

“Are you saying you were in the cave during the rescue?” Marina asked Varden.

His expression became solemn; she fancied he looked almost reverent. “In the embrace of Gaia. Yes, I was there. She was reaching out to you. Could you feel it?” His voice was a low rumble.

Marina didn't reply. Her moments of commune with Gaia had been private and sacred, and the fact that Varden had felt the same... perhaps even was attuned to her personal, electric connection to Mother Earth...unsettled her.

He seemed to understand, and it disconcerted her even more when he said, “Much as I despise admitting it, Mariska Aleksandrov, you are instrumental to the Skaladeskas and their—our—connection to Gaia. To protecting her. You are the heir, after all.”

His steady gaze caught and held her eyes, and for a moment, Marina felt the shimmer of connection with Varden. It was the same energy she felt when she was in Lev's presence, or when she was close to Gaia, recognizing Her power and life.

“Lev needs you to stay alive,” Varden went on, his voice hardly more than a low rumble. “And you must understand that you're in danger. Not only from Hedron, but also from him.” He flicked his eyes from hers to the space behind Marina, toward Bruce.

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SANSKRIT CIPHER

A MARINA ALEXANDER ADVENTURE

C. M. GLEASON



To Gary March, D.O.:
for all of your ideas, brainstorming, expertise, and,
most importantly, angst over the bees—thank you
from the bottom of my heart.

And to Patricia Denke, PhD:
for your entomological expertise and enthusiasm
(not to mention your love for Eli), as well as the loan
of your name—I couldn't have done it without you.

Sanskrit Cipher: A Marina Alexander Adventure

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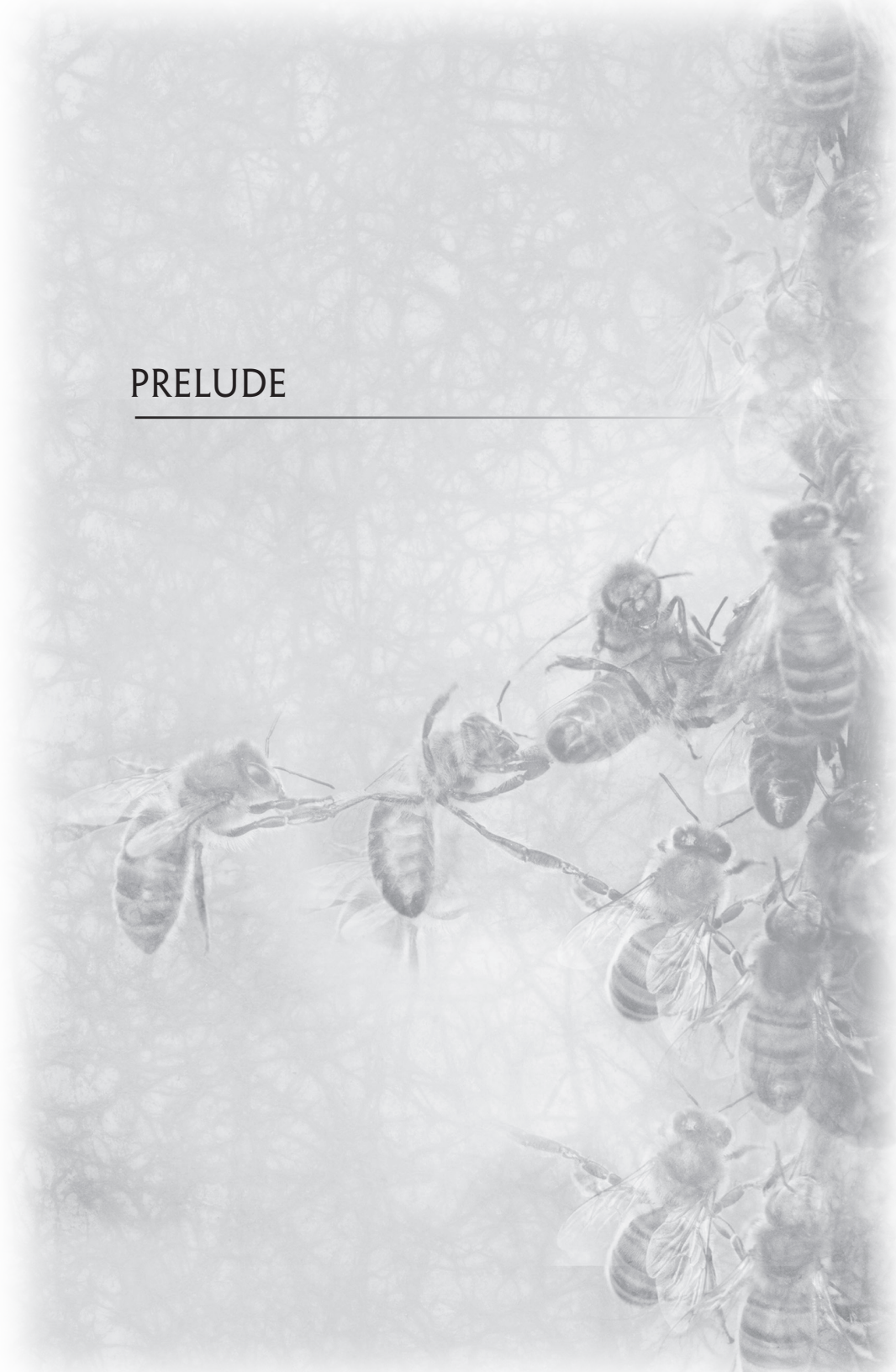
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PRELUDE



*Two thousand years ago
In the shadow of the Himalayas*

The sun had just begun to rise. The mists from the staggering mountains looming above the village still curled, steaming, from the ground. The world was frosted with a chill gray cast, but the pale pink that was barely glowing from beyond the far edge of the world indicated that the gods had blessed the Earth by allowing another sunrise.

It was an auspicious beginning to the annual hunt for precious and sacred honey.

Timbal, who'd been born twelve summers ago, was the youngest of the hunters. He fairly danced with impatience as his grandfather Bhulat murmured a prayer of thanks for a day dawning clear and still. Timbal knew it was important to thank the gods for their favor, but he wanted them to be on their way!

Bhulat, the patriarch of a family blessed with the task of foraging for honey, was leading his last hunt today. He would be turning over the role to his son, Khlari, who was Timbal's father.

Someday, Timbal himself would be leading the group. He fairly burst with pride thinking of the day he and *his* sons and grandsons would be sent off into the misty morning by their village. The entire village relied on Timbal's family to bring back the sweet and succulent golden liquid that was used for many purposes.

Today was his first hunt, and he would begin the first task of taking on his family's tradition by shouldering the heavy coil of the rope lad-

der. Father had warned him it would be heavy and that he could pass it off to the next youngest when he tired, but Timbal was determined not to ask for help during the half-day's journey. No other first-time member had succeeded in carrying the heavy coil the entire distance, and he intended to become a legendary honey hunter from the start.

The ladder was no light burden, for it weighed nearly as much as Timbal's younger sister. And each hunt required a new ladder to be woven from fresh bamboo fibers and reed. Thus, it took many months to create. During its construction, the materials were intertwined with prayers, incantations, and protections. When completed, the ladder was long enough to cross the entire village three times.

Since he had been five summers of age, Timbal had assisted his family members with the weaving, each time waiting impatiently for his chance to go with the men.

At last the day had come.

As the entire village came out to bid the hunters farewell, Timbal straightened his shoulders and adopted a serious expression. He would have reached for the rope ladder and hoisted it to his shoulder, but his father laid a hand on him and shook his head. *Not yet.*

Timbal hid his frustration. He would manage it. The ladder wasn't so very heavy that he couldn't stand and hold it for the moments of the blessing, then continue on their way.

A pointed look from his mother had Timbal turning his attention to the *paju*, one of the village's two shamans. The elder bestowed protections on the hunters, their rope ladder, and the live chicken they would sacrifice just before the hunt itself.

And then, *finally*, they were off.

The hunters' path was strewn with rocks, boulders, and tufts of grass determined to grow in such intolerant soil. Timbal strode along in bare feet, unconcerned by the rough terrain and enthusiastic about the task ahead. Neither his roomy tunic, woven from wool and hemp, nor the trousers that ended above his ankle did much to protect him from the chill air here in the foothills of the Great Mountains.

By the time the sun had risen above the horizon and was near the tops of the lowest trees, Timbal began to wonder how much further they must walk. The coil of rope seemed to grow heavier with every

step, and though he shifted it from shoulder to shoulder, the ache never seemed to dissipate even when the burden changed. Its rough hemp and bamboo abraded the skin of his neck and the top of his shoulder.

“Allow Arhat to carry the ladder for a time, my son,” his father said after they stopped for a brief rest and to drink.

But Timbal refused, lifting the ladder back to his shoulder with renewed determination.

Yet, as the journey wore on and the sun grew higher and warmer, his steps lagged. He began to focus only on putting one foot in front of the other, over and over again. He was dimly aware of conversation, singing, and the random cluck of the chicken tucked under Father’s arm, but he was far too out of breath to join in any of the camaraderie.

He would finish this.

He would do it.

And then, perhaps, he’d be the youngest man ever to climb the ladder in the quest for honey.

At last, Grandfather called a halt to the expedition in a clearing at the base of a sheer cliff. Timbal, who was suddenly elated because he’d managed to carry their ladder the entire way, was relieved to slide the heavy coil from his shoulder and let it collapse on the ground. He glanced at his father, who’d been watching him with solemn eyes. A brief nod and small smile indicated Khlari’s approval.

“Timbal.” He looked over as his grandfather pointed. “There. Do you see?”

Timbal’s eyes widened as he beheld the massive bee nests attached to the side of the cliff. Each one was as tall as a man, and as wide as two of them. The large, flat golden nests glimmered with the life of the busy, moving bees, creating a shimmering relief against the harshness of the rock wall on which they were built.

The only other beehive Timbal had ever seen was so small that a man could carry it. It had been a clay-made hive in the shape of a large urn, its mud base strengthened with reeds and grasses. This special hive had been borne on the back of a traveling holy man who’d visited their village some summers ago.

A shout yanked Timbal’s attention to the awesome glittering bee

nests above him. He helped his uncles and father unpack their meager belongings and arrange them in a small camp. But all the while, he had to peek at what his grandfather was doing.

Bhulat had crouched near a large, flat stone the size of ten men’s hands and mixed up a thick paste of millet until it was the consistency of mortar. Then, with his practiced, gnarled fingers, he modeled the paste into the figure of one of the mountain spirits, or *pari*.

By the time he finished the crude sculpture, the hunters had organized their camp and Khlari had started a small fire. The five gathered around as Bhulat placed his *pari* figure on the large stone.

Then, speaking the prayers and chants he’d been saying for over forty years—ones he’d learned from his father, who’d learned from his father before him, and the ones Timbal would someday learn—Grandfather Bhulat sprinkled the hunters’ offerings onto the stone: millet, rice, sheep’s wool, fragrant twigs, and a bundle of sage and juniper.

At the proper moment, Khlari offered his father a cone of thin bark wrapped around a stick and then set ablaze. Grandfather took the torch and set the bundle of herbs and twigs on fire, offering a final chant as it crackled merrily and released a pungent scent into the air.

The chicken met its end on the same altar table, executed as a sacrifice to the mountain spirit in hopes that he would spare their lives during the dangerous task ahead of them. The head was presented to Bhulat, and he sprinkled its blood over the offerings.

As Timbal helped prepare their dinner of chicken and rice, he looked up at the sheer, looming cliff that rose above their camp. Now he understood why the ladder must be so long, and so heavy, and he burst with pride that he, and he alone, had carried it the whole distance.

Before he’d seen the mountainside, Timbal had imagined himself dangling from the rope, high above the ground, calmly and expertly doing the work that today would fall to his father and eldest uncle. He’d pictured himself lowering down a rope like the first king, Gna-k’ri-bstan-po, had done on his descent to Earth from heaven. But now that he was faced with the mountain’s mind-boggling height and the unrelenting starkness of its stony cliff face that seemed to glare down

at them, Timbal was secretly relieved he wouldn't be the one taking the risk.

Not yet.

Maybe next year.

At last his grandfather said, "Start the fires."

Timbal's pulse leapt. *Now* it began: the sacred, dangerous hunt for honey.

Three large pyres rose from along the base of the cliff. The older, dry wood had been placed on the bottom of each pile where the fire was lit, and the top covered with newer branches and some damp leaves and grass to make the blaze smoky.

"Watch," said Grandfather Bhulat, curling his fingers around Timbal's arm as they looked up. "The bees—do you see? They are afraid their nests will be burned. So what do they do?"

Timbal knew the answer to that. "They eat."

"They stuff themselves full—as we do in preparation for a long journey—so they can travel far to safety without tiring. And that is good for us, why?"

"Because...because if they are full, they are slow. And the smoke confuses them. So maybe they won't be bothered to sting."

Bhulat gave a rare smile. "You have been listening. And now we begin, Timbal. Watch your father."

Before he began the dangerous ascent, Timbal's father turned to the effigy of the mountain spirit and knelt before it, bowing his head as he asked for permission from the *pari* to climb the mountain, and for safe passage. Then he picked up the rope ladder, and he and his brother Viri began to climb the mountain.

Instead of attempting to make their way up the sheer face of the cliff where the bees' nests clung, they took a different path on a gentler side of the mountain—still rocky and difficult, but more accessible than the choppy vertical rise. Viri carried the long bamboo poles called tangos, along with a satchel of other equipment.

While Timbal and two of his uncles stoked the fires on the ground and opened up the broad baskets made from reeds, they watched the pair climb the cliff like the goats many of their villagers tended: quickly, and with great agility. The thick smoke from the three fires

rose, already bothering the bees, but the climbers were too far to the south of the cliff face for it to clog their eyes and noses yet.

Once Khlari reached the crest of the cliff, he tied the long ladder to the most stable tree then threw the rope over the cliff. The ladder was so long that it fell more than halfway down the side of the mountain—but still ended much higher than any man would care to jump or fall. Timbal realized he was holding his hands in tight fists as he watched his father check the knots on the ladder.

Timbal could hardly see through the thick smoke, and his eyes stung as he peered at the activity above as his father took the pair of long tangos from Viri. Timbal was so intent on watching that he nearly jumped out of his skin when one of his uncles shouted and tossed one end of a large honey basket to him.

Gripping the handle and holding his side of the basket wide open, Timbal hardly breathed as his father climbed down the swaying ladder while managing the long bamboo tangos and a torch in one hand.

With the smoke from below billowing around him, the flames from the torch dangerously near his ladder, and the threatened bees beginning to realize there was more danger afoot, Khlari and his descent made Timbal wonder if that was how the gods and shamans felt when they climbed down the *dmu-t'ag*—the ladder stretching from heaven to Earth—into the dark, dangerous underworld.

But his father had been doing this since before Timbal was born. He knew just how to safely balance the tangos and torch, and how to avert his face from the brunt of the smoke and worst of the bees as he made his way from rung to rung. After what seemed like forever, he reached the height of the first nest. Because the nest clung to the cliff face, and the ladder fell straight down away from the stony surface, Khlari needed to use the bamboo poles in order to reach and attack his prize.

"Here," shouted Timbal's basket partner, and they moved so they were in position beneath the nest.

Through all of this activity, Bhulat sat in front of the millet effigy of the *pari*, praying while keeping one eye on the work his family was doing. Somehow, that gave Timbal comfort while he watched, breathless, as his father balanced on the ladder.

Khlari's feet, hardly visible from the ground because of the smoke, were hooked around the sides of the ladder, and an arm was laced through one of the rungs. He tucked the handle of the torch into a loop in one of the sides of the ladder above him, adjusting it so the flames weren't close enough to set the bamboo weave on fire. Then he needed both hands to maneuver the tangos, using them like two long chopsticks to push, prod, and pull the lower part of the nest free from its moorings.

Timbal knew this bottom part of the nest was where the immature bees lived—and this larvae was delicious. The wax therein would be rendered and used for candles as well as sculpting effigies and other religious images, but the hunters and their families would enjoy the delicacy of the young bees as a reward for the dangers they faced in obtaining the honey and wax.

The bees might have been full and slow from their unexpected feasting, but they were still displeased by the disruption to their nest. Though many of them had flown to safety from the smoke, others remained, and Timbal could hear the angry buzz and whirr as the large bees swarmed around the hunter threatening their home. Each insect was nearly the length of the first two segments of his finger, and they stung without hesitation. Timbal had seen his father and the others after they returned from previous trips: swollen in the hands and face from all the stings.

Now the torch came into play, and Timbal watched, holding his breath, as Khlari pulled the flaming bundle free from its moorings and brought it close to the bottom of what remained of the nest. While the close proximity of the smoke choked the insects, the sounds of their agitation filled the air as they rose from the nest.

As the bees vacated their home in a dark swarm, more of the dark golden honeycombs were revealed, and Khlari used the tangos to pummel and pull on the larger part of the nest. Timbal's mouth watered at the thought of the sweet, reddish syrup and the crunchy combs he would soon be tasting.

A great shout went up as Khlari detached the nest from its last bit of mooring, and Timbal and his partner scrambled into place below just as it fell.

Thwump!

The satisfying sound of the nest slumping into the huge basket brought with it a surprisingly strong jolt to Timbal's arms, and another shout of triumph from the honey hunters. It was one thing, Timbal knew, for the nest to be safely extricated—but it was just as important for the great mass to be captured before it crashed to the ground and broke into pieces, spilling all of its precious honey into the dirt.

Khlari detached three more nests in this same manner—bottom, larvae-laden portion first, then upper, honey-drenched section—before climbing back up and giving Viri a turn with the ladder, torch, and tangos. In all, they corrupted five nests from their positions clinging to the stony wall. Three huge baskets were filled, and one nest dashed against the side of the cliff and shattered as it tumbled down.

Though it was mostly a loss, the destroyed nest also yielded a few hand-sized pieces for the hunters to eat. Grandfather Bhulat, pleased with the take from this springtime trip and that neither of his men on the ladder had been injured other than a multitude of stings, took the first piece of the tender, lower part of the nest and bit into the sweet larvae with a satisfying crunch.

His wrinkled face creased with pleasure as he tasted the sweetness that Timbal knew could be found nowhere else. Soon, Timbal would eat as well and, for the first time, feel the effects of this springtime harvest of honey: a loose, pleasant hallucinogenic state that would stay with them as he and the others celebrated late into the night.

The take was large enough that Timbal's family would sell enough to feed them and part of the village for many moons. They would render the wax and sell that too. A small portion of the special red honey would be blessed and given to the shamans in order to assist them with their magic dreams and visions.

And, most important of all, they would put offerings of honey and some of the bee larvae in three beautiful pots, sealed and closed. These would be offered to the mountain spirit who'd given them safe passage and a good harvest.

Finally, Grandfather would place the last and most important offering in the sacred cave near their village.

The cave was the place where the holy man known as Saint Issa,

who traveled from a very distant country with his own small hive of bees on his back, had slept when their village was infected by a great illness. Issa was obviously surrounded by the *pari's* blessing when he reclined there that night, for the next morning, he had come forth from the cave and healed the village of its plague.

Timbal had been five winters when Issa visited, and he remembered being ill with the fever and how nothing would soothe him until the cool, calming hand of the gentle saint had touched his brow...and how the heat and pain had evaporated at his touch.

Saint Issa had left soon after, carrying the rounded hive made from pottery on his back, but the villagers never forgot him. Bhulat and some of the other elders had marked the cave in which Issa slept with the same symbol carved on the holy man's beehive.

Nothing like that plague had ever come to the village again, and each spring and autumn, the bee hunters went on their quest—not only for the riches of the honey, but also to make a sweet offering to the mountain spirit who'd sent Issa to save them.



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