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RUNAWAY.  
ADVENTURER!

The mysterious stranger, Zheng, tells a good story about missing treasure, sea monsters and evil villains. Is it true though? To find out, Razi and his sister, Shifa, must run away to sea...

But after meeting the biggest sea monster of all, will anyone live to tell the tale?



THE BOY WHO MET a WHALE

NIZRANA FAROOK



nosy  
crow



THE BOY  
WHO MET  
a  
WHALE



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"A cracking  
narrative ... the pace  
rarely slackens"

Telegraph

"More like this, please"

Observer

THE BOY  
WHO MET  
*a*  
WHALE





# THE BOY WHO MET *a* WHALE



*NIZRANA FAROOK*



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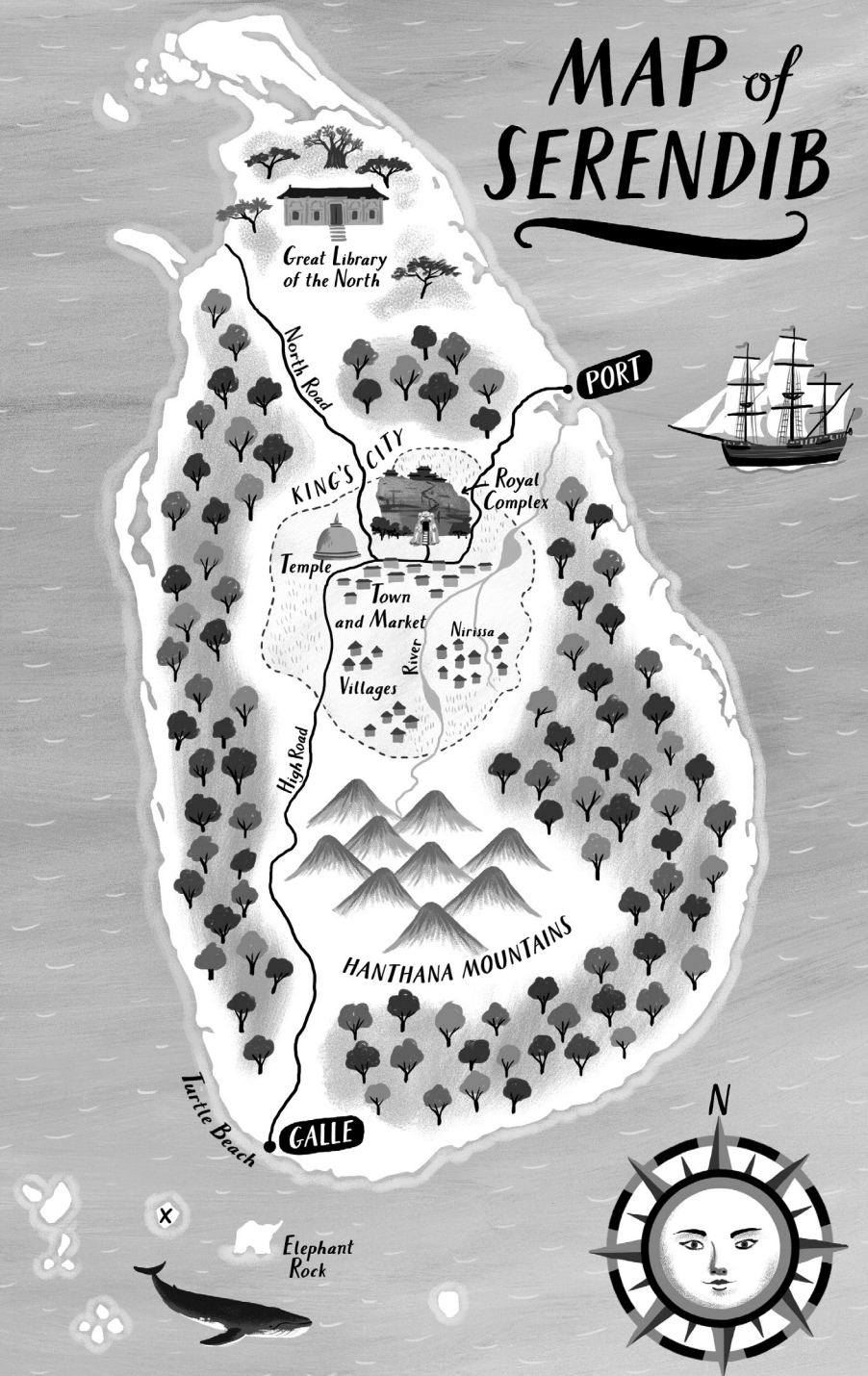
*To the Maalus of my life,  
Who've been there for me  
Not just in sunshine, but also in storm.*







# MAP of SERENDIB





# Chapter One

The boy clung to the rail with a death grip as the ship lurched violently in the storm.

It was sinking.

All around him was darkness and the roar and crash of waves as the ship buckled and rain lashed down. The wind was shrill and whip-sharp. But for all the noise, the ship was empty of people. Where was everyone? The boy ran along the deck, slipping and sliding to the wheelhouse.

It was deserted.

He sprinted down the length of the

ship, hurtling below deck to the captain's quarters. He pounded on the door, desperate to be heard over the sound of the thunder and the howling of the wind. But it was impossible.

The door opened suddenly and the first mate slipped out, a long leather pouch clutched in his hand. He started when he saw the boy, and quickly hid his hand behind him.

"Sir, the storm—" began the boy, but the man shoved him aside and hurried down the passage.

The boy held on to the side for balance and stumbled into the cabin. The captain was lying in his bunk, fast asleep. The room had been ransacked: drawers were hanging open and books had been tossed all over the place. The ship listed sharply and the debris on the floor slid to one side of the room where water was pooling, creeping darkly over fallen books.

The boy froze in shock. The crew had *known* they would be sailing into a storm. Why was the captain asleep so soundly? Why was the *whole ship* asleep? Apart from...

He stormed out of the captain's cabin and scrambled up to the deck. A lifeboat had been lowered into the sea, and the first mate was getting ready to climb down, accompanied by a man the boy recognised as

the ship's cook.

He stared at the men, a cold fear clamping round his heart as the rain soaked through him. "Marco!" he screamed. "What did you do? Did you *drug* them?"

The first mate looked back and shrugged, not even bothering to deny it.

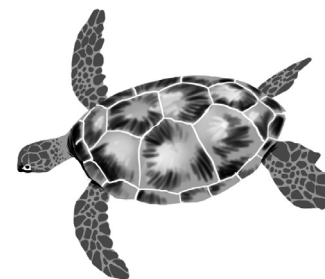
Rain pelted over the men as they prepared to get in the boat. Something snapped in the boy, and he raced towards them and plucked the leather pouch from the first mate's pocket.

Yelling, the men gave chase as the boy sprinted away down the ship. Lightning lit up his running figure. The ship groaned and shifted. The men stumbled and one fell as the boy doubled back, jumping over the fallen man and speeding past his furious companion. The first mate took out a knife that flashed silver in the gloom of the night. He ran fast, closing in on the boy as water filled the deck and crept up his ankles.

It was over. The ship was going down and it was too late to save anyone. The boy wailed in anguish as he threw himself over the side and into the lifeboat. The ship tilted and groaned, making a huge cracking sound as it broke apart. The men ran to the railing and yelled at the boy, but the rain blotted out everything

as he rowed swiftly away. The last he saw of the ship was it careening jerkily off course.

The boy screamed into the wind and wept for his lost friends.



## Chapter Two

The baby turtle scuttled down the golden beach, wet and gritty with sand. Bit by bit scores of others emerged, their shiny black bodies, flailing limbs and beady eyes glinting in the early-morning sun. They scampered towards the water, their little legs scuffling over the freshly turned-up sand. A bale of tiny turtles – all eager to make their first meeting with the sea.

Razi laughed as he ran after them, careful not to step on any of the little creatures. The sight never failed to amaze him and lift his spirits. He'd seen it a



hundred times, coming early to this stretch of beach to watch the newly hatched turtles running into the sea at sunrise. There was a white one among them, an albino turtle, the pattern on its back etched out in shiny black lines. It was lagging behind and in danger of getting lost.

“Go on! Go, your friends are leaving!” called Razi. He knew not to touch it so hoped instead his voice would cheer it on. Sure enough, the white turtle perked up and scuttled after the others.

Overhead a yellow-beaked ibis wheeled past. Razi kept an eye on it in case it tried to attack the babies.

The sea was a greyish blue, deepening gradually to a brilliant turquoise with the rising sun shining on the waves. Coconut trees fringed the beach, their wiry trunks twisted like swaying cobras.

Standing on the shoreline, Razi watched in awe. A wave came in, drenching the baby turtles as they swarmed up to meet it. They hopped into the water, greeting it playfully. Razi held his breath. This part always worried him. The turtles looked so little and fragile. But the whole lot of them swam away happily, dots of black on the rolling blue waves surging into the great ocean.

He sat cross-legged on the sand and watched them

bob away. They disappeared quickly, swimming away to their new lives. He knew that turtles always came back to the very same beach they were born in to lay their own eggs. So someday when Razi was an adult he could be back here and see the babies of one of these same turtles.

It was a lovely feeling. But it couldn't completely dislodge the sadness that dimmed Razi's world, no matter how much the sun shone and waves danced.

The sun rose higher and prickled his skin. Then he saw something bobbing in the water. Something dark.

Razi squinted into the horizon. The turtles were all gone, but this was too big to be one of them anyway.

Whatever it was, it was heading towards land.

The sea glittered a brilliant, sparkling blue now, and the dark object swirled closer and closer to the shore with every wave.

It was a boat.

Razi stood up. This wasn't a fishing boat like the ones on Serendib. This boat was plain and simple, with no sail or outrigger, and, as it sailed closer, Razi saw it had some strange lettering etched on the side.

*Foreign letters*, thought Razi excitedly. Where had

the boat come from?

It dipped into a wave and then lifted up, a solitary blot on the empty ocean. As it surged closer, Razi saw something droop out over the side. Something small and bunched.

A hand.

An actual human hand! Someone was in the boat!

Razi staggered back, jabbing his foot on a pointed shell. The pain hardly registered as he watched the boat bobbing closer. He looked around the beach wildly to see if there was anyone to help. But, as usual, it was entirely deserted.

The boat swirled closer and Razi froze. Was he going to have to get into the water? Dread clawed his heart at the prospect.

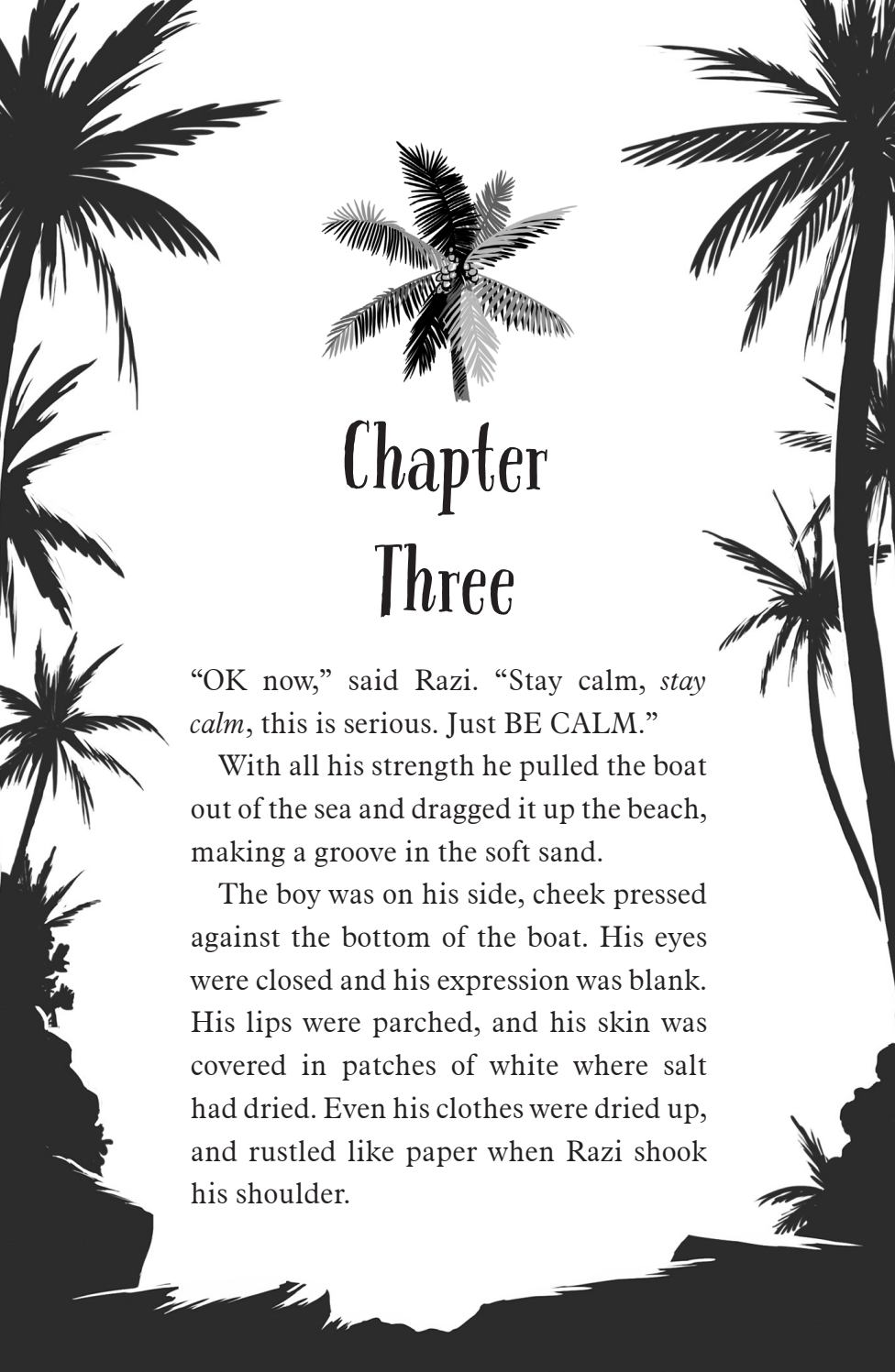
A gull squawked overhead, startling Razi. It was the jolt he needed and he ran into the sun-warmed water, soaking his clothes as he waded quickly towards the boat.

*This is OK, you can do this*, he told himself over and over as he tried to ignore the water rising to his chest.

Razi reached the boat and looked over the side. An egret swooped by and darted off again, leaving the echo of its cry.

Razi gulped.

Lying in the bottom of the boat, sunburnt and still, was a boy.



## Chapter Three

“OK now,” said Razi. “Stay calm, *stay calm*, this is serious. Just BE CALM.”

With all his strength he pulled the boat out of the sea and dragged it up the beach, making a groove in the soft sand.

The boy was on his side, cheek pressed against the bottom of the boat. His eyes were closed and his expression was blank. His lips were parched, and his skin was covered in patches of white where salt had dried. Even his clothes were dried up, and rustled like paper when Razi shook his shoulder.

His eyes remained shut.

“Um, hello,” said Razi. “Er, listen, are you alive?”

The boy was as still as a stick. The sun beat down on him mercilessly, frying his already parched body. He had to be moved to the shade and given some water immediately.

Razi took a deep breath and carried on talking to the boy, despite feeling foolish. “So I’m going to move you over there. Get you out of the sun.” He leaned into the boat and grasped the boy under his arms.

To his surprise the boy slid out easily, as if he was no weight at all. Razi dragged him all the way up the sand to the shade of the coconut trees and lay him down. Out of the sun’s glare, it was instantly cooler, and there was a soft breeze too.

The boy twitched, his eyes fluttered open slightly, and then closed again.

Razi almost cried with relief.

“Now, *that* is good,” said Razi, trying to sound encouraging. It had worked for the turtle after all. “You stay here – I’m going to look for some water.”

He stood up and looked around.

Something out at sea caught his eye. Another boat, identical to the one the boy had been in. There were two men in the boat, and the taller of the two was

standing up, gesticulating furiously at the beach while the other rowed to shore. Razi couldn't understand any of this. What was going on?

Razi emerged from the trees and walked down the beach to meet the men. The tall one, who was strongly built with close-cropped hair, immediately jumped into the water and ran to him. To Razi's alarm, he gripped him by the collar and lifted him off his feet.

Razi tried to scream. He blanched at the man's furious expression.

"Marco!" said the other man, coming up the beach. "That's not him."

The tall man shoved Razi away. He seemed angry that he'd got the wrong person. Razi turned to run, terrified. He had to get away from these men fast.

"Where is he?" yelled the one called Marco. He rounded on Razi. "You! You must have seen him."

Razi shook his head hard. Was the man talking about the boy on the boat? He wanted to say something, anything, but couldn't find the words.

"He must be around here somewhere," said the other man. "That's his boat over there. We'll find him."

"Find him and kill him," said Marco, kicking at a scuttling crab.

Razi began to tremble. The boy was lying unconscious just metres away from them in the shade of the coconut trees. He was weak and barely alive and these men wanted to harm him. He couldn't let them do that.

"Oh! D-do you mean the boy in the boat?" said Razi, finding his tongue at last.

Marco stopped and turned round. "What do you know?"

"N-nothing," said Razi, which was true. He pointed towards Galle town, then carried on less truthfully. "He asked me where the closest town was, and I told him it's a mile up the beach. So he ran that way."

Marco came towards Razi slowly. His thick neck and meaty shoulders made Razi shrink away until he backed on to the side of their boat.

"When was this?" said Marco, breathing into Razi's face.

"An hour ago."

"Why did you say before that you hadn't seen him?" The man spoke slowly, making the words sound doubly dangerous.

Razi swallowed as he tried to think of a reason. "I wasn't sure what you m-meant. I m-mean, 'Where is he?' doesn't mean much, d-does it? Now, if you'd said

w-where's that boy who came on the boat..." He was blabbering and Marco was looking at him with deep suspicion. He should shut up before he brought some serious damage down on himself.

"I see." Marco still spoke slowly and deliberately. "If I find out that you've been lying to me, I will find you and I will kill you. Understand?"

"O-of course," stammered Razi. "That-that sounds clear enough." He caught himself before he wittered on any more.

With that, Marco and his accomplice got back in the boat and rowed off.



## Chapter Four

Razi watched the boat heading in the direction of Galle.

He exhaled and pressed his hands to his forehead. What had he got himself into? He looked back towards the unconscious boy, his foot clearly visible for anyone to see.

He had to check that the boy was all right and then get out of there as fast as he could.

Razi ran to collect some fallen king coconuts. Once he'd found a pointed stone, he managed to pierce one, making



a terrible mess, and felt the welcome squirt of cool coconut water on his face.

He went back to the boy and lifted his head up, tipping the king coconut slowly against his mouth. Half of the water sloshed out but the boy stirred awake and soon began to lap it up. He took in a good amount and then lay back down, his eyes closing again. He smelled of salt and the brininess of the deep sea. Razi felt a chill in spite of the heat of the day.

“Er, looks like you’re a bit better then,” said Razi, edging off and sitting back on his heels.

The boy opened his eyes. His face furrowed slightly and his eyes travelled all around him – taking in the jewel-bright sea, the shell-strewn beach with the boat pulled up high on the sand, and the bunches of bright orange king coconuts in the tree above him.

He blinked in confusion and tried to sit up. “Huh?”

“I said it looks like you’re feeling better,” said Razi, even though the boy probably couldn’t understand him. He was clearly from a faraway land. “You’re safe.”

The boy looked at Razi for the first time. “Where is this?” he said, speaking Razi’s tongue easily.

“Serendib,” said Razi. “You’re on the island of Serendib.”

The boy lay back wearily but there was a hint of a smile on his face. He touched his chest and his clothes rustled again.

Razi stared at the boy. The rustling sound wasn’t coming from his clothes after all. There was something long and cylindrical hidden inside his shirt.



The boy slowly began to lift himself up until he was leaning against the tree.

“Here,” said Razi, prising the coconut open into two halves. He showed the boy how to scoop out the soft, pulpy insides. The boy took the coconut and scarfed it down gratefully. Seeing he was still hungry, Razi pierced open another king coconut for him, all the while keeping an eye out for the two men.

“What’s your name?” asked the boy, after taking a long swig of coconut water. “I’m Zheng.”

“I’m Razi. I live in the town down the beach from here. How come you speak our language?” He glanced nervously at the sea. Would the men be back? And was it all right to leave the boy in this state?

Zheng wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Oh, I speak *loads* of languages. I don’t mean to boast, but I can’t think of a language I don’t know even a *little* of. Been all over the world, you see.”

Razi frowned. So much for not boasting.

Zheng put down the coconut and gave a small sigh.

“Listen,” said Razi. “I don’t like to hurry you while you’re like this, but you need to get out of here fast.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because a man called Marco means to kill you.”

The boy started and dropped the coconut, water sloshing over his legs. He scrabbled around as he tried to get up.

“Hold on!” said Razi. “I didn’t mean that fast!”

Zheng stared at him with such panic-stricken eyes that Razi felt instantly sorry for him. “Who *are* you?” said Zheng. “Are you working for Marco?”

“No! He and another man came ashore in a boat soon after you did.”

“Marco is *here*?” Zheng got up and staggered around like a crab before he managed to straighten up.

“Wait, where are you going?” said Razi, following Zheng as he stalked around in a panic.

“I don’t know. Just *away*. I’ll figure something out. I always do.”

Razi could hardly leave him now. Zheng was shuffling inland in his ragged clothes, tired and weak, barely able to stand.

“Wait, Zheng.” Razi ran up to him. “There’s a place

near here where you can rest for a bit.”

Zheng turned back and looked at him hopefully.

“Come on!” Razi led the way up the beach, threading through the coconut trees to the abandoned fisherman’s hut he knew was there. “It can’t really be seen from the beach. You’ll be safe while you hide and think of what to do.”

The hut was just a minute up the beach, small and coconut-thatched. There was a single wooden window that didn’t close very well. The corners were full of cobwebs and the door hung lopsidedly off its hinges. It wasn’t great but it was safe.

“Would anyone come here?” said Zheng.

“No. It was abandoned a long time ago. No one comes to this beach at all. I only come here because of the turtles.”

Zheng relaxed visibly and settled on the hard earth floor, stretching himself out.

“What’s that rustling noise coming from your shirt?” asked Razi.

Zheng paled under his sunburn. “I’m not sure what you mean. I think it’s my bones creaking.”

Razi suppressed a chuckle. Whatever it was, clearly Zheng didn’t want Razi to know.

“Thank you for everything,” said Zheng. “The less

you know about any of this the better. Marco is a dangerous man, and Cook isn't too sweet either."

"Don't I know it." Razi leaned against the window. "He's already threatened to find me and kill me if I was lying to him. And I was."

Zheng shook his head in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

"Marco asked if I'd seen you. I said you went to town and sent him the wrong way."

Zheng's face turned sour. "Oh no. He's not someone you want to cross for any reason."

"What about you, though? Will you be all right?"

"Of course," said Zheng, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes. He seemed to have become more relaxed after reaching the hut. "I've been in all sorts of situations. When you work on a ship and have been all over the world, you're ready for *anything*. Reminds me of the time we had to fight off pirates. Not that it happened just the once, but this one time was particularly tense, because I had only one working arm at the time."

Razi had no idea how seriously to take any of this. He was curious about Zheng, though, and felt responsible for him after rescuing him from the boat. "Who are you? How did you come to be in that boat?"

Zheng's face screwed up, as if he was trying to hold back some emotion. "I was on a merchant ship that sank."

"You're a ship's boy then?"

Zheng nodded. "It might not sound like much. But I was very close to the captain, no less. And I've been *all* over the world. Been doing this since I was eight, and now I'm twelve. Imagine that."

That was impressive, but Razi wasn't about to admit it. He was twelve too, but had never even left the area he lived in.

"Where did you say you were from again?" said Zheng.

"Galle," said Razi. "It's a town about a mile or so up the beach from here. There's nothing else around. If you go up the beach the other way there's a village, but that's even further away than Galle."

"What were you doing here then?"

"I was watching turtle hatchlings. There are always loads of them here. I like to see them go safely to the sea. Did you know that's why they run to the sea so soon after birth? It's so they're safe from predators."

"That's nice," said Zheng, though he didn't look too interested in the turtles. Which wasn't surprising considering he was running away from a maniac

who was trying to kill him.

“I’ve got to go now. My mother will be waiting for me. We usually have breakfast together before she goes to work. Good luck, Zheng.”

“Ah, breakfast... Can’t remember the last time I had it,” said Zheng, a mournful expression on his face. “Well, goodbye, Razi. Thank you for everything.”

Razi nodded and turned to go. He stopped at the doorway. He couldn’t very well leave Zheng without food. The coconut pulp was hardly anything.

He turned back to Zheng. “Don’t move from here. I’ll bring you some food and water and then you can be on your way.”

Zheng looked thrilled. “Could you hide my boat as well? If Marco comes back, it’ll show him where I am. I’d do it myself if I wasn’t so weak.”

“Sure.” Razi smiled. He’d move the boat, bring the food, and that would be the end of that.



## Chapter Five

Razi ran all the way home. When he got close to town he slowed down and approached cautiously, looking to see if Marco and Cook were there. He knew he was late for breakfast. His mother would be furious under normal circumstances, but ever since the accident she’d been far more lenient with him. She might have even left for work at the lace mill by now.

Razi’s family lived in one of a line of fishermen’s houses facing the beach. Beyond was Galle town, with its narrow cobbled streets and orange-roofed villas

packed close together.

There was no sign of Marco or Cook so he ran into the house and burst through the kitchen. Mother was cooking roti at the stove and the smell of warm coconut was in the air. His sister, Shifa, was sitting cross-legged on the mat with a plate on her lap. She was eating quite fast and barely glanced at him. She spent all her non-school days at the medicine man's, learning how to make foul-smelling medicines and treating injuries and illnesses. Razi couldn't understand it himself, but Shifa was always in a hurry to go there.

Mother looked up and smiled at Razi. "Where have you been?"

"I went to see the turtles again. There were loads of them today." He put two roti on his plate and piled up a generous dollop of onion sambal from the clay pot.

"I have to leave soon," said Mother. "You two clear up here."

Razi picked up a banana leaf from the pile that was always on the side – cleaned and cut into squares for wrapping lunches.

He sat down and quickly wrapped one of the roti and some sambal in the banana leaf. He stuffed it in his pocket when he thought no one was looking.

"What are you doing?" said Shifa, pausing mid-bite.

Mother looked up from turning a roti.

"Eating," said Razi, nudging Shifa and looking at her meaningfully.

Shifa frowned in disapproval. She always went big sister on him, even though she was younger. Only by eleven minutes, but still. He'd explain to her later.

"I was just thinking, Razi." Mother had finished cooking and came and sat with them after serving herself some food too. "Nathan is going out of town for two weeks. He said you can use his boat, since it'll just be sitting there all that time. Maybe you could join the men when they go fishing tonight?"

Something like dread crept over Razi like a new skin. Not this again. "No, Mother, please. I can't do it."

Mother smiled sadly. "But you love fishing, Razi. You can't be afraid forever."

Razi shook his head hard. He just couldn't.

For once Shifa kept quiet.

Mother picked at her roti. Razi noticed her hands for the first time in ages. Her fingertips were raw and pink. It must be from the weaving loom; she'd increased her working hours lately to make ends meet.



He stared at her hands guiltily. He should be helping more – then maybe she wouldn't always look so tired.

Mother went off to her work at the lace-makers' yard and Razi quickly started the washing-up. As he scrubbed the blackened cooking pot, he hurriedly told Shifa about Zheng over the sound of the sloshing water.

Shifa stopped sweeping the floor to listen. "How on earth did you manage to get into such a mess before you'd even had breakfast?"

"*I* didn't do anything!" said Razi, scrubbing furiously. "I had to help Zheng, didn't I?"

"Yes, but you didn't have to make an enemy of those men. Why did you first tell him you didn't see the boy and then say you did? He must have been suspicious immediately."

"Well, I'm sorry I couldn't keep my cool when faced with a potential murderer. Now that I have some experience I'll do better next time."

Shifa laughed. "Wait, so this boy's waiting for you to bring him food? He might need some medical help too. Go on, I'll finish up and meet you there."

"Great, thanks! Come as soon as you can." Razi took a change of clothes for Zheng and headed to the door.

"Be careful, Razi!" Shifa shouted after him. "Those

men might try to follow you if they think you're hiding something."

Razi paused near the door and looked out, scanning the area for Marco and Cook. Some men were stilt-fishing, their crane-like figures dotted among the rolling waves. The sight of one of the stilts, empty for months now, made Razi's heart hurt. He slipped out with his head down and started the walk to the hut.

The sun was getting hotter now. Waves crashed on the shore and the boat was still plainly visible on the beach. He slapped his forehead when he realised he'd forgotten to move it like Zheng asked him to. He'd do it just as soon as he put down the things he was carrying in the hut.

He entered and peered around as his eyes adjusted to the light. The hut was dark after the glare outside, and Zheng breathed noisily as he lay fast asleep on the floor. Razi pulled the door to behind him, leaving it ajar as it wouldn't close fully. Placing the clothes on the floor, he put the food parcel on the windowsill.

Just as he was about to slip out again, Zheng grunted and shifted in his sleep. He turned over, and something slipped out of his shirt and lay slightly wedged under him. Razi tiptoed up to him and leaned over to see what it was. It was a thin brown leather

case with stitching in darker brown. A row of bronze-coloured studs secured it closed.

Razi was overcome with curiosity. What on earth was so important that Zheng had left with that one thing from a sinking ship? And whatever it was, maybe it was the reason Marco was prepared to kill Zheng and anyone who helped him.

He really should leave it alone.

But then Zheng would be on his way and Razi would never know what all the fuss was about. A little look couldn't hurt.

Razi held on to the windowsill for balance and leaned over on one leg as far as he could. He reached out a hand and gently inched the case out from under Zheng. He hardly dared to breathe as he slid it free. The first bit came out easily, but then one of the studs snagged on Zheng.

Zheng snorted in his sleep and turned over again so he was now facing Razi. The leather roll was left behind him on the floor and Razi quickly snatched it up.

With trembling fingers he undid the studs, the faint pops sounding loud in the silence. The smell of ink drifted from inside as he opened out the case to see what it contained.



## Chapter Six

As the case rolled open, Razi saw there was a scroll in the middle. It was sand-coloured, thick and heavy.

Suddenly the room brightened dazzlingly as the door scraped open.

Zheng opened his eyes and screamed to find Razi crouching over him. At the same time, Razi jumped out of his skin and sprang up screaming. The scroll fell off his lap. They both screamed at the dark apparition standing in the sunlit doorway. The figure then began to scream at their screaming.