

TARA TRILOGY BOOK THREE

the deadly conch

MAHTAB NARSIMHAN

THE DEADLY CONCH

By

Mahtab Narsimhan

Chapter 1: Revenge

Layla glared at Tara, her face contorted with rage. Tara returned her gaze steadily. In the deepening dusk around them, the villagers of Morni danced in time to the drummer's beat.

For Tara, time slowed down, stopped, reversed. It was as if she were staring at a smaller replica of Kali; her evil stepmother, who had plunged to her death in the underground chasm mere days ago. Had it already been a week since she had escaped that nightmare? It seemed like yesterday.

Layla shall avenge my death ... mine and Zarku's.

Kali's words, spat at her like a cobra's venom, still haunted her dreams. Tara sometimes awoke to the echoes of Kali's dying scream reverberating in her head. But did her spoilt, overweight daughter have the power to make them come true? Despite the heat, Tara shivered.

"Tara!" someone yelled.

She whirled around. Kabir, Raani, and Vayu raced up to her. Vayu limped slightly and Raani favoured one leg as she ran. Tara remembered their fight on the beach with the hyenas. Raani could barely walk then, a hyena had attacked Vayu as he struggled to keep their boat steady, and Kabir had been deep in the throes of fever. What a sorry sight they had all looked. But here they were now, alive and well! She had done the right thing by letting them escape, though at the time it had been a very difficult decision.

"You made it back!" said Raani. "I'm so proud of you." She flung her arms around Tara. Tara hugged her back, inhaling the intoxicating fragrance of the raat-ki- raani flower tucked behind Raani's ear.

Kabir and Vayu hugged her, too, grinning widely. "You made it back with my sister and your brother!" said Kabir. "And you managed it all by yourself!" He shook his head, gazing at her, awestruck. "Weren't you scared? Did you ever feel you wouldn't be able to do it?"

“Our Tara is a tigress,” said a familiar voice. “She prefers to work alone. *Nothing* scares her!”

“Ananth,” said Kabir. “Good to see you, brother. That was some boat ride, no?”

“Hmmm, yes,” said Ananth. “But it wasn’t as exciting as the things Tara had to face.”

Vayu clapped Ananth’s back, smiling. And then they were all talking at the tops of their voices, bombarding Tara with questions. Ananth had already told her how they had escaped, but their friends hadn’t heard her story.

“I want to hear every little detail,” said Raani. “Don’t you dare leave out a single thing.”

“Your leg,” said Tara. “It’s all right?”

Raani nodded. “Still hurts a little, but it’s bearable.”

“And you both?” said Tara, looking at Kabir and Vayu.

“We’re fine,” said Vayu. “But enough about us. How did you manage to kill Zarku and Kali? We heard so many different versions, but now you’re going to tell us what really happened, right?”

“It’s quite a story,” said Ananth, smiling. But the smile did not reach his eyes. “It could take all night.”

Something jabbed at Tara’s heart. Ananth was mad at her for some reason. But why? Luckily no one else had noticed.

“Oh come on, Tara. Let’s sit somewhere and talk,” said Raani.

Tara led them to the periphery of the clearing. She glanced around, and, with a sharp jolt, realized that Layla had slipped away just when her friends had arrived. Layla’s presence made her sick, but her absence made her worry even more.

“Ananth, did you see where Layla went?” asked Tara. “I should keep an eye on her.”

“No, but don’t keep our friends waiting. They’re dying to hear your story. I must go see where Mother is.” Ananth hurried off.

“Come back soon!” Tara called out behind him. Ananth disappeared into the crowd without looking back.

Men, women, and children thronged the clearing in their bright clothes and jewellery, shimmering and sparkling in the light of the torches that kept darkness at bay.

Tara paused for a moment, revelling in the festivities around her. All of Morni was rejoicing because of *her*. They could just as easily have been mourning the deaths of *three* children right now. She stood straight and tall, gazing at the smiling faces. She had believed in herself and it had worked. Though Tara prayed there wouldn't be another occasion for this kind of bravery, she knew now she could handle anything that came her way.

And yet, not everyone in Morni was happy tonight. They had lost Rohan to the hyenas. She could never forget him nor the look on his parents' faces when she had returned with Suraj and Sadia.

"Stop daydreaming and tell already," said Raani. "Don't keep us in suspense."

They all grabbed a cup of icy well water from one of the earthen pots placed all around. Then the four of them sat some distance away from the loud music and Tara began to talk. She told them everything. The journey back to the temple, finding Kabir's sister, Sadia, the trek to the underground cave, and the horror of discovering what Zarku had planned for her; cutting her heart out.

"So that voice you kept hearing," said Raani, wide-eyed. "That was Zarku's mother? You were possessed by his mother and you didn't know it?" She had twisted the edge of her dupatta around her fingertip, turning it white and bloodless.

Put like that, it sounded horrible. Tara suppressed a shudder. Reliving every moment of that ordeal, she couldn't imagine how she had survived. All alone.

The drummer picked up the pace of the pulsing music. Villagers dressed in clothes every colour of the rainbow, swirled and twirled in front of her, filling her field of vision.

Vayu shook his head. "You were incredible, Tara. To face Zarku in Kali's body and defeat both must have needed so much courage and a clear mind. I don't know if I could have thought of a plan, let alone carry it out."

"You think of nothing but food," said Raani. But this time there was no malice in her voice. Only laughter.

“But we all survived, thanks to Tara,” said Kabir. “And Suraj and Sadia are safe, too. We did it!” He held out his fist just as he had the very first time. Smiling, Tara, Raani, and Vayu held out theirs, too. The fist was one again, except for Ananth. Why wasn’t he back yet?

“The feast is ready!” a woman called out.

A last drum roll hung in the air for a few moments before evaporating in the thick heat of the evening. It was early summer and even the cloudless night was dressed in its best cloak, studded with stars. A full moon bathed the village with silvery light, making the evening appear magical.

Tara sniffed, her stomach growling. The fragrance of biryani filled the air, mingling with the delicate scent of chicken curry; her favourite. She had seen some of the village women prepare another favourite of hers: raita, the cool yoghurt sauce that she loved to drizzle over the biryani to cut the spicy taste. She couldn’t wait to eat. And then sleep. It had been an exciting, but exhausting day.

“Everyone, gather around,” said Raka. He clapped his hands and managed to get the attention of the villagers sitting in groups smoking, talking, and laughing. “I want to say a few words before we all start eating.”

Everyone shuffled closer to Raka, who climbed on to the parapet surrounding the stump of the banyan tree. The sight of that burned stub jabbed at Tara’s heart. Was it only last year that her grandfather, Prabala, had been tied to it while the villagers, changed into Vetalas by Zarku, had danced around the blazing tree, thirsting for his blood? She tried to block out the images of the transformed villagers with their translucent green bodies, pulsing black hearts, and turned feet. But Tara had defeated Zarku by turning his fiery gaze upon himself. They had all survived.

But not their poor banyan tree. It had taken hundreds of years to grow — and had been destroyed within an hour, thanks to Zarku. Tara missed its cool shade on a scorching summer afternoon, the swaying roots that hung from its branches, but most of all she missed the squirrels and birds that had made it their home and darted down fearlessly for tidbits offered by the villagers.

She missed Prabala, too. Shortly after she had returned with Suraj and Sadia, her grandfather had left for the hills to meditate. When Tara had asked why, he'd said that Morni needed stronger protection from the evils that had befallen it. The only way to achieve it was by more rigorous meditation on his part.

"But then who will look after us and heal us while you're away?" Tara had asked.

"The vaid, Vishnu, is my disciple and well qualified," her grandfather had replied.

"When will you be back?"

"When the time is right and no sooner." And then he was gone. No one knew when he would return.

When everyone had gathered, Raka began. "People of Morni, we are here today for two reasons. To rejoice because our very own Tara was able to rescue two of our children and stop ... Zarku ... from coming back." He hesitated, his face grim. Tara was sure he was thinking of the Vetalas. "But we are also here to remember Rohan, who is with us no more."

As he was speaking, Tara's parents, Parvati and Shiv, joined her. Tara glanced at her mother and smiled. Suraj scampered up and slipped his hand into Tara's. She had to blink back sudden tears as she realized, yet again, just how close she had come to losing her brother forever.

Raka finished speaking and loud applause broke out. He gestured to Tara, calling her over. Suraj poked her in the back when she did not move.

"Go on, Didi. You can't keep Rakaji waiting."

Tara looked over at Shiv and Parvati. Their faces were as huge and glowing as the full moon that hung low in the sky.

Parvati straightened the gold and green dupatta Tara wore, which matched her new shalwar-kameez specially stitched for the occasion. "You look beautiful, my star. Now go!"

Tara walked over to Raka and stood beside him, her cheeks burning. The applause was deafening. Raka held up a hand and the noise died down.

“Today we owe a huge debt to this brave girl who not only brought back her brother and Sadia, but rid us of Zarku. Because of Tara, every village for miles around respects Morni.”

A sea of faces stared at Tara; some smiles were genuine, but some looked more like grimaces. She scanned the crowd and finally located the one face she had been searching for. Ananth stood at the back of the crowd. She smiled at him. An answering smile crept to his face.

He was so serious these days. She remembered the time when they were trying to escape Zarku and she had deliberately stayed on shore, allowing the others to escape. Ananth had looked so upset then and had been ready to jump into the water to rescue her but she had stopped him. He was such a wonderful brother to have, if only he’d remember to laugh once in a while.

“Who invited *her* to the feast?” a woman screeched. The anger in her voice was unmistakable. “Go away, you’re ruining the celebrations!”

All heads turned toward the speaker at the back of the crowd. Tara saw a flash of white disappear into the shadows near the huts. It had to be Gayatri, Ananth’s mother and a widow. None of the other widows dared show their faces at a public gathering but Gayatri-ma had always been different. Tara had forgotten how unwelcome widows were at any public gathering, joyous or otherwise.

“Gayatri,” said Raka. “Come here.”

There was no movement from the back of the crowd.

“Gayatri, don’t keep me waiting.”

Slowly Gayatri emerged from the shadows and walked toward Raka. The villagers hastily parted to let her pass. It was evident no one wanted to touch the widow or let her shadow fall upon them. They all believed it brought years of bad luck. Tara did not believe in such nonsense and therefore did not move an inch as Gayatri approached.

Gayatri stood in front of Raka with her head bowed, her saree covering her face, as was the custom. The villagers also considered it inauspicious to look upon the face of a widow, but Tara had no qualms. Gayatri-ma was like her second mother.

“Don’t you know better than to come here today?” Rakaji’s voice was calm, but tinged with annoyance. “Just because we allow you to live in the village does not mean that you break tradition and join in with the festivities. Remember your place and your duties as a widow. These rules were made for *your* well-being, as well as for the good of the villagers.”

Tara’s heart ached as she saw Ananth’s mother shuffle uneasily in front of the gaping crowd, uttering not a word in protest. It was not Gayatri-ma’s fault that she had lost her husband. Zarku was to blame! And just when she needed the support and companionship of the villagers the most, she was treated like an untouchable and denied the simple pleasures of life. It was so unfair!

“I really don’t mind her being here, today, Rakaji,” said Tara. “Gayatri-ma is like my own —”

“That’s enough, Tara,” interrupted Raka. His voice was as cold as the well water she had sipped moments ago. “No one asked your opinion about this. Do not interfere in custom and tradition that has been around long before you or I were born.”

Tara hung her head and stared at the muddy ground that had been churned up by a million footprints.

“Sorry, Rakaji,” said Gayatri softly. “Tara is like a daughter to me. I couldn’t resist coming here to see her being honoured in front of the villagers. It will not happen again.”

“If everyone starts forgetting their place, what hope is there for the rest of us?” said the crotchety old lady who had first noticed her. “Spoiled the entire evening by showing her cursed face. You mark my words; something bad is going to befall us all. Something terrible ...”

“Shut up!” a voice yelled out.

Ananth stepped out of the crowd and stood by his mother, a ferocious scowl on his face. He had grown, and towered a good inch above Gayatri.

“You leave my mother alone,” he said looking around at everyone. “She said she was sorry. She only wanted to see Tara. If you don’t want her here, then we’ll both go.” He

glared at them all and then his eyes rested on Tara. He looked at her steadily, reproachfully, almost as if she were to blame for his mother's humiliation.

Tara tugged at Raka's hand. "Please, Rakaji. Just this once, let her stay."

Raka shook off Tara's hand with a disgusted expression and stepped away from her. "Rules are made for our good and *no one* can break them."

Not a soul piped in, but the unrest and animosity in the air was palpable. Tara looked at all of them, especially the women, decked in their fine clothes and jewels, proudly displaying the red sindoor, a sign that they were still married, in the parting of their hair. None of these women spoke up for Gayatri. Neither did her mother.

For the first time, it dawned on Tara that it was only that little bit of red powder that kept them on the respectable side of the fence. If they had the misfortune of losing their husbands, they would cross over to the "widow's side" and life as they knew it would end. The least they could do was love and support one of their own.

"Throw her out of the village," said a voice that made Tara's pulse race. "Just like you threw my mother out."

Layla pushed through the crowds and stood in front of Raka.

Tara's guts twisted into a painful knot. "Don't you dare compare Gayatri-ma to your evil mother, Layla," she said. "Your mother *deliberately* hurt others and *enjoyed* it. *She should never have been born.* I'm happy she's gone forever!"

Layla stared at her and Tara took a step back, shocked at the venom in the eyes of a child barely nine years old. Layla was the same age as Suraj and yet she looked years older. And capable of causing a lot of harm.

"That's enough, you two," said Gayatri in a surprisingly firm voice. "This is all because of me. I'm sorry to have spoiled your evening, Tara. I'll go."

"I'll go with you," said Ananth. He threw a last look at Tara and turned away. Tara's heart ached. Why was he angry with *her*? She'd tried to talk to Rakaji, but it hadn't worked. Did he not see that? She wanted to say something more, but the words had dried up under Ananth's angry gaze.

Once again, the crowd parted. Tara watched Ananth's stiff back and made up her mind to talk to him as soon as she could. She hated these silly traditions, too! Within seconds, Gayatri and Ananth melted away into the shadows beyond the circle of revellers.

Raka spoke again. "The food's getting cold. Let's eat and rejoice."

Instantly, Gayatri was forgotten as chatter and laughter swept through the crowds again. They all made their way toward the large, steaming pots of food prepared by the women of Morni. Banana leaves had been laid out on the ground in rows and the men and children sat cross-legged before each leaf-plate, waiting to be served.

Tara had been hungry earlier, but witnessing Gayatri- ma's humiliation had caused her to lose her appetite. Vayu, Kabir, and Raani were already sitting, awaiting their meal. Vayu's eyes were fixed on a woman coming down the line with a basket of pooris

"Aren't you joining us, Tara?" asked Raani. She patted a spot beside her. "We have to eat and then head back home. We'll have to start out as soon as possible."

Tara shook her head. "You all eat, I'll be back soon with Ananth."

Tara hurried down the line toward the woman with the pooris.

"Want one, Tara?" said the woman. "They're hot and fresh."

Up close, the fragrance of the fried bread tickled her nose and her stomach growled again.

"Yes, please," said Tara.

The woman picked out the biggest golden orb and handed it to her. Tara thanked her and hurried on, munching on the poori while searching for Ananth.

Something warm brushed against Tara's leg. A stray dog was looking up at her, his enormous eyes riveted to the food in her hand. He whined and wagged his stump of a tail.

"I'm hungry, too," said Tara taking another large bite of the fried bread. "You'll just have to wait till the feast is over. I'm sure there'll be lots of leftovers. You'll eat like a king tonight."

"Oi, Tara," a women called out. "Don't feed that stray. They're getting to be too much of a nuisance."

Tara looked down at the dog again. His tail fanned the air vigorously and his eyes pleaded silently. She backed away. He limped toward her, uttering small pitiful squeaks. Large patches of brown fur were missing and the outline of his ribs was clearly visible, like a serrated bowl covered with skin. Tara couldn't resist him anymore. She broke the poori in half and held it out. The dog lunged forward and snatched the food from her hand, his teeth grazing her knuckles.

"Owww," she said, glaring at the stray and rubbing her hand. "You sure have that pitiful performance down pat until you get the food!"

In reply, the dog jumped again, surprisingly high, and snatched the other half from Tara's hand and swallowed it.

"You mangy thief!" Tara swiped at the dog, but it backed away.

She heard laughter from a few onlookers who had witnessed the scene.

"Told you not to feed him," the woman said before moving away. "Rakaji is going to have all the strays rounded up and put to sleep. They're hungry and getting very aggressive. He's afraid they might bite a child."

Tara looked at the dog, who now sat licking his injured paw, the food long gone. She was mad at him. But it was not his fault that he did not have a loving home. Putting the strays to sleep would be a mean thing to do. Killing anything, for that matter, would be wrong. How could you take something that you were unable to return? *Especially a life.*

But you've taken two lives, said a small voice within her. *You killed Zarku and Kali.*

That was different, she told herself. They were inhuman monsters. The last few moments in the cave flashed through her mind once again; Kali's screams as she had hurtled to her death. She clapped her hands over her ears. Would she ever be able to forget? Would time ever dim this ghastly image? Everyone thought she was a hero; they envied her, but they had no idea about the terrible nightmares she had. The memories she had to struggle hard to forget, lest they overwhelm her.

"You're happy that my mother is dead," a voice whispered in her ear. "Isn't that what you said?"

Tara's skin crawled. She did not even have to turn around; she knew who it was. A voice that oozed such hatred could only belong to one person. She stood still for a moment, wishing Layla would go away.

Layla grabbed Tara's shoulder and spun her around. Her black eyes glittered as she held Tara's gaze. "Watch your back, *dear sister*. I'll make sure you suffer horribly for what you did to my mother. That's a promise."