeats and scrutiny in unseeing stares. The authorities were going to build roads and erect clean housing on the land where Nenek's house stood. This was Ria's way of trying to stop all that.

If Barani did not have snakes that would bite her, if she had real hair, strands of them to pull, she would have pulled them. If she could have just turned anyone in Kenanga to stone, she would have. She had been tempted. Every time she had gone to the inland village on errands, women had moved their children out of her way and men had stared at her openly. As she protected her family's money cent by precious cent, she had been met with derision from those she bargained with for home necessities. They said her mother had sinned and sometimes Barani even believed them because she did not know who her mother was.

After Ria, Nenek had been the closest thing she had had to a

real family. A few times, wishing to right any sins she might have committed, Barani had asked Nenek if she had ever tried to turn Nenek to stone in a time she could not remember. The old woman's reply was always the same: Have or don't have, not important now.

The fear, the hatred—both hers and those of the villagers; the responsibilities of dealing with the world they knew and the one that was fast approaching from newspaper pictures—the riots and the roads, the tall buildings in close proximity: these were the things Barani wanted to protect Ria from. When Nenek was alive, she had reminded Barani over and over that she was to be a good influence on the much younger girl. Nenek had revealed once, over the pounding of chilli and shrimp paste in a mortar, that under that vexing, scrappy exterior was a little girl who thought the world of Barani.

Barani wanted Ria to always remain the same—always with her eyes big and innocent, always to make epok-epoks too big even though she'd been shown countless times how to make them the right size, and always to be frightened of the dusk because of the tales they told her about the jungle people.

Perhaps Nenek had seen what Ria could become, what she could do. Like an omen, a single chilli seed had jumped from under the pestle into Barani's right eye. It burned, and Barani, hissing, "Ah, it hurts! It hurts!" groped for some water to wash her eye with and the conversation was pursued no further.

In the present, months after that conversation, Barani looked down into the eyes that peered up at her. She saw tears welling in them. She thought she heard a tin plate drop and drum its spinning rhythm on the floor of the distant house, before Ria heaved in a deep breath and let her eyes dart around her. Barani, too, let her eyes wander; taking in the stone forms of what was once alive. She often wondered what kind of curse was placed on their ancient predecessor, so that their eyes could make still what moved, immortalise what aged, and—she turned to look at Ria again—blind what once could see?

Ria was distraught. Barani, while groping for a way to comfort her, suddenly remembered the men who were still at their house. They would have found the petrified policemen by now. There was little time. She could only think to get Ria away.

Nenek had once told her that if anything went wrong, she was to take Ria towards to the old, abandoned quarry. Nenek never gave further explanations, only mentioned an old Tuyunri tribe still living within its depths and that she was to look for a door. "Humans can be an unobservant bunch. They won't find you there." And she would fold the betel nut into a single sireh leaf before popping it into her mouth, then say nothing more.

Barani took hold of Ria's small hand and with a gentle tug got her down from her tin-can stilts. She'd just turned around to go back up the path to their home when the rest of the men rounded the bend and ran towards them.

"Kakak..." she heard Ria say fearfully.

Barani kept Ria behind her as the men came to a halt at the sight of the stone children, Abang at the head beside the one remaining policeman.

"Ani!" Abang cried out, turning horrified eyes to her. "What—"

He cut himself short when he spotted Ria. The horror became mixed with fear and as a policeman reached for his holster, Barani heard Abang say, "What? No—"

At the first silver flash of the revolver, Barani struck. All who looked at her—all the men who'd come to her house—greyed over instantly.

She noticed that the stone forms she'd created were a few shades darker than Ria's. She might have wondered why, but Abang—no, no, this Useless Man—stood before her as a statue. She remembered how in her bright-eyed youth he had promised to find a cure for her "condition"; remembered the way he kept telling her how beautiful she was, though it was with his eyes closed and his sweat-covered

body pressing—gyrating—into her. In a flood of sentiment, she raised a hand to touch him but clenched it into a fist just short of his face. She could not afford to cry or to regret what she'd done. Turning back to look at Ria, she noticed her sister's own hand was raised to touch her, and knew like the hand, Ria's expression of alarmed pain was a mirror of her own.

Nelroote

Back at the hut, they packed what little they had into an old suitcase Cikgu had given them right before she left. Ria knew they were criminals now and that they must be gone from the house before more policemen came, so she did everything she was told without the usual arguments. She kept glancing furtively at Barani as they worked. Barani would not look at her after they made for the house and guilt rose in Ria like a putrid stench from a dead animal. She knew it was her fault that Barani had had to turn the Useless Boy to stone, her fault that they were running around the house grabbing clothes and what few belongings they had, and prying off the floorboard in the corner of the kitchen to take the emergency money kept hidden in the nook. But every time she tried to apologise, the words found no way of expressing themselves to Barani's averted face.

The heavy suitcase held everything they needed to bring. Ria had some books that Cikgu had given her for the day she would be able to read books without pictures. These she wrapped up in her scarf. She held on tight to the bundle as Barani took her free hand and hefted the suitcase. They released all their chickens and chased them around the courtyard until every single one disappeared into the foliage. As they were doing so, Ria looked back at their old home. The door and the single front window formed an eye

and a mouth, blindly staring and screaming. She imagined Nenek and Barani breaking long beans on the veranda, and saw an image of herself wheeling a hoop in the courtyard among the chickens, before the house and all its memories disappeared behind a rush of greenery.



It began to rain soon after, which was strange because Ria had not noticed the leadening of the sky or the drenched smell of the air when they made their run. Barani's shawl was soaked through as the downpour intensified to the point that even the canopy above failed to shelter them. Ria worried more for the books than where they were going.

Barani kept walking at a hurried pace, around buttress roots and over leaf litter, holding Ria tightly by the hand. Gritty wetness got in between Ria's toes and her blue-and-white slippers were slick underneath her feet. Already two sizes too big for her, they threatened to slip off with every rain-heavy step. But Barani kept going as if pursued by hunters with guns and spears, even though Ria knew it would be some time before anyone discovered their house.

Ria tried to say something, but Barani appeared not to hear. Not in the rain, the persistent falling of which drowned out all sounds of the forest. Even if Barani did hear, Ria doubted that her sister would slow down in her search for refuge—for it had to be refuge, for her, for Ria, for people like them whom the world did not want to see. Ria expected that their refuge would be on an island they would swim or take a boat to, and that they would eventually come to a river or a coast. Ria didn't know how to swim but an island would be safe. An island surrounded by blue water, with no road or bridge to the mainland, would be very safe.

Much to her disappointment, however, it was no river or coast that they came to, and there was no boat to take them anywhere

either. Instead they found themselves staring down a slope covered in ferns. Below them, level ground had been stripped to reveal red earth turned to mud by the downpour. A sort of vehicle, with a giant rolling pin attached to it, stood near a mound covered in blue-and-white striped canvas. Across the red ravine was another forest, like a distant island behind a rain-streaked blur. Across a stretch of redness, it looked isolated and foreign—safe beneath a barren sky.

Barani had her face partly hidden by her shawl, so drenched now that Ria could see the brown and black of her snakes and their individual long, sluggish bodies moving through the already pale material. Barani turned around and tugged at Ria to follow. Which she did, glancing over her shoulder at the yawning red earth, wondering what was going to be buried down there. What creature could be so big that it required such a massive grave?

In time, they came to a rusty rock face, looming huge over them, higher than even the tallest trees. Barani was always sure of things where Ria only had maybes. However, as Ria looked up uncertainly at her sister, she saw Barani scrutinising it, as if searching for some answer, some message written on its immense face.

Barani was soon muttering, "I see it. I see it. It's here but...how—"

Ria was about to ask her what it was that she saw—just so she could help see too—when a tall rushing mass of dark green came at them from behind some foliage by the rock. Ria started and grabbed a fistful of her sister's baju as Barani pushed Ria behind her. The mass came to a surprised halt and Ria saw that the dark green was in fact a large poncho, the hood drawn so far down that Ria could not see the person's face, and especially not when she was squinting through the deluge streaming over her eyes.

The hood was drawn back, quickly, and the face that appeared was unlike any that Ria had ever seen. It was not Human. If a strand of her hair dyed itself a dark red, grew larger and then grew arms

and feet, it might begin to resemble the person standing before them, frowning down at them (if the scaly, low-lidded expression could be called frowning). Even Barani was staring, and she had seen people like this at the coastal village where she had her market stall. The immense amber eyes with their thin convex pupils were focused on the sisters, taking in their every feature. It was a large, strong-looking creature, more dragon- than serpent-like now that she had a closer look. The poncho fell to knees that jutted out at an odd angle, so that the calves appeared elongated, curving backwards away from the body and going down to rather large feet with only three clawed toes on each, and spurs where the heels ought to be.

The Scerean said: “Uh...” Ria jumped at the low voice, male. There was a pause and then he started to speak in a mix of Ro’ ‘dal and Sce’ ‘dal, his eyes darting from Barani to Ria and then back to Barani. “It’s...what eh?”—he pointed up towards the canopy. “Raining. You no bring...umbrella?”

He spoke slowly, pronouncing the Ro’ ‘dal words with difficulty, his expression growing more vicious as he went. Ria saw Barani glance down at her before turning back to the strange-looking man. “Don’t have,” she began in Sce’ ‘dal, and then asked, “Can I ask if you know... is... is this the quarry...”

It was the first time that Barani seemed uncertain of which ‘dal, or tongue, to speak—was it Ro’, the new common tongue created by the large Human towns, or Sce’, the one from neighbouring Su(ma) and F’herak, which was spoken in most villages. Ria thought the answer was obvious, but perhaps the Scereans Barani encountered at the coast spoke something else entirely—on a rare chance, Tuyunri, and if that was so, Ria was sure she could be of some use. A simple “*bcur’in*”, which meant “Day above”, or the Tuyunri equivalent of “Hello”. It was one of the first words she’d learnt from Cikgu and surely a word of importance.

She tried to muster up the courage to speak when the man gestured a thumb behind him and replied, “Gate...uh...wait, sorry. Uh...wait.”

He loped back to where he’d first emerged and was about to disappear through the foliage when he executed a sharp about turn and rushed back to where they awkwardly stood.

He removed his poncho and handed it to Ria with a “Nah” before loping away and disappearing through the plants.

Ria thought he had a funny way of moving and started to snicker. “Hoi!” Barani hissed, nudging her hard. Silencing any arguments from the younger girl with a warning finger and a stern look, she took the poncho from Ria and drew it over the younger girl’s head, bringing the hood down to cover the limp snakes. The poncho nearly reached the ground and was so big it made her feel somewhat smothered. The large hood had a strong plastic smell and was so enclosed around her head that the sound of rain pattering down on it seemed magnified.

The strange man emerged from the foliage and motioned for them to approach. As they did, he indicated the gap he was holding open for them in the plants. The small entrance yawned into an abyss, dark and seemingly impenetrable. Ria regarded it gingerly as she peered in to see if there was any light. Back when she lived in the hut, she was always home before twilight descended and everything became silhouettes against the gradient of indigo to orange sky. When she had to wash her feet before bed, she always got Barani to go down with her and while Barani was washing her own feet, Ria would sprint up the steps and into the house to be on her sleeping mat beside Nenek before Barani came back in. Barani used to say, as she extinguished the lamp, “So naughty and yet so scared,” as if it was a common rule that naughty children shouldn’t be afraid.

The man plunged into the darkness. Barani hesitated and then followed suit with Ria in tow. Ria did not want to think about what

might reach out and grab her in the dark. Tightening her grip on Barani's hand and on the books in her shawl, she let herself be led inside, scraping elbows and shoulders against the rough walls of the crude corridors.



The strange man introduced himself as Acra. He had been a little boy when his family was evicted from one of the villages near the west coast. Ria listened as he explained what it was like before something called a "house in skim" was put in place. ("Skim" is what, Ria also don't know.) Gavernen could pretty much do whatever they wanted to poor folk who only wanted to catch fish and crabs for a living. Unable to afford a place in the city, his family had finally settled underground in Nelroote. He spoke mostly to Barani, although he would caper around Ria, smiling down at her when there was light in the tunnels and even once asked what was in her bundle: "Inside got gold, is it?" In other circumstances, she might have disliked him, but he was helping them and had lent her his poncho. So while his question made her hug the books tighter to her, his antics made her smile back.

Nelroote was at first only a strip of light at the end of an immense tunnel of smooth walls and shadowed enclaves full of occupants she couldn't see. The end was blocked by a solid gate that didn't quite fit the tunnel's width, so light seeped out from the sides without hinges.

As they approached, cold and practically blind, they saw two dark forms attached to necks and shoulders, rising above the top of the gate. A voice called down to them but they could only gape up at the sheer size of the tunnel they were in, and the sheer impossibility of its existence directly under the world they'd known all their young lives.

The voice called again, rough and rumbly, and Acra replied, saying he'd found them outside with nowhere to live.

The two improbable heads disappeared from above the gate and Barani let go of Ria's hand. She dropped to her knees, to Ria's eye level—the first time Barani had looked at her properly since the village. Gripping Ria by the shoulders, she said just loud enough for the younger girl to hear, "Ria, no looking okay?" Ria nodded. *Okay. No looking.*

A creak came from behind Barani and the older girl planted a quick kiss on Ria's forehead, the display of tenderness surprising Ria, before a small door opened, its lit outline growing bigger, momentarily blinding them. Acra stood by the door, watching them. It was only when Barani straightened up to look at him that he motioned for them to enter.

"Not so nice, the place. But this is Nelroote. Uh...welcome," he said, smiling uncertainly.

They were met at the door by the owners of the two improbable heads: another Screean like Acra, and a fierce-looking Cayanese. Acra introduced them as Mat'ra and Gemir. Ria had thought Acra was a big man, but Mat'ra and Gemir—*especially* Gemir—were even bigger. Mat'ra's snout was shorter than Acra's, almost flat against his face. Ria had learnt from Cikgu that it was a result of time changing the forms of people as bloodlines became increasingly mixed. Mat'ra's scales were a dark green, almost black. Blunt knobs alternated with short spikes down his arms from his shoulders, and he had a cleft at the top of his head that joined to form a ridge which ran along the back of his neck before diminishing into the scales of his body. Gemir looked almost like a man, and his broad nose bridge was scrunched against a wrinkled, leathery face. Coarse, black hair framed his face and covered the rest of him. His brow bones were defined and curved low over his eyes, making him appear as if he were glowering all the time.

Peeking up from under the poncho, she saw that both of the men were shirtless. Mat'ra was even scratching his bare chest as he studied

her. Maybe being covered in scales and fur meant they didn't need to wear shirts, Ria thought, and wondered if their women bathed without sarongs out in the open. Ria had the urge to touch Mat'ra, just to see if his rough scales were as dry as the shiny ones on her snakes. He smiled down at her, as if sensing her thoughts, which made her withdraw further into the poncho.

Acra led them towards the settlement. Ria had expected an underground village: familiar houses on familiar bare ground, but with no sky and no guavas growing on trees. They stopped at the top of worn steps cut right into the stone and Ria seized the chance to take a better look at her new surroundings.

The settlement was bigger than Ria had thought. It sat within a great stone bowl with sides that rose up like an arena, surrounded within the cave by natural pillars of joining stalagmites and stalactites. She could not spot the point of a roof anywhere, just stretches of dirty grey walls; the reds, blues and greens of painted, corrugated metal; and tarp covers radiating out from an obscured centre. The homes made of these walls did not seem to have been built according to any design or with any planning in mind. They seemed to have begun as boxes, some alone on ground level, others stacked up to three storeys high, and all pressed into each other so closely that one could stretch out from the window of one's own home and pick food off the table next door.

Around these basic structures the residents had built shacks, extra rooms and fences using bits of spare materials, more often improvising one item for another—such as a door turned sideways made into a low wall, and supplemented with wooden beams that supported a roof made out of tarp, so that a sort of veranda was formed. The extra bits climbed and snaked around each other, merging in some parts, and only accessible on others by rickety staircases and makeshift ladders. Manoeuvring individual clusters of homes was akin to scaling a vertical maze. Between them were

narrow alleys either of rocky ground or furrows for drainage, some of which were wide enough to need bridges of plywood boards at intervals. The compact city of dwellings possessed no discernible beginning or end, no distinguishable boundaries. Ria wondered if finding her way around was the same as moving through a jungle—finding landmarks in unusual trees, or tracing the paths in disturbed vegetation. There was no sky to navigate with, to guess at time, and yet everything was also visible. Ria squinted up at the too-bright bursts of white light.

“Generator,” she heard someone say in a deep rumble—one of the voices from before. She turned to see Gemir studying her, his arms crossed over his chest and his lips curled up in amusement. He pointed up and added, “From outdoor one, the lights. Same like in stadiums.”

She wondered how they had got the lights up and if they switched them off at night, but didn't feel it was the right time to ask. Gemir tilted his head and looked at her, as if waiting, but she turned away to study the massive cave within which the tin-can city existed.

She had expected there to be echoes, sounds of people—living—bouncing off the walls to create a constant buzz with a cacophony of sounds. However, the city was quiet. Every now and then chatter could be heard, growing and then diminishing as if only in passing. She thought she could hear oil sizzling from one of the nearby homes and instinctively lifted her nose to smell what was being cooked.

Within her line of sight in the far distance, three statues loomed in arched enclaves cut into the rock high above the settlement. She could clearly see the silent women in ankle-gracing dresses that began at the tops of their breasts. Each curvaceous figure, right up to their tall, ornate crowns, stood taller than the average tree she had climbed. The statues did not appear to be carved into the rock itself and the material they were made from did not look like it was local to the cave. She could not fathom how the people who'd

shaped them had managed to haul them up so high. Each serene face was tilted down towards the settlement as if in fond consideration, undisturbed by the messy and ugly creature of a city that lay below their beautiful forms.

Ria wanted to hold up a snakehead against one of the faces. Perspective would make the snakehead large and she would press the corners of its mouth to make it gape. Then she would release her hold so that the jaws would come snapping down.

As if sensing the thought, her hair began to shift beneath their cover, as if just waking. It was then that she realised that Acra had been watching her from two steps down, smiling as he did. He beckoned to her when she looked at him. Mat'ra and Gemir were already making their way down, Mat'ra looking back every now and then while his companion walked on in a hulking, lazy gait. Ria saw that while Mat'ra's legs looked like Acra's, Gemir's did not.

Barani stood near her. When Ria turned to her, Barani placed a hand lightly on her shoulder and with a nod, urged her to follow. At the bottom of the steps, Ria saw more people with varying degrees of un-Human features. Barani stepped up to them, effectively positioning herself in front of Ria. Ria peered around her sister. There were other children, some very Human-looking, others less so. One end of a skipping rope was in the hand of a Feleenese girl; small like Ria, but in a prettier dress. The rest of the rope lay curled on the floor beside her partner, a slightly older Cayanese girl. A few boys had pockets bulging with marbles and another was holding on to an ice-cream stick gun loaded with rubber-band bullets. Looking up, she saw her sister staring down at her, fear and warning in her violet eyes. Ria dropped her gaze to the stone floor where it was safe.

She thought the silence was going to go on forever and that this was where she was going to be scolded and punished, but Acra was suddenly kneeling in front of her. He peered sideways at Barani before focusing both eyes on Ria and complimenting, "Your Adik is

very pretty, eh?" Ria felt Barani stiffen before she came between them. Tugging at the back of Barani's baju, Ria tried to say, *No, Kakak, no. Not him. Not them.*

Not you, too.

Barani let her shawl drop to her shoulders. Ria pressed her eyes shut, imagining the worst, only to hear Barani, facing all the people who stared at her with a new look of shock, ask for a place to stay and tell them that she would work, any kind of work. Ria expected questions. No one asked a thing.

Ria remembered the books and produced them from under the poncho, unwrapping them from the soggy scarf. They were rain-soaked, the pages already crinkling. At least the linen-bound hard-covers seemed sturdy. She thought they might still fetch a good price.

Just then, the crowd parted and everyone turned to look at a middle-aged man pushing his way through it without hurry. At first glance, his skin seemed to have a rocky texture to it. As he came closer, however, Ria saw that the strange texture was, in fact, formed by a tessellation of diamond-shaped scales, large and visible—not fine like Acra's, Mat'ra's, or her hair's. She remembered seeing a person like him in Kenanga before. Not quite as big, or as kind-looking, but the other person—a man—had had the same rock-like scales, crawling into the face, keeping eyes in sunken hollows with brows resembling hardened geographical ridges above them. The rocky scales extended to his exposed arms and ended at the tips of strangely dexterous though thick-fingered hands. He'd been hunched beside a worn mat, over which was spread a selection of interesting textiles and carved wooden toys, in a lonely corner of the marketplace that she'd had to pass on her way to school. She'd had given him her lunch once—her boiled banana and glutinous rice wrapped in tempeh leaf—thinking he needed it because she never saw him eat anything. He had looked up, had looked so surprised that Ria had to tighten the knot of her scarf just in case he saw. He had smiled, and then Barani came before

Ria could ask him questions: *How you make the cloth, pakcik? You make yourself is it? You live where? Are you sick?* From the way no one stopped by his mat and the way they avoided him, she had thought that he must be.

In the present, the same-textured man she would come to know as Pak Arlindi was standing before her, not sick, not hunching. She could guess right away that he was someone important, like a chief. Jerking a chin at Ria he asked Barani, “Is she the same too?”

Barani nodded. She stepped behind Ria and slowly drew back the poncho’s hood to reveal their sameness, writhing and looping as if they were excited to be let free. The man swept his eyes over Ria’s entire face before taking in the snakes. Ria could feel them acutely on her head, every movement noted and the weight more apparent as if she’d just got them for the first time. There were the compromises of tugs and presses when the snakes were not alarmed or excited, the trails of smooth, slender bodies around her neck and shoulders, and the end of tongues flickering against her skin, tickling her. They fell down in waves, free and uncontrollable. Being what they were, hair and serpents at the same time, made it feel as if everyone’s eyes were on them, judging and fearing her because of them.

She wanted to pull the poncho over them again. Maybe she would wear oversized ponchos all her life and be resigned to her ugliness. But the man broke into a smile, one that was sad but understanding, and said, “You are very cute.” Ria watched him size her up, unsure of how to react. “But,” he added, “you too small size lah. Need to eat more.”

A titter ran through the crowd. Barani’s smiles had become rare ever since Nenek had fallen ill; the tentative one she wore now was probably the warmest Ria had seen on her sister in a long time.

Nelroote, Ria thought. It was a new way of spelling an old name. It used to be Ne’rut: *ne’*, to, and *rut*, see. Nenek would call the forest the Ne’rut jungle, in memory of the ancient Tuyuns to whom it used

to belong. *To see*; even if Ria didn’t feel like she’d quite come home, she knew it was the right name for it. And that it was the right place for her sister if she was able to find new reasons to smile within it.



PHOTO BY: ALLAN SIEW

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