



Chapter One

The grandest elephants in the country stood on the lawn of the Great Library of the North.

Nuwan skidded to a halt in the shadows of the palmyra trees, watching the hustle and bustle with excitement. Mahouts fussed over their elephants on the green in front of the triple-domed white brick library building. The elephants were all sizes – mostly huge but some smaller ones too – and there was even one tiny little elephant, standing there swaying softly as musicians tested their instruments. The

elephants were dressed in their finest garb, ready for the procession that was to come.

Nuwan looked around him. A crowd had gathered to watch and a thrilling expectation was in the air. Groups of people stood dotted about in the shade of the trees on the edge of the lawn.

“Hey, Nuwan!” said a voice from his left, and he turned to find one of his friends, Sani, standing with her family. She broke away and ran over to him, her two tight plaits jiggling on her shoulders. “Came to see the elephants too?”

“Yes!” he said. “Aren’t they marvellous? The big one is the Queen’s!”

Sani beamed. “I know! And my father said he’s been entrusted to carry the Key of Nissanka. Apparently it’s really valuable and all that. Imagine having such a huge job.”

“Looks like he’s up to all that pressure!” Nuwan grinned as he eyed the massive elephant and his powerful tusks. A mahout threw the animal a plantain, which he caught expertly in his trunk. The embellishments on his regalia winked in the blistering sunlight.

“What’s going on?” Another of their friends, Chathura, came up to them under the palmyra trees,

munching on something. He had a paper cone of boiled cashew nuts, which he offered to them. “My father dragged me here but I’m not sure what’s happening.”

Nuwan laughed as he threw a handful of cashews into his mouth. “That’s because you’re napping most of the time.”

Sani giggled and Chathura grinned sheepishly. The crowd pressed forwards and an official waved them back bossily.

“So, Chathura, you know there’s this huge old statue in the King’s City from the time of King Nissanka?” began Nuwan, but Sani jumped in.

“Legend says that the king didn’t trust his successor, so he had the statue built with a cavity where he could hide his treasure and keep it safe for the future,” she said. “You can sort of see hinges and a lock apparently, but no one knew if a key to the treasure trove actually existed.”

“People have tried to break in over the years,” said Nuwan, craning his neck over the elephants to see if there was any activity in the library building. “They never succeeded. But now they’ve found the key.”

Chathura’s eyes widened. “And it was *here* all along? Miles away from the King’s City?”

Nuwan nodded and took another mouthful of the tender cashews. “One of the junior staff cleaning the archives found the key among a lot of junk. It was checked by experts and it’s genuine.”

“So what’s that got to do with all the elephants?”

“The Queen’s going to open the statue! The elephants are carrying the key to her in a procession that’ll take five days. They’re going to go slowly through towns along the way and rest at night. On Saturday evening there’s a ceremony where the key will be handed over to the Queen.”

Chathura started fanning himself with the now empty paper cone. The heat was intense and Nuwan welcomed the slight breeze from it.

“I wish I could see it,” said Sani wistfully. “The actual key, I mean. Rather than just the box it’ll be in, and from this distance too!”

All three of them stared across at the library building, where officials were going in and out as they got ready for the handover.

“That would be so amazing if we could.” Chathura turned to Nuwan. “Pity your brother, Krishnan, isn’t here. He works at the library, doesn’t he?”

“Oh yes!” said Sani. “If only he were here.”

“He doesn’t *work* at the library,” said Nuwan, a

little resentfully. Krish was a sore point with him. His brother was the golden child of the family and sometimes Nuwan wished everybody didn't *need* him quite so much. "He does a monthly delivery of library books to a monk at the King's City. I wouldn't call that working here."

"Still," said Sani. "If he were here he'd go in to see and tell us all about it."

"Well, he's not here," Nuwan said curtly, "even though he was supposed to do a delivery today. He's been ill for the last few days. So he's no good to us."

He paused. An idea glimmered in his mind. This was serendipitous timing. Krish wasn't here so he couldn't do his job. But Nuwan *was* here... He could do Krish's delivery! He would get to see the Key of Nissanka *and* prove to his parents, and everyone else, that he was as capable as his brother.

"You know what," he said to the others, "I think I'm going inside."