

TARA TRILOGY BOOK ONE

the third eye



THE THIRD EYE

By

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Prologue

Someone was following him. He was sure of it. Bare feet following in time to his steps and stopping just after he did.

Late enough to be heard, soon enough not to give away their direction.

Shakti hesitated. He looked around. The deepening gloom in the forest cast eerie shadows across the path. A biting wind swept down from the Shivalik Range and woke every tree and shrub in its path. Shakti shivered, more from fear than cold. He cursed himself for losing track of the time and wandering so far away from the safety of his village, Morni.

Holding up the lantern, he peered intently for any sign of his pursuers. Darkness surged against the edges of the feeble light. He lowered the lantern and hurried toward the village.

His sturdy leather mojris ground up the dead leaves. Bare feet followed.

He quickened his pace. The pursuers matched it.

His heart thumped like a tom-tom within his chest. He dropped the dead hares slung over his shoulder and bolted, his lantern knocking against his knee. The flame flickered and went out. He was plunged into darkness. The sickly sweet smell of rotting flesh wafted past him. Panicked, he went crashing through the trees, not caring about the noise he made. He had to get to the village before they caught him. The footsteps were louder now, coming closer and closer. His breath came in gasps as he ran. He tripped and fell headlong into the bushes. Dirt filled his mouth. It tasted like wet earth mixed with worms. He spat it out. Sharp rocks scraped his chest in spite of his thick kurta. He put his hands on the ground to push himself up when a heavy body landed on his back. One, two, three ... he lost count of how many bodies piled on top of him, holding him down. It felt like huge boulders had landed on his back and knocked the air out of his lungs. He smelled their breaths — which reeked like a combination of rotten eggs and feces — and almost vomited.

“Please,” he gibbered. “Please don’t hurt me.”

A warning thump on the head silenced him. The weight on his back began to lighten till the only thing pinning him on the ground was the rough skin of a foot planted in the small of his back. He tried to twist his head back to see who it was, but the complete darkness made identification impossible. He waited, sweat dripping into his eyes, bile nestled at the base of his throat just waiting to erupt.

Suddenly, the gloom dissipated. Someone was coming toward him bearing a lit torch. He looked up at his captors and his stomach contracted with fear. A sea of ghastly green faces looked down at him. A huge, green monstrosity towered over Shakti. The monster’s skin was stretched tight over his gaunt, skull-like face and framed by dirt-encrusted hair. Eyes, black as bottomless pools, bored into Shakti. Then he noticed the man’s chest. The skin was translucent and he could see all the way to the man’s heart — a pulsing fist pumping black liquid through that massive body. It was fascinating, yet horrifying, to watch the green body criss- crossed with a network of black.

Shakti’s eyes strayed upward again to the man’s face. A deep gash ran the length of his forehead. It was still fresh, and black liquid seeped from the edges of the swollen skin. The man, clearly the leader of the group, stared at him with his whiteless eyes. Shakti looked around at the sea of bodies, which looked the same except that the shape and size of that horrifying form varied. They all had similar gashes on their foreheads, though some of the wounds seemed to have healed while others looked very fresh.

They pressed closer to Shakti, touching, pinching, and prodding him with grimy fingers. He stood up on shaky legs, desperately looking for an opening in the crowd. The sickly smell enveloped him and seemed to permeate his body through every pore.

“What do you want?” he croaked.

Silence.

The giant who blocked his path raised a callused green hand with filthy, black fingernails up to Shakti’s eye level. Shakti jumped backward, lost his balance, and fell to the ground. He turned to crawl away, sobbing with terror, but was barred by a fence of feet — feet that looked unnatural because they were all *turned backwards at the ankle!* A

scream rose in his throat. He jumped up, arms outstretched, pushing his way through the crowd. Someone grabbed him by the hair and jerked his head back. He felt a razor-sharp fingernail move across his forehead, tearing through the tender skin. A searing pain coursed from his head through his body like liquid fire. The pain was so intense that he was starting to lose consciousness. Through the haze he saw a tall figure approaching. Maniacal laughter echoed around him and then everything went dark.

Chapter 1

A bright burst of stars lit the night sky, illuminating the upturned faces of the children gathered around the old banyan tree. The stars dissolved into smoke and it was dark again. Laughter rang out from the clearing where a dozen children of the village of Morni had gathered for the festival of lights. The smoke and smell of gunpowder hung in the air.

A short distance away from the clearing, two silent forms sat huddled on the front step of their hut. Tara hugged her younger brother, Suraj, as they watched the firework display. Around them, Morni shimmered in the glow of clay lamps that adorned homes and doorways as far as Tara could see. The soft, yellow light reflected off the reds, greens, and blues of the villagers' clothes and their gold and silver jewellery. They were all dressed in their best to celebrate the joyous occasion of Diwali, the New Year of the Hindus.

She heard a deep sigh.

"Cheer up, Suraj," said Tara. "Mother will be back next year." She had doubts that this was true, but for the sake of her brother she had to keep up a brave front. She looked up at the black sky, now strewn with stars, and for the umpteenth time she whispered a plea.

"I'm so scared, Lord Ganesh, so scared. But please don't let anyone find out ... especially Suraj. And send Mother back to us."

A solitary tear rolled down her cheek and she wiped it away as she glanced at her brother. He was so thin and small; he did not look seven years old, more like five. His skin was a deep brown from working in the hot sun. Unruly black hair surrounded a pinched face and black eyes that had once sparkled with mischief, now long gone. His white kurta pyjama hung on his bony frame.

They sat in silence looking up at the stars. Suraj rested his head in Tara's lap.

"Why won't anyone play with us anymore, Didi?" asked Suraj with a wobble in his voice. "Didi" was the respectful way to address an older sister.

"I don't know, Suraj," said Tara, staring into the distance.

“Where is Mother, Didi? Why did she go away? Why?” asked Suraj, his voice barely above a whisper.

Tara tightened her grip on his shoulders. She had no answers to his anguished questions. Her mind turned back to a morning almost a year ago, a few days after Diwali, when her mother had woken her while it was still very dark outside. Rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, she had noticed that her mother was dressed to go out. She had looked very upset and sad as she hugged Tara close to her.

“I have to go away, my child.”

Tara’s heart beat at triple speed. She pushed her mother’s arms away and stared at her in complete shock.

“Go away? Where? I’m coming with you.”

“No, Tara. You have to look after your brother. But I will be back. I promise we will all be together again.”

Tara clung to her mother’s skirt, sobbing softly, feeling as if she were in a bad dream. Her mother undid a gold chain from her neck and fastened it around Tara’s neck. On it hung a small, bejewelled mirror shaped like an equilateral triangle. The border was inlaid with red stones in hues of the setting sun. These were interspersed with blue star-shaped stones, the shade of a summer sky. Leaves in thin, gold filigree wound their way around the border. Of the little jewellery her mother owned, this was Tara’s favourite.

“Wear this always, Tara, and when you look into it, you will find strength.”

“Mother, don’t leave me, please,” said Tara, sobbing even harder.

Her father, Shiv, and Suraj were still fast asleep. “Hush, my child. We will be together again, I promise.”

“Parvati, it’s time. We have to go,” someone called out very softly from the window.

Parvati looked up and nodded. She took Tara’s face in her hands and looked deep into her eyes.

“I have to go, Tara. Be brave, be strong, and remember: always do the right thing.”

She kissed Tara's forehead and Tara was suddenly overcome with sleep. As she fought to keep her eyes open, she glimpsed her mother dousing the lantern and then she was gone.

* * *

Tara blinked. A purple cone was spewing silver and gold stars into the night sky.

"Didi, do you think our friends will mind if I join them?"

Tara was silent for a moment, then said, "But you have no crackers to share with them."

"So what?" asked Suraj in a belligerent tone.

Tara took a deep breath. "Next year. Let's just enjoy watching them, okay?"

"Okay," said Suraj as he snuggled closer. Tara heard snatches of conversation:

"Mala, taste the kheer I made ..."

"Oh, what a beautiful yellow outfit. Who stitched it for you?"

"Children, we're starting prayers for the goddess Lakshmi. Bring your father and come inside immediately."

Tara and Suraj sat quietly, listening to the happy voices around them, when the loud beating of a drum overpowered the sound of the crackers that reverberated from every corner of the village. A swarthy man in an orange robe appeared near the banyan tree, a large drum hanging from a rope circling his neck.

"Hear, hear ... Come one, come all," he called out in a sing-song voice. "I have exciting news."

His sudden appearance caught everyone's attention. They gathered in the clearing, looking expectantly at the drummer. Tara and Suraj stood up to get a better look. The dark-skinned man looked at the silent faces and once again sang.

On this auspicious day of Diwali, I present to you the greatest healer of all. He has decided to grace this village with his presence. The one and only ZAAAAAAARRRRKKKUUUUUU."

He yelled the last word slowly as a man in a black, flowing robe stepped out from the shadows of the banyan tree and into the light. The crowd gasped as one and fell silent. He was tall with broad shoulders. There was not a single hair on his head and the lamplight flickering off his bald pate gave it a golden sheen. He had a long, thin nose and a prominent jaw. But it was his eyes that instantly drew everyone's attention. They were black, tar black. There seemed to be no whites at all and this made him look oddly menacing in spite of the benevolent smile on his face.

It seemed to Tara as if she were looking into a deep, bottomless well. She shivered involuntarily and noticed that a lot of people were shifting uneasily, whispering to each other and pointing at the newcomer's pulsing forehead. In the dim light and from a distance, Tara could not make out what it was, but it looked like ... Could it be? ... Was it possible? ... A *third eye*?

A brash young villager stepped forward and voiced the question that, Tara had no doubt, was in every villager's mind.

"What is that on your forehead?" he asked rudely. Zarku's eyes narrowed.

"You mean this?" said Zarku, touching the bulge on his forehead lightly.

The man nodded.

"This is the Eye of Truth. It looks beyond the body into the heart and mind. I can sense strength and weakness in people, I can see illness before it blossoms, I can see a crime before it is committed. And I can see what is in your mind at the moment," he said, snickering.

The young man looked bewildered.

"Want me to tell a certain young woman to meet you near the Ganesh temple at midnight?"

The boy blanched and shook his head frantically as his eyes darted to a pretty young girl in a yellow kurta pyjama who had pulled a dupatta over her face.

The young man shuffled backward and melted into the crowd.

"People of Morni," said Zarku in a cold, penetrating voice, lifting his hairless, white arms to the heavens, "I have come in answer to your prayers. I know that you have lost your

own healer recently. I come on Diwali, the first day of our New Year, to heal pain and alleviate any suffering. There will never be sickness in the village. Health and prosperity shall be the future of Morni and every village for miles around.”

Murmurs peppered the air.

“Who are you?” asked the village chief, Raka, stepping forward. Raka was a wiry man with a wrinkled face and gnarled hands. His innocuous look belied the wisdom that lay behind the shrewd, brown eyes. He ruled the village of Morni with a firm and just hand, with the help of four elders that formed the Panchayat.

“I am Zarku, the best healer in all of India. I am compelled to go where I am most needed.”

“We did not ask you to come, thank you very much,” snapped a village elder.

“Patience, my good men,” said Dushta, the village moneylender. “We do need a healer. Zarku, show us your powers. Why should we believe you are the greatest healer?”

A slow smile spread over Zarku’s face. The bulge on his forehead twitched and flickered. A deep furrow appeared just above his eyes. His smile chilled Tara till goose bumps rose on her arms. She moved closer to Suraj as he clutched her arm.

“He does not look very nice, Didi,” whispered Suraj. “There is something about him that is ...”

“Evil,” said Tara, looking at Suraj’s scared expression.

She put an arm around his shoulders.

Zarku beckoned to a villager, Lalu, standing nearby. Lalu looked aghast at being singled out. He stood there for a moment, eyes darting. When Raka nodded, he shuffled forward. Zarku closed his eyes and the one on his forehead popped open. The crowd gasped. Silver light bathed Lalu from head to toe. Lalu stood quietly without moving a muscle.

“You suffer from chest infections and an extra-hairy back, which your wife hates. And there is a cure if you want to see me later.”

People tittered in the background.

“Yes,” said Lalu, glaring at the crowd, “you’re right, Zarku, there is no need to go on.”

“Is there anyone here who does not believe in my powers? This is but child’s play. Death and illness dare not linger where I am,” he said, his voice thundering over the crowd.

“Impressive, Zarku. But the hour is late. The Panchayat will meet in the morning to decide if Morni needs you,” said Raka. “Tonight is Diwali, and we are all about to start the Lakshmi pooja — prayers for the Goddess of Wealth. I welcome you to spend the night in the guest hut. Dinner will be served to you shortly.”

He joined his hands in a namaste and turned to go, a puzzled expression still lingering on his face.

“No need for the guest hut,” said Dushta. “Zarku can stay with me.”

Raka nodded, and Dushta led Zarku to his hut while the crowd dispersed. Tara and Suraj sat down. The excitement over, they waited for their father, Shiv, and stepmother, Kali, to return home from visiting the neighbours and prepare dinner. Delicious smells wafted out from the neighbouring huts, making their stomachs growl with hunger.

“Didi, I’m so hungry, is there anything to eat?” asked Suraj.

She looked at his starved face, stood up, and walked into the hut to rummage through the kitchen. She knew exactly where to look and hoped the cache was still there. Fear and hunger jostled inside her. Kali always kept some sweets in a glass jar on the topmost shelf in case her darling, overfed daughter, Layla, wanted a snack before a huge meal.

Tara climbed onto the bottom shelf of the kitchen, stepped to the one above, and reached out for the jar on the top shelf. She inched it forward with her fingertips, her hands slippery with sweat. She knew they were already in trouble. But today was Diwali and tradition was to celebrate the start of the New Year with something sweet.

As soon as her slippery fingers grasped the jar, she jumped down and opened it eagerly to examine the contents. Two small laddoos, sweets made of lentils and sugar, lay at the bottom. *Put it back, put it back*, said the small voice inside her. But the hunger was too strong. She ran out to Suraj, ignoring the voice.

“Here you are, Suraj, Happy Diwali!” she said as she handed him one laddoo and took the other. They ate the laddoos and watched the fireworks, which had started up

again. The laddoo tasted bitter to her and Tara regretted having stolen them. Suraj had already finished his so she handed him the rest of hers.

“Are you sure, Didi?” he asked.

“I’m sure,” she said.

She put the empty jar beside her and gazed into the distance.

Suraj snuggled up to Tara and she put her arm around him. She thought of this time last year, when they had also been part of the festivities. If she had only known of the sorrow awaiting them in the New Year, she would have cherished every minute spent with her mother instead of taking her presence for granted.

Tara was jerked out of her reverie by two unpleasant incidents: an exploding firecracker, and a particularly hard slap on her face.

“Wha...?” said Tara as she shot to her feet, holding her hand to her stinging cheek.

Suraj had fallen asleep with his head in Tara’s lap. He jumped up, too, his eyes wide with terror. Their stepmother, Kali, towered over them. Anger and hate twisted her face into an ugly mask. The little black eyes in her fat face looked like small raisins in an unusually large, uncooked, ball of dough.

“How *dare* you touch any food in the house without my permission?” she yelled, eyeing the empty jar beside them. “I told you I would be back to give you a meal, didn’t I?”

Tara’s heart sank. *I told you not to steal the laddoos*, said the small voice inside her.

“I’m sorry, Mother,” she said in a soft, pleading tone, hating herself for not standing up to Kali.

She looked up in mute appeal at her father, standing silently behind Kali, who was still berating them. Red spittle from the paan Kali was chewing flecked Tara’s face. Her father brushed past her and entered the hut without saying a word.

“Go to bed, both of you. NOW!” said Kali. “You have been very bad children, stealing your poor sister’s sweets.” As if on cue their stepsister, Layla, peeked out from behind her mother’s ample body, stuck out her tongue at them, and ran inside.

“But I’m so hungry,” said Suraj, tears filling his eyes.

“You should have thought of that before stealing in your own home,” snapped Kali.

Tara knew she was responsible for this. If she had amused Suraj somehow till Kali came back ...

She cringed inside as the tears cascaded down Suraj's cheeks. Gently, she steered him into the hut and made for a corner of their two-room mud hut to make their bed for the night. She unrolled a thin, straw mat on the floor and curled up on it with Suraj. Shaking out a torn, threadbare sheet, she covered them both and closed her eyes to block out Kali's malevolent stare, which followed their every move. Finally, her stepmother moved away into the kitchen to prepare the evening meal and Tara could breathe peacefully.

The fragrance of freshly boiled basmati rice and chicken curry wafted to where they lay. Tara's stomach grumbled in protest. She heard an answering grumble from her brother's stomach. They both loved chicken curry.

"I hate you, Kali," she whispered under her breath, feeling weak, hungry, and very tired.

Her fingers sought the gold chain around her neck. She slid her hand along the chain and pulled out the mirror her mother had given her. She always kept it hidden from Kali lest that cruel woman take away this last memento of Parvati's, which Tara treasured more than any other possession. She held it up and, by the light of the lantern, looked into the mirror. The red stones seemed to be on fire and the blue stones swirled with shadows.

Soft brown eyes in a thin face with high cheekbones stared back at her. There were deep shadows under her eyes. The full mouth, normally upturned at the corners, seemed to be drooping. Thick brown shoulder-length hair, well oiled and plaited, framed her face. The only sparkle in her face was from a tiny silver nose stud that she wore.

"Where are you, Mother? We miss you so much," she whispered.

Suraj moved closer to Tara.

"Why did Mother go away, Didi? WHY? I *hate* her for leaving us!"

"Shh, Suraj, I am sure she had a reason, though I wish I knew what it was."

Almost a year had gone by and they had not seen their mother or their grandfather, who had both disappeared on the same day. The worst part was that no one wanted to talk about it or answer any questions. It was maddening! There were a hundred questions in her

mind and no answers. *Why had they disappeared? Where were they now? Were they dead? And the most important, would they ever come back?*

Tara held on to the belief that her mother would be back, like a drowning person hanging on to a floating piece of wood. If she let go of that belief, she would drown in the sorrow that seemed to be swirling around her. What would happen to Suraj then?

At long last the sounds of smacking and slurping subsided. Both she and Suraj pretended to be asleep as soon as they heard Kali come into the room to make up her bed. Kali and Layla shared a cot and Shiv had another one. Tara and Suraj slept on the floor because there were no more spare cots. Soon, everyone was in bed and the lantern was doused.

Moonlight filtered in through the window in the front room, making bright patterns on the mud floor. Tara shivered as a frigid gust of wind ruffled through the straw on the roof and swept in through the cracks. A cloud moved across the face of the moon and plunged the room into momentary darkness. Tara moved closer to Suraj, the warmth of his body comforting her. She was thankful for the thick, woollen clothes, which afforded some padding on the cold, hard floor. She could not sleep. In the distance, she heard a stray dog barking. The incessant sounds of lizards, as they ran around the outer wall of the hut seeking flies, kept her company. The cloud passed and moonlight lay in silver puddles on the floor once again.

Suraj whimpered in his sleep and turned restlessly. "Mother," he whispered.

Tara stroked his forehead, shushing him. Her heart ached to see that even in his sleep, Suraj was troubled. She stroked his hair tenderly and Suraj stopped his restless tossing and turning.

At long last, she started to feel drowsy. As her eyelids drooped, she saw a slight movement on the mud-packed floor a few feet from where she lay. Her eyes widened and her sleep vanished in an instant, blood turning to ice as she sat bolt upright. A black cobra, the deadliest snake in India, uncoiled its length and raised its hood, ready to strike. In the bright moonlight, cobra and girl stared at each other in absolute silence, not a movement to betray that either was breathing. Suddenly, the cobra lowered its hood and, with

lightning speed, covered the last few feet between itself and the sleeping form of Suraj. It stopped next to Suraj and once again raised its hood, swaying menacingly from side to side.