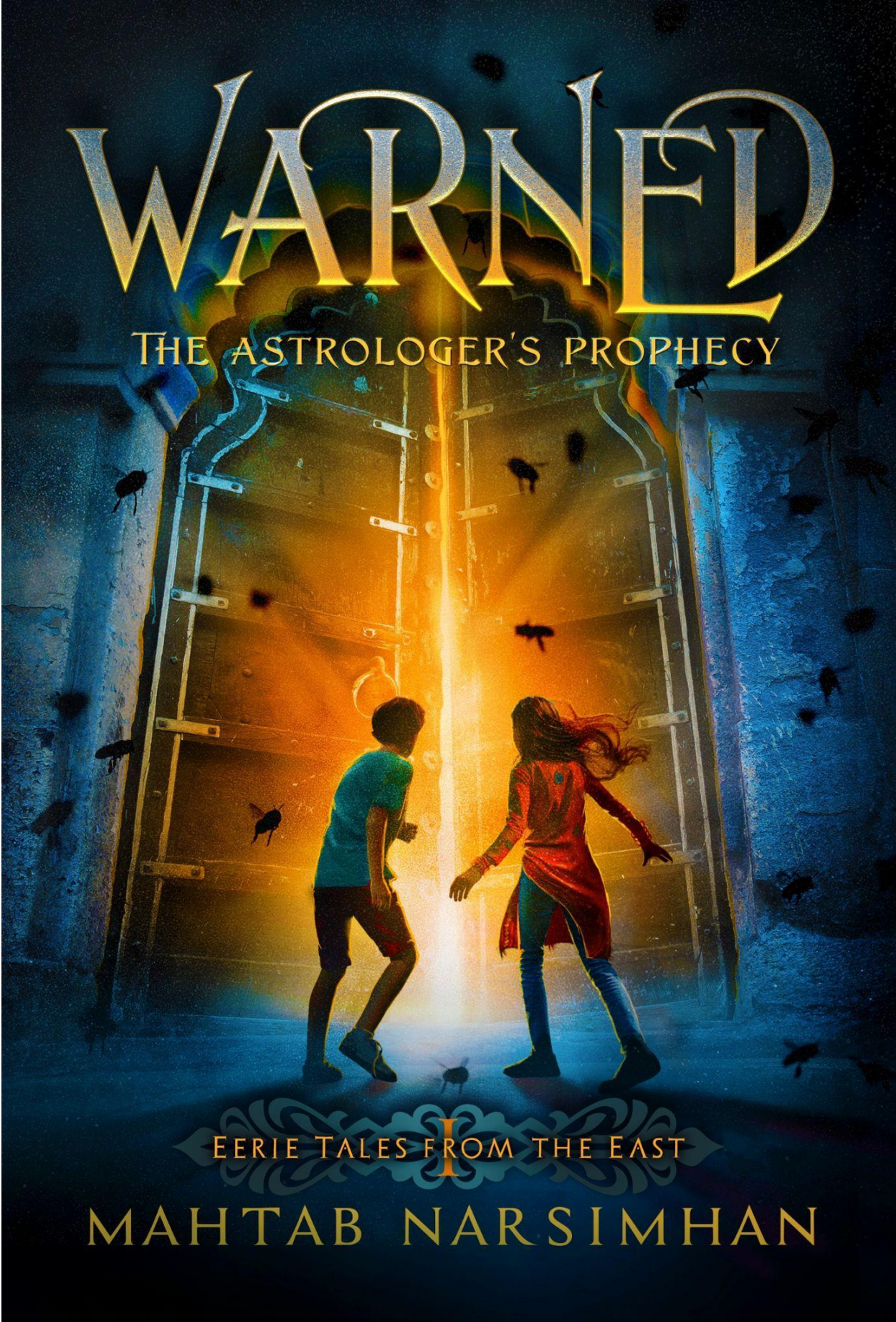


WARNED



THE ASTROLOGER'S PROPHECY

EERIE TALES FROM THE EAST

MAHTAB NARSIMHAN

WARNED: The Astrologer's Prophecy

By

Mahtab Narsimhan

Chapter 1

The line outside the astrologer's tent snaked through the village fair—long and sinuous. I wondered if he was that good. Not that I believed in any of the rubbish superstitions or fortune-telling that seemed to be the case here.

My phone rang half-heartedly. I grabbed it and pressed talk, afraid I would lose the weak signal if I moved.

"Hey, Lee!" I said. "Miss you, man. How's Delhi?" Lee was my best friend and miles away. I should have been there with him, or he should have been here. I tried to ignore the pang in my gut when I thought of two weeks in this remote village without a friend.

"Miss you too," he said. "Delhi seems weird without you. Where are you again?" His voice crackled and broke. The signal was so terrible I was scared I'd lose him.

"Tolagunj," I said. "Small village up north. My grandfather is some bigshot here with the title of zamindar. Something like a head honcho with lots of land." I swatted a large wasp that buzzed by. My fingers touched the EpiPen in my pocket and my heartbeat slowed. As long as I had it with me at all times, I was okay. No wasp could hurt me.

"What are you planning to do there for two weeks?" Lee asked.

"Probably die of boredom," I said, gazing at the villagers milling around food stalls, the cows and goats wandering by, the amateur game stalls. "I brought boo—" I started to say when someone snatched the phone out of my hand.

I whirled around and there he was—a weirdo in a black kaftan and a fancy turban of colored beads that covered his face. He gripped my arm and dragged me into the tent, despite the grumbling villagers in line.

"How dare you?" I squeaked, my eyes darting around the bare tent. "This is child abuse!"

"I'm an astrologer and I see grave danger in your aura," he said. The beads swayed and tinkled as he spoke. "Leave now or you'll die a horrible death!" Stinking of sweat and

sandalwood, he leaned close. “This year the wasps are the worst I’ve ever seen. Enough of them sting you and you’re dead,” he hissed.

I stared at him, aghast. “Who told you I’m allergic to wasps? They do nothing to me.” Yet he’d spoken the truth. Probably a lucky guess.

“The nearest hospital is fifty kilometers from here,” he said in a whisper. “Want to take your chances?” The heat in the tent was stifling.

“Give me my phone,” I said, jerking my head toward his hand.

“Will you leave if I do?” asked the astrologer.

“Who are you to tell me what I should do?” I said. “And no. I won’t.” I shuffled backward out of the tent and bumped into a villager, who grumbled loudly.

The astrologer followed, his black eyes boring into mine from behind the curtain of beads. Barefoot, he stood there and surveyed the line of waiting customers. Sweat pooled at the base of his neck, which he wiped away with a grimy hand and then muttered under his breath, making the complaining villager blanch.

This guy was a weirdo and a bully. He’d probably seen me swat at that wasp when I was talking to Lee and predicted that I feared them to get me to pay him. I’d read somewhere that most fortune-tellers had excellent powers of observation. There was no way I was parting with any money for this fraud, even though he’d made a lucky guess.

“I say this for your own good,” said the astrologer. “Why do you want to die young?”

“You’re making this up just to scare me,” I said, stepping out of reach before he grabbed me again. “You saw me swat that wasp earlier. It’s summer so there will be lots of them around. You’re a fraud.”

“Only one way to find out,” he said. “You’re in grave danger here, and I have warned you. Your parents will lose their only child.”

An electric current jolted through me. *How did he know this stuff?*

“Phone!” I said.

The astrologer slapped it into my hand, muttering under his breath. If he thought I’d react the same way as a villager, he was sadly mistaken.

“I don’t believe your predictions,” I said. Though it felt like an army of mice were running up and down my spine, I wouldn’t let him see that he’d rattled me. It would only make him spout more crap or lucky guesses.

His laugh was chilling. The beads in his headdress clattered together softly. “Then stay, and you’ll see that I’m right. Your poor parents.” He dismissed me with a wave of his hand and turned to a waiting villager.

I looked around for Mom and Dad. I had to try once more (and only the billionth time!) to plead with them to let me stay with my friend Lee in Delhi, while they were volunteering as doctors in Rajasthan. This desert state was suffering from serious drought and illnesses among its farmers. They’d already told me Nana was a technophobe and there’d be no Wi-Fi at his place. I was going to be bored out of my mind in Tolagunj. They couldn’t expect me to read books for two entire weeks. Unless I died before that. I tried not to think about it as I hurried through the fair, looking for Mom.

I found her talking to a man wearing a white dhoti-kurta and a snow-white turban, with a face like a prune. When I walked over to her, she put an arm around my shoulders. “Avi, this is Mr. Venkat, the head of the panchayat in Tolagunj. The panchayat settles disputes in the village, much like a court in the city,” she added when she saw my puzzled expression.

“Um . . . okay,” I said, not really interested in anything except that she’d let me go back to Delhi.

“I threw up on him as a kid,” Mom continued, laughing. “Mr. Venkat, this is my son, Avijeet.”

TMI.

Mr. Venkat gave a hearty laugh, which sounded totally fake. I managed a weak smile.

“I have to talk to you, Mom,” I said. “It’s urgent.”

She gave me the stink eye. “Excuse me,” she said to Mr. Venkat. “I’ll be right back.”

As soon as we were out of eavesdropping range, she shook her head as if she already knew what I was going to say. She was right. “No, Avi, we’re not leaving. You will stay here

with Nana. It will be a pleasant change of pace for you, and good for him too. He's been very lonely since Nani died."

"So *you* spend time with him," I snapped. "Let me stay with Lee. Please, Mom. This place feels weird—people are lining up outside an astrologer's tent to have their fortunes told!" I refused to tell her about my brief encounter with him.

"The villagers are very superstitious," said Mom. "Don't hold it against them. I know Nana did not want us to come, but I think he needs his family. Besides, we're only staying a week in Rajasthan and the second week we'll all be together. I'll show you my favorite hikes around here. We'll have fun, I promise."

"Mom, any house without Wi-Fi and cell coverage is child abuse," I said. "I can barely get one bar on the phone here."

She laughed. "Sue me. Meet us at the car in twenty."

I wandered through narrow aisles between stalls set up in the village square. It was loud and noisy. Smells of fried food, parched earth, and manure filled the air. So unlike the city, where it would have been the smells of coffee, petrol, and garbage. I missed the white noise of traffic and was already homesick.

Villagers, dressed in bright clothes with the men sporting colorful turbans, called out to me to buy food or play a game. I ignored them all, trying not to feel too sorry for myself. If I really thought about it, I guess I could put this time to good use and finish writing my scary story and read a ton of books.

A plump vendor with a double chin was selling *gulab jamuns*—fried sweets dipped in sugar syrup. A cloud of flies perched on the wire dome covering them, but not a single one had got through the mesh. *Good!*

"I'll have five, please," I said, pulling out a ten-rupee note.

The vendor slipped tongs under the dome, plucked five golden-brown balls and put them into a cone made of dried banana leaves. He handed me the change.

I walked slowly, savoring the rich sweetness in my mouth. A prickle at the back of my neck made me pause. Someone was watching me. I glanced around, but no one seemed to be looking my way. The villagers wandered in and out of stalls, chatting or playing games,

while kids whooped and darted around in the late afternoon sunshine. Cows with tinkling bells chewed the cud. Stray dogs scrounged in piles of garbage beside the stalls.

Was the astrologer stalking me? But he was nowhere around.

A shadow between two stalls moved. A young girl was sweeping up the garbage into a handheld pan with a small broom. She was dark-skinned and wore a heavily patched kurta-pajama with a white dupatta draped over her head. Red bangles on her arms clinked softly as she swept, her eyes riveted to the sweets in my hand.

She looked away when she saw that I'd noticed her. She was so thin her cheekbones stood out like twin peaks on either side of her nose. The mouthful I swallowed almost stuck in my throat.

"Hello!" I called out, walking over with a smile.

She stood up, clutching the broom to her chest. Her eyes were a pale gray.

"What's your name?" I asked.

Her eyes strayed to the sweets in my hand and then she looked away.

"Do *not* talk to an untouchable!" someone behind me bellowed. "Don't you know it's bad luck for you and for the village? We only speak to give an order. Otherwise, keep your distance and ignore her. It is our way."

I whirled round as this ugly word—"untouchable"—bounced in my head. Mr. Venkat stood there, his moustache quivering indignantly. Mom had warned me that the villagers were not only superstitious but also old-fashioned. They still believed in the outdated caste system. Yet, to hear the head of the panchayat speak it so casually and with such conviction made me sick. And furious.