CITY OF GIANTS

By Laura Ring

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"They gave their daughters to the God of Death
And the children they bore were monsters?"
—Inscription, Proto-Harappan, ca. 3000 BCE.

IT wasn't a proper sandstorm like the ones you hear about in Saudi Arabia, where the sky turns black and the planes can't land. But it was bad enough to make me cover my face with my hands and run for shelter. In North Africa, they call it the *sirocco*, or *haboob*—an evil, striking wind. And even the words we use in Pakistan have that same aura of menace: *aandhi. Ghubar.*

I can see why people view sandstorms as a bad omen. They hide things; they steal your sight, your breath, cut you like glass. But it's hard for me to think of them that way.

It was a sandstorm that drove me over the caution ropes into the ruins of site 229.

And it was there that I met Ekatu.

It started like any other winter holiday—heading north on Super Highway in a rented Pajero, my dad at the wheel, the chaos and kerosene-smell of Karachi diminishing with every mile. When your father is an archaeologist, you don't spend your school vacations traipsing through air-conditioned malls or lying on the beach. You spend them on a dig.

It could be worse, or so my father loves to remind me. It could be wet tents and ancient stepwells in South India (mosquitos), or copper plates in the Sundarbans (tigers), or cave temple carvings in Maharashtra (did I mention bats?)

In case that wasn't clear, I don't like bugs. Or large predators. Or fauna of any kind, really. I like words, like my father. Some archaeologists study pottery; some study

bones, or tiny specks of pollen. My father studies inscriptions—ancient words embedded in stone, metal, or clay.

And that's what made this dig so exciting.

Six months ago, a shepherd tripped over a piece of stone in the Sindh desert, about 250 miles outside of Karachi. It turned out to be a five-thousand-year-old sandstone pillar. And it was covered with ancient text.

We pulled up at the excavation camp, and I was instantly relieved. Most of the other Indus Valley sites are well-established and full of dig teams. This one was bare bones in comparison: a line of heavy canvas tents and a handful of jeeps, packed with supplies. There was more equipment here than people, which suited me just fine.

My father, on the other hand, worries. On the drive up, he said to me, "Amal, I don't think there will be any other girls your age on this trip. I hope you won't be lonely!"

Oh, Dad. I'm pretty sure he knows that I put a lot of effort into avoiding other teenagers, but I pretended to be disappointed and stoic, and he pretended to be reassured.

I am comfortable in the desert. Not much can live here—no pye-dogs that may or may not be rabid, no monkeys to snatch food out of your hands. No small mammals with big eyes to fool you into caring for them.

Everything that's here is a survivor.

That's what archaeology is, really: the study of what survives. Scholars have to piece together whole worlds from the scraps that the elements don't manage to destroy. Masonry. Stone tools. Metalwork. Sometimes I think of it as a kind of survival guide. See these things? These hard little relics? These mummified bodies with the warm and wet scraped out of them? They made it! Be like them.

The area around the pillar had been excavated enough to reveal the ruins of an ancient city—the rows of low brick walls cut the desert into grids. The dig team calls the site "City of Giants" because of the out-size proportions of its architectural features. There's a massive bathing pool, with stairs that would have been nearly impossible to climb, and great halls with doorways twice as high as other Indus Valley sites.

Everyone's excited because something so big is probably ceremonial, which means this could be a temple complex, but who knows? My dad says it will take years just to determine the scope, much less the nature of the settlement—a lifetime, even.

This doesn't surprise me. You can spend a lifetime trying to decipher a single line of text. Just think of all the people who tried to crack the Indus Valley script in the '20s and '30s—they had to die disappointed. There wasn't enough writing to make sense of it—just small fragments on clay seals and stamps. And there wasn't a bilingual inscription to help them translate it.

Until—just maybe—now.

On day two, my father took me into the excavation pit to show me the pillar. "See the symbols on the top?" he said. "They're very similar to what you find at other Indus Valley sites. But they're not identical. We're calling it proto-Harappan."

I took pictures with my digital camera so I could study it later. It's closer to pictographs than cunei-form—more legs and jars and daggers, less wedge-shaped footprints of water birds on the shore.

"But here's the exciting part:' my father said. "See this other script down here? It's Sumerian, obviously written later and with less care. But this one we know, Amal. This one we can read."

By evening, my father had worked out a rough English translation of the Sumerian text. Of course, scholar that he is, he had to qualify everything with a hundred caveats—we don't know for sure that the Sumerian is a translation; it could be graffiti for all we know; we can't test it until we find more inscriptions…But in the end, he agreed to read it to me.

Words like these are hallowed. You can't read them like you're reading the back of a cereal box. You have to give them their moment. My dad and I took our seats at the folding table; we let the silence of the desert filter into the tent as he read.

It was short. Two little lines:

"They gave their daughters to the God of Death And the children they bore were monsters."

I made him repeat it. I made him show it to me in writing. And then I copied the words into my own journal.

My father began talking again, about what it might mean: about ritual and the sacred, social differentiation. I couldn't listen. I was still dazed by the wonder of it all—that a message could survive for so long, without its readers. I was thinking of all the things in the world that remain ungrasped.

Day three was beset by technical difficulties—broken water pump and a failing generator—so my father and a few of his students took a jeep to Larkana to arrange for repairs. "Make sure Hassan Uncle knows where you are at all times," my father said. Hassan Uncle is our site manager. He's been with us on every dig since before I can remember, and he's also my dad's best friend.

I nodded in agreement, and as soon as the jeep was out of sight, I went back into the tent to grab my journal.

Usually on a dig, I like to spend the first few days just wandering around the site so I can let it all sink in. My dad says when you study the past, you need to read the landscape just like you would a book. But there would be time for that later. For now, I just wanted to think, and I preferred to do that alone.

I walked past the dig team at the pillar, hard at work with delicate brushes and specimen cards. I kept walking until I reached the furthest boundary of the main field site. There were a few "areas of interest" further still, roped off with caution tape, but as yet unexcavated. I settled myself under a scraggly tree and started to write.

A lot of what gets archaeologists excited would bore the socks off of other people. Most ancient inscriptions are hardly high drama; they're just bits of facts that help fill in the picture of the past: the names of kings, "So-and-so built such-and-such on such-and-such-a-date," a recording of gifts given, monies paid or received. It's hard to get excited about a thousand-year-old tax receipt, even if it's etched in copper. But inscriptions like this one—full of ancient hopes and thoughts and fears—are truly rare.

I must have sat there for hours, pondering those hallowed words, taking notes. I've no doubt I would have been there even longer, if not for the wind.

There's a quality of silence in the desert that is almost sentient. It's the feeling you get when someone's watching you; you turn and meet their eyes with a flash of recognition. *Yes. There you are.*

That's how it felt. There was this sudden, conspicuous nothingness. And then sand. Everywhere. Fast and biting and unrelenting.

I covered my face with my hands and lurched to my feet. I was struck, briefly, by how ill-prepared I was for this, which is so unlike me. How long do sandstorms last? Was I better off waiting it out or seeking shelter? I shifted my hands a bit to attempt a visual reality check and was rewarded with a mouthful of grit. That clinched it; I needed to breathe, ergo, I needed shelter.

I stumbled, blind, in the general direction of camp—or so I hoped. It's amazing, how stubbornly we persist once we've fixed on a course of action, even when new information tells us it's pointless. The wind was so strong, and my gaze so obscured, that I was probably changing direction with every step.

And yet, when my shins met the light resistance of plastic field ropes, of course I assumed I'd made it to the excavation pit. I called out for help, thinking one of the field techs would surely hear me.

Well, it wasn't the excavation pit. I wasn't anywhere near the campsite. But someone heard me.

Someone, or something.

I thought it was the wind lifting me, like those funnel clouds you hear about in America that pick up entire houses and cars.

I waited to be dropped, or slammed into the ground. Absurdly, I spared a moment to wonder if staying under the tree would have been a better choice.

All of a sudden, everything hushed, and I was released. Gently. Precisely. On my own two feet, like a chess piece being positioned on a board.

I brushed the sand from my face and opened my eyes.

I was in a room, of sorts. A cave, or maybe a cellar. It was dim, but I could make out the contours of a masonry wall in front of me. Perhaps it was an ancient storehouse, impressively intact but largely hidden under the sand. Then it hit me: this must be one of those "areas of interest" roped off by the survey team.

As for how I got there, I considered the possibilities: funnel cloud, djinns, or angels, and then stubbornly put it out of my mind. I could hear the muffled shriek of the wind still raging above me. The storm wasn't over, but against all odds I was safe; I would wait it out here.

That's when I heard the other sound, this one right behind me—a shuffling of feet, but louder, like the dragging of furniture over gritty floor tiles. I turned around slowly, heart pounding.

It took me a minute to realize what I was looking at. A belt, cinched over a tunic. Perfectly ordinary, I know. But you don't expect to see it that far above eye level, not when you're standing up, and so the mind resists.

I lifted my head up, and up again, from belt to buttons to massive shoulders. I tilted my head back and saw a youthful face looking down at me—clean-shaven, wide-open eyes, brow creased with worry. I could almost have convinced myself it was a statue, if he hadn't opened his mouth to speak.

Perhaps it's a testament to my rational nature, and not to mere cowardice, that I fell to the ground in a faint.

When I came to, he was speaking to me in a language I did not know. I didn't move, but I listened, letting the timber of the words wash over me, taking comfort in their strangeness, even accepting, on some level, that they might be the last words I'd ever hear.

At some point he switched to Urdu, which I do know, and then Sindhi (which I've studied in school), and finally English. "*Aap theek hain? Theek ahyo?* Are you alright?"

I had no idea how to react. To my surprise, I wasn't afraid.

"You speak a lot of languages," I said, at last. He let out a large breath of relief, perhaps—and I lifted myself up on my elbows.

"Yes," he said.

"Are you a djinn?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Are you ... a person?"

He gave a sad little smile at that. "I like to think I am—at least, a kind of person. I am Ekatu." He placed a massive hand over his heart in greeting. I did the same.

"I'm Amal," I said.

I'm not particularly good with people. It helps when there are protocols to follow—the hellos, how are yous, how is your family—that make most social conversations rather script-like. But as far as I knew, there was no guidebook for first meetings with giants in five-thousand-year-old storerooms. Luckily, Ekatu spoke, and spared me the awkwardness.

"You are with the diggers?" he said.

"Yes."

"But you are ... not quite grown?"

"Nearly," I said, miffed, then relented; "I'm sixteen; I'm here with my father."

Ekatu thought for a bit.

"I think, perhaps, that we are of an age."

"You're sixteen, too?"

"Not in your years," he said. "By your reckoning, I'm almost as old as these ruins. But by ours, I'm only newly mature. I am almost at the age when I could take a mate, were there others of my kind."

I blushed at that, but Ekatu didn't notice. "Aren't there?" I asked. "Others of your kind?"

Ekatu shrugged. "There were. There could be. But—no. I fear that I am, truly, alone."

I felt an uncomfortable rush of sympathy and was at once struck by the impossibility of it all—this place, this . . . person. I took refuge in what I know best.

"Your name," I said. "It's familiar. It reminds me of a word we have in Urdu. Ekka. It means "Unique."

"Yes." he said. "They are surely related. My name means 'the One' or 'the Only.'"

He smiled then. "And your name means 'Hope.' I'm glad to have met you, Amal."

I glanced away, suddenly self-conscious, when a thought occurred to me, and I had to stifle a snort.

"It is funny?" Ekatu asked.

"I was just thinking of my father," I said. "He'd be so happy to see me talking to someone my own age—although I don't think this is what he had in mind." And as soon as the words had left my mouth, I leapt to my feet. "My father!"

Outside, the storm had long-since ceased. The jeep would be back by now; everyone would be looking for me.

"I have to go," I said.

Ekatu nodded. "You will keep my secret?"

"Yes."

"Close your eyes."

Not a moment later, I was back at the tree, the scraggly tree, my notebook barely visible under a hill of sand. They were calling my name in the distance. I grabbed my journal and ran.

When I made it back to camp, my father was frantic. "What were you thinking, Amal? You can't wander off like that. It's not safe. The dunes, they're like the ocean. They can swallow you whole. *Ya Ali*, if your mother were here—"

We looked at each other, stunned.

He never mentions my mother. Never. Not once, in the six years since she left us.

I waited for my heart to start beating again.

Finally, without a word, my father stepped through the flap of the tent. I followed him inside.

Naturally, we didn't speak of it, and by the next morning, everything was back to normal, with one difference: I was now in possession of one half of a walkie-talkie pair (so my dad could reach me if he started to get worried), and a whistle (in case the walkie-talkie failed, and I needed help). Such are the low-tech options for "checking in" when you're miles away from cell reception.

Of course, I was also in possession of a secret, and I could barely wrap my head around its consequences. There was my father, in the excavation pit, struggling to uncover this figurative "City of Giants" that, it turns out, may have been a city of actual giants. And I couldn't say a word about it.

Sometimes, a problem is just too big. If I couldn't think, I would wander. I took my journal, my walkie-talkie and whistle and headed back out to the far edges of the field site. Maybe Ekatu would find me again.

Spoiler alert: he did.

This time, I was walking up a large dune just past the hidden storehouse when the sands began to spill away, and Ekatu's head rose up like one of those Easter Island statues pushing out of the ground.

"Ekatu!" I said, with a backwards glance at the dig site. "They'll see you!"

He shook the sand off his face and smiled. "They will not see me. But if you prefer…"

And for the second time in as many days, I was whisked off my feet by hands big as arm chairs and released in the underground room.

I waited a moment for my eyes to adjust to the relative dark. "I don't suppose there's a less dramatic way in here, is there?"

"I'm afraid not."

I found it mildly frustrating that Ekatu could take this all in stride; but of course, he'd known about humans his entire life. There was no....acceptance curve like there was for me.

"Do you live here?" I asked.

"No, I hide here. And other places. Many other places."

I laughed. "I find it ironic that your strategy for living in this world is hiding, considering you're twenty feet tall."

"Well, I am good at it. We all are." Ekatu sat down, his back against the wall. With me standing, this brought our heads closer together, though still comically apart.

"Was your father angry?" he asked.

"Yes, a little," I said. "More worried than angry."

"And your mother?"

I shook my head. "I don't have a mother."

"Hmmm. Neither do I. She died when I was quite small." I gave him a curious look, and he raised his eyebrows. "I was small once," he said. "I'd have had to be. I was born to a human woman."

At that moment, the walkie-talkie crackled, and the voice of my father rang out, calling me to lunch.

"You'll find me again?" I said, and Ekatu nodded.

"I will find you."

Over the next few days, I realized some things about Ekatu. One, he was the ultimate Rosetta stone, an archaeologist's dream. He could be my native informant, the best of all possible sources of information about that inscription—not to mention this five-thousand-year-old civilization that we knew so little about.

And two, despite his intelligence and his courtly manner, he was also just a big teenage boy. There was no question of "meeting at the scraggly tree at midday." He insisted on appearing to me in the most unlikely and the most risky of places: he'd wave a log-like finger at the entrance of the mess tent, lie down in trench nine and press his giant face against the tarp. He even stretched out under the mechanical digger and was utterly unbothered when Hassan Uncle maneuvered its tank treads along his ill-concealed frame.

It astounded me that he was never seen.

But while Ekatu was giving me heart attacks, I was pumping him for information. Most of my questions he answered with good humor. ("Are you immortal?" "I don't think so. But we are very long lived." And "Do you eat what humans eat?" "Yes, but in larger quantities, and less often.")

Some questions he treated with a strange reluctance—especially if they had anything to do with the inscription.

I was deeply disappointed when I found out that Ekatu could not read the writing on the pillar, could remember little of his first language.

"I am sorry, Amal," he said. "I was so young when I went into hiding. I have not heard that language spoken in thousands of years."

Still, I was undeterred.

"But you know of the inscription, right? "They gave their daughters to the God of Death, and the children they bore were monsters?""

Ekatu looked away, clearly discomfited. "Yes, it is known."

Well. I may be bad with people, but I'm an expert at awkwardness. I quickly changed the subject. "Do you know how to play Ghost?" And I proceeded to teach a five-thousandish-year-old teenage giant my favorite word game. Of course he proved to be annoyingly good at it.

That's what occupied the next few weeks: word games, Ekatu's pranks, and my

never-ending questions. I woke each morning with a sense of urgency. There was so much I needed to know and so little time. And somewhere along the way, almost without noticing, I had allowed myself to look forward to the company of someone other than my father. It was another secret that I held close.

Meanwhile, new discoveries at the dig site were making my interactions with my father distinctly uncomfortable.

"It's a real puzzle, Amal," he said to me one evening over dinner. "We're finding artifacts that are as disproportionately large as the architectural features—ordinary, mundane things you don't normally associate with ritual practice." And then he showed me a few: a three-foot long lice comb, carved out of bone, with desiccated lice eggs still attached. An enormous copper pickaxe, missing its handle. And a row of glazed beads, clearly fashioned to be strung on a necklace. "I can't imagine anyone wearing these," he said, with a laugh. "They're as big as watermelons! And it would take nautical rope to hold them."

"Maybe they were made for statues of a deity or something," I suggested.

"Perhaps," my father said. "But this is the nature of archaeology, Amal. One uncertainty after another and discoveries that bring more questions than answers." Which of course made me feel very guilty, knowing that a few words of truth from me could make such a difference in his interpretations (or give me a one-way ticket to the nuthouse). And it only increased my own determination, to dig deeper.

Ekatu and I grew still easier with each other; we laughed more, shared more, but I also pushed more. I was desperate to get to the bottom of things. I returned, again and again, to the question of the inscription. What did it mean? Who wrote it, and why? Was it a warning? Was it allegory? Was it myth?

Ekatu's answers were frustratingly vague. "Perhaps." "Who can know, for sure?" and my favorite, "What does it matter, Amal?"

But I kept up my stealth campaign: pressing, retreating, pressing, retreating. Ekatu was slow to anger, but like anyone, he had his limits. Once, after a particularly intense session of "badgering" (Might the daughters have been priestesses, given in tribute to the temple? Or wed to barbarians? Or sold into slavery?), Ekatu accused me of "only wanting answers" whereas he "only wanted a friend: Which, of course, was ridiculous. He just didn't seem to understand what was at stake.

The dig would soon be winding to a close. I felt so close to something—something fundamental. We were in the storehouse, Ekatu hunched low to the ground, me pacing. I could barely contain my frustration.

"Come on, Ekatu!" I said at last. "Aren't you curious? Don't you want to know? This is your life we're talking about, your story. Don't you care?"

I had finally gone too far. Ekatu flew to his feet in one great rush. "Enough!" he shouted. I staggered backwards, off balance. His face was so far above me that I couldn't see his expression. But I could feel his anger.

"Is it not obvious, Amal?"

I looked up at him, heart pounding.

"Must I say it?" he said. "That my mother was one of the daughters, from your precious inscription? Given to the God of Death—"

"Ekatu—"

"—the God of Death, who, I have to believe, is my father? Else," he said, his voice bleak; "why would I and those like me be monsters?"

I was dumbstruck. Sick with shame. How could I have been so blind?

I tried to speak; Ekatu silenced me with a shake of his head.

"Why do you think we went into hiding, Amal? There is not a single place on earth that is safe for 'monsters.' My life, you say? My story? I only know what is said of us. I do not know my own story. And I don't believe I will find it in rock or stone."

I looked at the ground. I had never felt smaller.

"I have asked myself these questions, Amal, asked them all. Why her? Why any of them? Why were they given? Were they the oldest in their families? The youngest? The least fair? Perhaps they were a confederacy of the slightly less loved, that their parents could stand to part with them. Then I thought, maybe they were the strong daughters, and their loved ones knew they could survive it."

Ekatu drew a long breath in and out, his emotion spent. But I was shaking. With shame, anger, panic, I didn't know. I was utterly closed off to myself.

Ekatu clearly noticed, for he fell into a low crouch, bent forward, and looked me right in the eyes.

"Why does it matter so much to you, this inscription?"

I couldn't speak. It was Ekatu's turn to press. "Why, Amal?"

"Because." I said, my voice breaking. "Because . . . it's important to know what things mean."

Ekatu leaned closer still. "All things?" he asked. "Or one thing?"

I spun away, breaking our gaze. I focused with all my might on the storehouse wall. Baked bricks, tidily stacked. Such an ordinary wall to have lasted so long.

When I spoke, it was almost a whisper.

"She left me a note." I said. "In an envelope with my name on it. It was one line. One line! 'I love you. I'm sorry. I don't know how to stay.'"

I looked back at Ekatu, my eyes beginning to fill. He folded me into his hand in a makeshift embrace.

Ekatu and I sat quietly for a long time. When we were ready, we talked of small matters. And then of larger matters. And then we laughed a little and knew though things were different, they were different in a good way.

Winter break was nearly over, and I would be leaving soon. We didn't speak of it—didn't want to mar the pleasure of those final meetings. But our last evening together, I simply had to ask: Will you find me, Ekatu?

"Yes," he said. "I will find you, Amal. That is, when you are off on a dig somewhere. As you can imagine, we tend to avoid cities."

"You know what?" I said. "For someone who claims to be 'the Only', you say 'we' an awful lot." That made both of us smile.

"Ekatu, are you sure there are no others?"

He grew thoughtful for a moment.

"I don't know," he said at last. "I've told you that I remember little of my mother." I nodded. "But I remember her last words. 'I will come back for you, Ekat.' I was too young, then, to understand death. So I waited."

"How long?" I asked.

"Years. Centuries. And then later when I did understand, I thought, well, my father is supposedly the God of Death. Perhaps one day he will release her."

"Oh, Ekatu."

"Over the years, when it became more and more dangerous for us, we went into hiding. Everyone left. But I stayed."

"Waiting," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But I think, perhaps, I might be done now."

Our tent was empty, the rented Pajero packed. I stood at the edge of the field site with my father, taking in the excavation pit, the pillar, my scraggly tree.

The barest sliver of sun was rising, and everything was still—like the silence before the *aandhi*. I'm sure my father couldn't see him, but there was Ekatu, stretched out like a dune, his sand-covered hand propped up in farewell. I lifted my own in return.

I turned to my father. "Dad?" I said. "Yes, Amal?"

"I don't know why she left us." I could hear my father's swift intake of breath. "I may never know. But I'm glad you stayed."

He took hold of my hand and squeezed it.

"Let's go home," he said.