# Aurya

Aurya hated going out into the reed bank. It was a clear morning, but the reeds grew taller than her, and she could never see far. She had dreams some nights that she was lost out there, running and breathless, while something huge stalked her through the rushes.

'Sharo!' she called out, sending a flock of crows bursting into the air. 'Sharo, where are you? I mean it!'

She'd spent half the morning looking for her brother around the village: up on the crossroads where the desert people sold caged birds and rabbits, at the quarry edge where foxes gathered among the hawthorn and wild oak. Usually if you followed the animals, you could find Sharo. But now there was only one place he could be. The ruins of the old village. As she wandered deeper through the sunken thicket of tamarisk, Aurya tried to keep the stories people had told her out of her mind.

On the ground beneath a clump of boxthorn, she found what she was looking for: her brother's drawings, scratched into the riverbank mud. They were sketches of animals, as usual. Carp and pigs, snakes and turtle shells. Aurya followed the images as they became rabbits, deer and doves. Then she spotted the deep footprints Sharo always left in the mud, leading off towards the old village.

'I knew it. Not again, Sharo.'

The undergrowth was denser here, wreathed with thorns that clutched at her woollen sleeves. She tried to follow the paths cut

by wild pigs where she could, but the going was hard. The deeper she went into the thicket, the more those stories came back to her: the sounds in the dark that one of the charrer's boys had run from, and the prints the old leather-worker had found at the river a few mornings back, bigger than a man's hand. As she got closer, the shells of the old houses appeared, half-hidden in the thicket. The stench of the abandoned well filled the air, and Aurya saw that her brother's footprints led off towards it. The well had been tainted by flood waters once, and when the villagers moved, it became a rubbish pit, full of the waste of two dozen families.

'Sharo?' she called out, and edged closer. 'Sharo, are you down there?'

A groan of pain answered from the bottom.

'Sharo!' Aurya ran closer, but something stopped her. A sound: a slosh nearby that sent her ducking down into the grass. A crow fluttered from the skeleton of one old house, and then the tamarisk on the clearing edge swayed. Something was out there. Aurya hushed her breath, her heart thumping. It was probably a pig. A large pig. There was the crack of a rotten log, and then something heavy moving in the reeds. Not a pig. It could be a deer, lost in the brush. Aurya thought suddenly of the goat that had disappeared from the village pen in the night, its stake uprooted from the ground.

'Sharo!' Aurya hissed as loudly as she dared, but there was no reply from the pit. 'Sharo, if you're down there …'

The trees hushed each other. Aurya gave out hurried prayers:

To the god of old things
To the gods of the riverbank
To the god of hunters

The sounds came nearer, the crunch of reeds, the water dropping from branches. And then the rushes parted and her brother stepped out, back first, heaving an old roof beam behind him.

'Smash your head!' Aurya shouted. Sharo started and turned to her, going pale with guilt. The beam he was carrying thudded to the ground.

'Aurya,' he said. His eyes were swollen with crying. 'Aurya, please don't tell Father.'

She ran to him and brushed him down, his wool shirt wet and caked in mud. He was a whole head taller than her, with curling black hair and a flat face full of feeling.

'Sharo, I've been looking for you all morning. Didn't I tell you never to come out here? Look at you. You're filthy.'

'Aurya …' He held out his muddy hands. 'I just wanted to help it.'

'You could have hurt yourself.' She took him by the shoulders. 'Clambering around in these old houses, disturbing the ghosts. And what if you fell into the pit? You think Father would help get you out? You think the village would fetch the ropes for us?'

'I'm sorry, Aurya. It needed my help.'

She heard him this time. Sharo was looking over her shoulder, down into the pit. Then that groan came again from below, like a wooden board when a heavy person steps on it. A huff of breath. The noise sent something skittering inside her.

'Sharo, what is it? What's down there?'

'It's hurt, Aurya. Please don't tell Father.'

Aurya turned and crouched, crept towards the pit and peered over the edge. There at the bottom, among the rotten reeds and the shards of a cooking pot she'd broken back before the rains – and been beaten for – and fish heads with eye sockets seething with white worms, and the grinning bones of a lamb from a recent wedding, and old curd spotted with blue mould, and wax seals from beer jars, and the leathered body of a dog that had jumped down there half-starved and never been able to get out, and the pools of muddy water and weeds and wildflowers growing among all the festering mess, Aurya saw the thing she dreaded most in the world.

It was a lion: a young male with a thin black mane, blood caked around a wound on one hind foot. A cloud of flies circled, but its ribs still moved to a slow breath. That groan came again from between its jaws. Aurya shuddered. Beams, like the one she'd caught Sharo dragging, had been dropped over the pit edge,

slanting so they formed a ramp almost to the top. Aurya looked back at her brother, who stood guiltily behind her.

'You were going to help it climb out,' she said.

'It was crying, Aurya. Can't you hear it?' Sharo said.

'We can't – it's not …' She struggled to find the words. 'Sharo, how could you?'

'It's hurt.'

Aurya stared down at the creature's matted black mane, the slender arc of its spine.

'Sharo, one of those monsters killed our mother. What were you thinking?'

She saw the hurt look in her brother's eyes, and knew she had to soften her tone.

'Sharo, listen to me – if the lion – if that animal gets out of the pit, it will come for us. It will come stalking through the reeds and into our house at night.'

Sharo's eyes wandered from her down into the pit, so she took him by the chin and forced him to look at her. Then she reached into the pouch inside her shirt and pulled out her knife. It wasn't a knife so much as a shard from an iron blade that she'd once found in the river shallows, thrown from a passing barge. But she kept it sharp.

'Do you know what the beast will do then?' she said. His eyes followed the sliver as it flashed. 'First, it'll find Father lying drunk on the floor. And it will slice open his belly with its claws and eat his guts, just like hot soup.' She made a slurping sound. Watched his eyes waver. 'Do you know what it will do then, Sharo? It will come into the room where we sleep. It will creep through the dark and come over to my mat, and then it will slice open my belly, and eat my guts. Like what?'

'Like hot soup,' he murmured, going pale.

'And do you know what it will do then? It will creep over to your bed –'

'No! Stop!'

He was shaking. Aurya felt weak. This talk of soup reminded her that she hadn't eaten since yesterday. She kept checking the undergrowth surrounding the clearing, at the shaded wall corners

and collapsed roofs. She knew those beasts sometimes moved in pairs. She squeezed Sharo's shoulder.

'Try remembering something,' she said.

'I don't want to.'

'Sharo, do it for me. What about the day Father came back from the war? Where were the stars that night?'

'You always ask that one,' he said, his breaths coming in little gasps. 'It's too easy.'

'Well … what about the clouds? What did they look like just before sunrise?'

Sharo's eyes wandered, and Aurya counted three heartbeats.

'A big one, over the hills. It looks like a jumping hare. The birds are coming home for the season.'

'And what about … two days later? What did we eat in the morning?'

Sharo took a sharp breath through his nose, smelling the meal he'd eaten years ago as if cooked right in front of him.

'Barley soup, and locusts cooked on coals. They've ruined the crops. People are crying. For the crops, and the men who didn't come home.'

Aurya looked at her brother, at his wide, smooth cheekbones, the swollen pink skin around his eyes. By some intervention of the gods, Sharo had never forgotten a thing in his life. He remembered the position of stars and clouds on far-off dates, the exact words someone had used ten years ago, the patterns of bark and stone he'd seen only once. There was only one thing Sharo didn't remember: the day their mother was dragged away by the lion.

'You have to promise me not to come back here,' Aurya said, and saw him look away. That was the upside of Sharo's curse: he found it impossible to tell lies. 'Sharo? You can't come back out here. That lion – it has to stay down there. If you promise, you can tell me one of Mother's stories.'

'A story?'

'Yes, I want to hear one.'

'Not like the last one you made me tell?'

'No, you can choose this time.'

'Can it be one with lions?'

'You're the one who knows them,' Aurya said, and led her brother away, with just one look back at the pit. 'But you have to promise, Sharo.'

'I promise.'

She pinched him, made a roaring noise. 'Look out,' she said. 'I'm a lion.'

He laughed.

'No, you're not.'

'Yes, I am.' She pinched him again so he yelled, and she chased him through the reeds, shouting, 'I'm a lion and you're a deer!'

When they reached the house, Aurya found a large piece of stone lying on a sledge beside the east wall. Deep furrows in the earth led back up to the road, and the earth was torn with buffalo prints. It had been years since her father had last bought a piece of stone, and Aurya stopped chasing Sharo and stood for a few moments.

'Did you know about this, Sharo?' He shook his head.

'How did he pay for it?'

Sharo curled a lock of hair over his ear as he followed her to the stone. It was beautiful: a flat slab, eggshell-white, laced with veins the colour of sunset. Aurya smoothed her hands over the surface: the hush it made against her palms, the odour of the thick ropes used to bind it. It was strangely warm. She put her cheek against it, and the sensation made her think of putting her cheek against her mother's stomach. She knew it wasn't a real memory: the lion dragged her mother away before she could remember. Aurya stroked the stone and thought of the animal in the pit, and the sound it had made when she called out to it, as if it knew her.

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Aurya took her brother back to the cooking area behind the house, the clay oven full of cold ash. She sat him down on the millstone with the weeds growing up through its centre, and washed his face with rainwater from the trough. Their father's snores came from inside.

'Are we going to eat ash again, Aurya?' Sharo said.

'Well, did you catch any fish today?'

'No.'

'And did you catch any pigs?'

'No.'

'Then we're going to eat ash. Unless you'd rather be hungry.'

'I think I'd rather be hungry,' he said.

'Me too.'

Her stomach lashed out though. Once they would have begged for food from their neighbours, but now their father owed them all, and they'd stopped leaving out scraps for the mason's children. They would have to go to the quarry camp and steal again.

'Can I see her necklace?' Sharo said. Aurya nodded, and let him play with it, the little cylinder of greenish stone she wore around her neck. Sharo ran his thumb over the lines carved into its surface, and Aurya poured a last spoon of water over his unoiled hair.

'Mother was from Nineveh.'

'Yes, she was.'

That's all she had: a necklace, the name of a city, Sharo's stories.

Sharo took the necklace and pressed it down into the earth, rolled it so the image carved on its surface printed into the ground. A lion, arching its back, surrounded by trees, and a river winding below it.

'Hey, you're getting it dirty,' Aurya said, and took the necklace away from him. 'Come on, before Father wakes up.'

Their father was where he always was, asleep on his sheepskin. In the summer, when he laid it out in the sun, the white lice would crawl out of it, showing blood through their transparent skins. Their father's face looked like it had been carved with a chisel. He kept his hair cut close to his scalp, like a slave. He'd been a soldier once, and if his stories were to be believed, he'd fought the Medes and the Elamites, savage hill creatures with sharp teeth and hair on their bodies like dogs. He'd never been a good father, but the war had made him worse. An Elamite arrow had landed in his thigh, a wound that still troubled him, and when he came home, he was given their house as a reward.

The moment Aurya and Sharo stepped into the room, a sharp wind from downriver banged a shutter, and their father jolted awake, coughing.

'What's the wind doing today?' he moaned. 'Where's it always hurrying to?' He rubbed his scalp, the short fuzz of hair broken in places by scars.

'Go back to sleep, Father,' Aurya said.

'Aurya. Look at you. You're getting taller every day; we'll have to weigh you down to earth somehow. Will you go down to the crossroads please …'

'No.'

'Will you go down there please, and get me some beer? Or some date wine. Tell them to put it on my credit.'

'You don't need any more,' Aurya said.

Her father's face darkened, and he waved her away. His palms were mason's hands, smooth and completely without fingerprints after years of working with stone.

'You'd have me eat clay for bread too,' he muttered. 'You'd have me drink water like the beasts.' Then his eyes fell. 'This demon, Aurya. You know how it's always scratching behind my eyes.'

'You haven't worked for months,' Aurya said. 'Me and Sharo had to go and sell your last chisels. We'll be eating the leather in the door hinges soon, and you want me to buy you beer? With what money?'

Her father's eyes untethered. He leant over and picked up a jar by its neck, the reed straw still in it. He made a movement as if to throw it at her. It was heavy; the momentum rolled him on to his side, and a little beer spilled on to his sheepskin. Aurya flinched.

'I made a big sale.' Her father laughed, and clumped the jar down on the floor. 'Big piece of stone.'

'I saw it. How much did you borrow?'

'Beautiful piece, fresh from the quarry and still full of sap. Guess who bought it.'

'I don't want to guess.'

'Guess!' He pointed a wavering finger at her. 'I bet you think it's Nasirpal on the other bank.'

'I don't care if it's Nasirpal or not.'

'So like your mother.' He hiccupped, and thumped his chest. 'Well, it's not Nasirpal. It's the King.'

Aurya watched him, filled with waves of hatred and pity, and love turned rancid like old curd. She could hear her brother murmuring to himself on the terrace, scratching more drawings into the earth. She took the first step over to the door.

'Our lord, our sun, his mighty mightiness, King Ashurbanipal,' her father sang. 'Last week I heard that agents from the palace were buying up all the gypsum slabs from the quarry. So I borrowed from Nilmaher and bought the largest, flattest piece I could find. The poor old quarry goat who sold it didn't know what he was giving away. When he finds out – when he hears about the palace, and what they're paying …'

He hiccupped again. Puffed out his cheeks to hold in a belch. Aurya took another step.

'Why would the King want your stone?'

'King Ashy-ashy-banipal,' her father said. 'Doesn't just – just saying that name make you think of date syrup, and all the beer you can drink, with flower petals floating in it?'

'I haven't eaten since yesterday morning,' Aurya said, but her father didn't hear.

'The King's men are bringing a barge all the way from Nineveh. They'll be here to take it away: first light on the fifteenth, four days from now. We're part of great things now, Daughter. Great, great things. Ashurbanny-banny-pal. When you go to the crossroads, make sure you fetch some firewood, Aurya. Fetch some firewood and wash the pots too, with ash. Make yourself useful until you're married.'

Outside, Aurya found Sharo crouching on the ground, still drawing in the soft mud with a reed. She turned her head to see what he was drawing. It was a lion, crouched and mournful, its paws over its head.

'Come on,' she said, 'you've done enough drawing today.'

Aurya didn't go to the crossroads. Instead, she and Sharo went up to the quarry camp and crept behind the workers' tents, listening for voices inside. They had learned to survive this way

while their father was away fighting; these days it had come back into use. The earth around the camp was scattered with lumps of gypsum, old pieces of rope and dead rats. Aurya found a sandal there with a broken strap she thought she might be able to repair and sell. They found one unoccupied tent too, and managed to steal an onion that someone had forgotten. They ran back to the riverbank before anyone could catch them and sat on the abandoned kiln at the bottom of their dry field.

While they sat there and shared the onion between them, the north wind came in and battered the village. The women wrapped up the grains and small fish they were drying on their porches, tied down the cloths that covered their doors. Shutters banged.

Aurya did her weaving. The potter's wife sometimes gave her grain biscuits in exchange for repairing palm leaf matting. It was fiddly, but it let her mind wander. While her fingers worked, she and Sharo watched the boats sailing past on the wide river: the barges drawn along the towpaths, the reed-matted rafts, the sleek oared ships heading downriver to the great cities. Aurya imagined what magic it would be to step aboard one of those ships, to let the river's course draw them downstream.

'Nineveh,' she said, just to hear its sound. 'What do you think it's like there, Sharo? In the great city?'

'I don't know, Aurya.'

'I think it must be the most beautiful place in the world.'

Even from out there, they could still hear their father back in the house. He was crashing from room to room and singing. It was an old song about a city that had forgotten its gods and fallen into ruin, but he laughed as he sang it as though it was the funniest thing in the world.