

PROLOGUE

A wistful wind fluttered past the dreary thatched huts. The stench of rotting and death lay heavily like thick fog on a winter night. The mangled cries of the crows were like malady to an ear, for the blood-curdling screams of the mourning villagers pierced the silent night like arrows shot through stillness. A dim fire was crackled in the pit inside the squalid hut, lighting the room as such that the corners were swathed in darkness. A young boy lay on the dirt-packed floor, with cotton placed in his nostrils and his two big toes tied with a piece of red twine. His scrawny, undernourished body lay slack, head lolled to the side. The place where his right eye once stood, was now replaced by a ragged hole. The left eye was staring blindly, right at the ceiling, with a glazed look. His remaining eye was the darkest of browns, striking, even in death.

Clutching his hand was his mother, who engulfed in such sorrow, she mindlessly muttered solaces to him. Her oil-black hair stuck to her forehead as she frantically wiped at her sweat and tear mingled face. She was shuddering immensely, her hands a flicker of brown on his face. Every few seconds, she would let out a mournful, heart-broken sob.

The humble hut was exiguous, yes, but it was neat. But on the inside, it was in tatters, like the poor souls within. The pots and utensils were laying askew on top of each other, the scarce rations spilled in a kaleidoscope of browns and yellows. The cleaning broom was in fragments on top of the small kettle, water spilling onto the dusty bamboo mat.

Away from all of this imperious mayhem and sorrow, another being was mourning, but in a completely different way. He was aching, aching for his son, who lay in his house, dead. He was aching for his son's fate, the atrocious journey he took, and the irreversible result

obtained. He was aching, for there was no tomorrow, not for him nor his wife.

King Ashoka has fallen.

Ch 1

Thunder cracked like a whip, a blinding strip of white blurring across the sky. Rain tumbled in torrents, dousing the stiff huts with cold wetness. Sans the thunderstorm, all was quiet. No stray dog whimpered in the raging rain, not a startled child peeking out, not a single mother racing out to bring back the laundry. All was quiet. But that didn't stop the naïve sky from drenching the valiant city in water, for it didn't know that they left. All of them. Forever, or so it seemed. But it was there. The Great Palace.

A ray of light filtered through the shafts in the hut, a low rumble in his stomach waking him up. He swung his thin legs and pushed himself into a sitting position, using his other hand to scoop up the cloth he uses as a pillow. He got up, folded his mat and balanced it against the wall. He groggily scrubbed his eyes and gazed out the long window sitting low on the wall. His eyes widened immediately as he drank in the bizarrely intimidating sight. A steady thud of footsteps was marching straight and as he was gazing out of the low window, he could only see their pointed, gleaming shoes. His mouth fell open in shock as he recognized the emblem. The Lions. *It could only mean one thing.* This was the only thought running through little S's mind. His eyes darted back and forth between the hooves and feet, the whites and browns swirling together in a spectacular spectre, as determination was evident in the orchestrated march. Little S scrambled to the rickety door creaking on its hinges and flung

it wide open. His eyes were as big as tea saucers as he drank in the sight in front of him.

They were warriors. Thousands and thousands of them, all decked in traditional Noblemen attires. A blood red turban intricately folded on the sun-tanned heads, a long dress-like garment, called the *Kurta*, hung loosely, hunched shoulders poking out the back of the tremendous green cloth and a white *Dhoti* folded and tucked between two legs. Their brown arms were specked with bits of disturbing red, which could only be dried blood, and some warriors were holding stumps of arms. The others were holding silver spears which were gleaming blindingly in the heat of the day and tarnished silver shields. Amid the sea of humans, a carriage made of elephant Ivory strode proudly, dragged forth by elephants. Little S strained his neck to get a glimpse of the person sitting inside the gargantuan carriage but the glaring sunlight made it impossible. It didn't help matters that he only ten years old and thin as a whip.

The procession continued for ten more minutes when it stopped at the announcements' square.

"Little S, are you awake?" Roja called from somewhere inside the hut.

"*Amma!* Look who's come?" Little S tried to scream over the pounding of the drums.

"Little S? Little S!" Panicked, Roja raced to the door and started to look for him in the sea of villagers. In her panicked state, she was quite oblivious to the warriors with the Lion emblems and the man getting off the golden steps of the carriage.

"Ma! Look. It's King Ashoka. He's come Amma. He come to save us." Little S yelled from behind Roja who turned around quickly and grabbed him. 'Look, over there.' Roja pushed bits of Little S's onyx hair out of his eyes and turned to look at the direction he was

pointing at. Roja let out a strangled gasp of surprise and her eyes soon filled with dread as she hurriedly put down her son and started pulling him back into the yellow hut. The man was now standing on the platform. That's when the chatter broke out.

"...it can't be..."

"...Is that..."

"...it is..."

Roja started pulling her son as he refused to budge. She yanked his arm harder but he was still holding his ground. A crazed look crossed her face as she lifted him up onto her hip and advanced inside.

"Ma, who was that? Was that Ashoka?" No response.

"Ma. Who was that?" Still no response. An snarl took over Little S' innocent features as he boomed, "WHO WAS THAT MA?"

Roja visibly flinched at his harsh tone.

"S...Sus...Sushima..."