


"ENTHRALLING AND HIGHLY IMAGINATIVE."

SUE LYNN TAN, bestselling author of *Daughter of the Moon Goddess*



THE
SURVIVING
SKY

KRITIKA H. RAO

Contents

Cover

Praise for The Surviving Sky

Title Page

Leave us a Review

Copyright

Dedication

1: Ahilya

2: Ahilya

3: Iravan

4: Ahilya

5: Iravan

6: Iravan

7: Ahilya

8: Iravan

9: Ahilya

10: Ahilya

11: Iravan

12: Ahilya

13: Iravan

14: Ahilya

15: Iravan

16: Ahilya

17: Iravan

18: Ahilya

19: Iravan

20: Iravan

21: Ahilya
22: Iravan
23: Iravan
24: Ahilya
25: Iravan
26: Iravan
27: Iravan
28: Ahilya
29: Ahilya
30: Iravan
31: Ahilya
32: Ahilya
33: Iravan
34: Ahilya
35: Ahilya
36: Iravan
37: Ahilya
38: Ahilya
39: Ahilya
40: Ahilya
41: Ahilya
42: Iravan
43: Ahilya
44: Iravan
45: Ahilya
46: Iravan
47: Iravan
48: Iravan
49: Ahilya
50: Iravan
51: Together
52: Ahilya

[Glossary](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also Available from Titan Books](#)

PRAISE FOR *THE SURVIVING SKY*

“Enthralling and highly imaginative. *The Surviving Sky* is a richly crafted story set in a fascinating world... I loved the protagonists and their relationship, fraught with tension and secrets, ambition and desire.”

SUE LYNN TAN, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *DAUGHTER OF THE MOON*
GODDESS

“*The Surviving Sky* is a fast-paced, fascinating novel wrapped in philosophy and spirituality. Rao’s debut will dazzle many.”

FANTASY HIVE

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“Kritika H. Rao crafts an inventive and cerebral debut, reimagining South Asian culture in a wonderfully different world. A story about love, duty, power, as much as it is about fascinating lore and costly magic.”

R. R. VIRDI, BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE FIRST BINDING*

“Breathtakingly inventive, *The Surviving Sky* is a twisty, cerebral journey. . . This is a book to get lost in.”

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“*The Surviving Sky* is a high-octane science fantasy with heady, cerebral ideas and a lushly imagined world, whose story centers on a 30s-ish married couple—very unusual for fantasy! There is nothing else out there which is quite like it!”

SUNYI DEAN, AUTHOR OF *THE BOOK EATERS*

“A reading experience that is incalculably enjoyable, creatively built, thoroughly immersive, and just like a majority of concepts in Hindu philosophy, thought-provoking and incredibly hard to distill.”

FANTASY BOOK CRITIC

“A unique blend of sci-fi futurism, eco-fantasy mystery, and intriguing spirituality. . . truly unlike anything I’ve ever read. Extremely original and thought-provoking... I utterly loved it and couldn’t put it down.”

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“*The Surviving Sky* is a prodigious gift best slowly unwrapped. Nakshar is an enigma of a city, as rooted and protective as its people; its stakes feel cosmic yet intimate... Rao has offered us a world like no other.”

SUYI DAVIES OKUNGBOWA, AUTHOR OF *SON OF THE STORM*

“This wildly imaginative book explores a fracturing world through the deeply painful lens of a fracturing human heart. At times brutal, often beautiful, *The Surviving Sky* offers a thrilling glimpse into a flawed society scrambling to survive... Don’t miss it!”

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“Sentient forests. Flying cities. Lost histories. Power, rivalry, love, and exile. *The Surviving Sky* is a cornucopia of wonders... Combining the best of Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* and NK Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth*, *The Surviving Sky* is an immersive and original epic fantasy.”

GAUTAM BHATIA, AUTHOR OF *THE WALL* AND *THE HORIZON*

“*The Surviving Sky* is utterly creative, a heady and mysterious tapestry of love, duty, and discovery... Add in a slow-burn romance and Rao’s exploration of human drive, desire, and consciousness—and *The Surviving Sky* is sure to stay with readers long after the final page.”

H.M. LONG, AUTHOR OF *HALL OF SMOKE*

“With lush prose, compelling characters, and a wonderfully built world, *The Surviving Sky* has everything I hope for in a novel. This is a book for anyone who has ever loved and longed for the natural world around them.”

JOSHUA PHILLIP JOHNSON, AUTHOR OF *THE FOREVER SEA*

“In this brilliant, gorgeous debut, Kritika H. Rao’s *The Surviving Sky* weaves a kaleidoscopic environmental plot with relationships that feel very real indeed... This is a story unlike any I’ve read before, an epic adventure through fantastic landscapes and heartsapes.”

FRAN WILDE, DOUBLE NEBULA AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR OF *UPDRAFT*
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“Brimming with fascinating lore and dangerous magic, *The Surviving Sky* is an evocative debut that will sink its roots—and thorns—into your heart.”

CHELSEA ABDULLAH, AUTHOR OF *THE STARDUST THIEF*

“Immersive, inventive and intense, at once both universal and wholly South Asian, *The Surviving Sky* is a debut destined to live many lives. Let it grab your heart with its spiked, slithering vines!”

SAMIT BASU, AUTHOR OF *THE CITY INSIDE*

“*The Surviving Sky* dares to imagine a boldly unique fantasy world and succeeds in spades. Lush and evocative, this flying jungle city will draw you in, and the characters anchoring the story will keep you reading to the very end.”

ROWENNA MILLER, AUTHOR OF *THE UNRAVELED KINGDOM TRILOGY*

“*The Surviving Sky* has some of the most intricate and inventive worldbuilding I’ve ever had the pleasure to lose myself in, coupled with a story that both examines exactly what it means to be human while daring to ask: what if we were more?”

ANNA STEPHENS, AUTHOR OF *THE GODBLIND TRILOGY*

“*The Surviving Sky*’s characters struggle passionately to balance communal survival and individual ambition, exposing the private strain on a marriage. Teeming with detailed world-building, this debut is perfect for fans of original science fantasy.”

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“Some books reach right into your brain and give it a good shake, and this expansive science fantasy, with its wildly inventive worldbuilding and characters who feel desperately real, shook mine in the most delicious way. Highly recommended!”

SAM HAWKE, AUTHOR OF *THE POISON WARS*

“With worldbuilding and magical metaphysics as alive as the emotion on the page, *The Surviving Sky* devastates and resurges... The protagonists navigate the love and fury of a fraught marriage, class struggles, and layered secrets as thick as the jungle itself.”

ESSA HANSEN, AUTHOR OF *NOPHEK GLOSS*

“Daringly inventive and uncannily enthralling... While storms and strange ecology shape the world, the characters’ personal cataclysms are grounded in the compelling struggles of the human heart.”

CASS MORRIS, AUTHOR OF *FROM UNSEEN FIRE*

“Precise, exquisite, and jaw-dropping. The world is rich and alien and wonderfully new, grounded by characters so familiar they ache. I loved every page.”

DAN WELLS, *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
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KRITIKA H. RAO

TITAN BOOKS

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*For you, wonderful reader, of whom I first began
dreaming when I knew writing books was what I
wanted to do.*



1

AHILYA

The bracken didn't react to Ahilya as it should have. She tried again, drawing her desire for the leaves to part to a single point. "Open. I want to see."

It was unnatural—eerie almost—how defiant the plants were. It was as if her limbs refused to move despite the command of her mind.

She stood alone on a wide curving terrace of her airborne city, Nakshar. An hour earlier, a dozen citizens had flocked to the promenade, seeking a final look at the open skies before Nakshar landed in the jungle. Ahilya had yearned for solitude, unwilling to conduct her study in front of them, but now she gazed at the empty bark benches, the shady trees, the soft moss floor. Everything looked the same. Then why did the bracken wall behave so differently? It had been waist-high earlier, a mere parapet, but now it towered over her, growing rapidly. Tendrils curled into tight, thorny balls. Branches squeezed together, twisting in intricate lattices. The entire structure hardened as though to deny her. And none of it responded to her desire to see beyond the city.

Ahilya jogged alongside the wall until she found a small gap in the leafy growth. There, below thick clouds within a twilight sky, waited the earth's surface. She unslung the satchel from her shoulder. Eyes on the gap, she

rummaged until she found her telescope, then dropped the bag gently by her feet.

Ahilya pressed the telescope to her face so hard, it pinched her skin. The image focused just in time for her to see another dust explosion. Her breath quickened. There was a pattern to the dust, a shift she had theorized once. For the first time, she was viewing the *epicenter* of the fading storm. Her hands itched to take her tablet and stylus from the satchel to draw the patterns, but there was no time. The leaves on the city's wall were morphing too fast, she'd just have to commit the explosion to memory—

Dark green shuttered her vision. Ahilya lowered her telescope and peered through the foliage, but the wall was relentless again. "Come on," she muttered. "What is wrong with you? Open up a little bit, at least."

"Nakshar's plants won't respond to non-architects anymore," an amused voice called out.

Ahilya spun around.

Naila stepped off an ascending wooden pedestal that had emerged from a hole in the floor. She was dressed in her architect's uniform: an embroidered green kurta reaching her knees, flared over narrow, pleated trousers. Her long translucent robe wafted in the breeze. Thick black beads looped around Naila's neck; more beads—bracelets and rings—clinked around her wrists and fingers, held together by thin glassy optical fibers. The Junior Architect was perhaps twenty-five, nearly a decade younger than Ahilya, but the rudra beads indicated more responsibility for their flying city than Ahilya would ever be granted. All Ahilya owned was her obligatory citizen ring.

"Ordinary citizens no longer have any control over the architecture," Naila repeated, striding forward.

Ahilya forced a smile. "Great, you're here. I think I saw something—this incredible pattern of dust that might reveal the source of the instability down there. Will you open the wall for me? I want to sketch it."

"You want to draw... *dust*?"

“I want to draw dust during *landing*,” Ahilya corrected. “It’s the best way to understand earthrages.”

“Oh, I can explain those to you,” Naila said, flicking a lock of dark hair behind her. “They’re cataclysmic storms—”

“Yes, thank you. I’m trying to understand why they happen at all.”

“Because of a disruption of consciousness—”

“No, I meant, why did earthrages begin in the first place—”

“They’ve been around as long as we have—”

“How did—”

“Really, Ahilya,” the Junior Architect said, sniffing. “These questions have already been answered. And these dust patterns you want to draw—the architects have studied those for years.”

Ahilya turned back to the wall. She had asked the architects for their drawings, but they had summarily rejected her requests, citing their records as *privileged architect information*, a slap on the face she had never received before. “Right. Fine. Thanks for that,” she said. “Could you open this, please? I might still be able to get a few rough sketches.”

“I can’t—”

“Sure you can. You’re an architect, aren’t you? The plants literally shift at your behest.”

Naila gave her an unimpressed look. “That’s very reductive. How can you be married to a *Senior Architect* and not know the intricacies of trajectory?”

“We try not to talk about it, lest we begin arguing about how we see the world,” Ahilya said. Her voice remained mild. The workings of plant manipulation had always been too esoteric for her, but the truth was that ever since her husband had been promoted to the council, the two had stopped talking about each other’s pursuits altogether. Her fingers scrabbled at the leaves. “Please. You don’t have to open it all—just enough for me to see.”

“I can’t,” Naila said, exasperated, as though dealing with a child. “Now that there’s *finally* another lull in the earthrages, and now that we’re *finally*

landing, the temple architects have enforced higher limits on the architecture. *That's* why non-architects don't have any control—”

“But you're—”

“Yes, I know, but I'm a *Junior* Architect. Anything that doesn't align with the temple's guidance is almost impossible to do, especially by me. And they're closing the city. Look around you. I'd be trying to fly against a windstream.”

Ahilya released her hold on the wall. Loose leaves glided down onto the moss floor—but the floor wasn't moss anymore; it was transforming into bark. The benches and trees were gone. From all sides, thorny bushes rushed toward them, eating the curve of the terrace in their hungry approach. Even the bracken wall had extended, entrapping the terrace in a dome. Leaves and stems crisscrossed in a hundred different layers as the foliage tightened. Darkness would fall in seconds.

Ahilya's brows furrowed. Nakshar had always been a flat city flying in the sky. Its architect-formed hills, with massive trees that housed the library and schools and homes, usually spanned acres. Checkered fields grew on the edges, and rainwater was harvested in rocky pools and waterfalls. She had never heard of the architecture changing so completely.

“Relax,” Naila said. “The council will release permissions beyond the temple again as soon as we land. Non-architects will be able to mold the architecture, and this part of the terrace will transform into an entry point close to the jungle. Shouldn't affect your expedition.”

Ahilya frowned and stepped away from the wall, the dust patterns she'd wanted to study forgotten. There was something in Naila's casual words, a message she did not understand. She glanced at the unresponsive architecture, studied Naila's insouciant stance, thought about the easy assurances. A prickle of worry climbed the back of her neck.

She had lived in Nakshar all her life, but matters in the city had been changing recently. Hardly anyone paid attention, but Ahilya had kept track. First, it had been the suppression of the architects' records. Then the fight to get her expedition approved. Now this? Control was being taken away from the citizens slowly and subtly, one way or another; a dangerous pattern.

The weight of this realization grew, pressing her shoulders down. In the end, wasn't that what life in the flying cities was really about? The lack of autonomy she and others like her had over their own lives? Ahilya's expedition, her dealings with Dhruv, the vacant council seat she was eyeing—everything she had done all her life was to balance this inequity, but things were coming to a head now. She could feel it.

She cleared her throat and returned her attention to Naila. “Why was the design changed?”

“I told you. They've enforced higher limits—”

“Yes, but why?”

The Junior Architect tilted her head and studied her for a long second. Then she smiled.

“For architect reasons,” she said coolly. “Why does a historian care to go into the jungle?” she added, asking her own question. “Aren't there detailed accounts of our histories in the libraries?”

Ahilya flinched. The questions were calculated insults.

Naila knew Ahilya was an archeologist, not a historian. She knew any histories of the world were *her* histories, architect histories. She knew why Ahilya explored the jungle—life had begun there, and Ahilya's entire research was to find a way to return to it again, to find survival on land instead of in architect-dependent cities in the sky.

This was a deliberate attempt to bait her. Either that or Naila had learned nothing from the documents Ahilya had provided to prepare for the expedition. It was likely beneath the Junior Architect to take any instruction from a *non*-architect. Refusing to indulge either attempt to shame her, Ahilya snapped the telescope shut and dropped to her knees to place it back into her satchel.

If only they would *tell* her. Naila had mentioned the recent earthrage as a reason behind this new design, and based on that alone, Ahilya could have helped the architects, shared information about what she discovered, even studied something *for* them.

But she was a non-architect, a pretender. What use was an archeologist in a civilization that had only ever known flight? Ahilya had practically

invented the term. They were not going to tell her anything. The Junior Architect was simply reminding her of her place.

Ahilya pushed aside her strain with an effort, closed her satchel, and rose to her feet. In the few seconds it had taken her to repack her instrument, the terrace had closed entirely, so that she and Naila stood face-to-face on a square of bark. Thorny bushes enveloped them from all sides, obscuring any view.

“So, where are Dhruv and Oam?” Ahilya asked, referring to the other two members of her team.

Naila tilted her head. “They’re in the temple. With the rest of the citizens.”

“Why? I told them to assemble here.”

“Iravan-ve. He insisted the temple was the safest place until Nakshar had fully landed.”

The respectful suffix attached to her husband as an architect, but never to Ahilya as an archeologist, grated on Ahilya. Her hand curled tightly around her satchel. Iravan had abandoned her for seven months, and now he thought to give orders to her team without her knowledge? All of her restrained irritation bubbled up, tightening her throat.

“And they listened?” she said. “Even Oam?”

“Oam tried to protest, saying you needed us here. And Dhruv—well, I don’t think Dhruv wanted to go toe-to-toe with a councilor.”

Oam was only as old as Naila. Iravan would have intimidated the boy with a glance. As for Dhruv—ever since his last few inventions had failed, the sungineer had become wary of disturbing the council. Ahilya’s closest friend he might be, but Dhruv wouldn’t openly oppose Senior Architect Iravan.

“I see,” she said.

“Iravan-ve requested you go to the temple, too. That’s why I’m here. I’m supposed to bring you there—”

“*Bring me?*”

“Escort you,” Naila said. “Request you. He didn’t demand it—”

“But he might as well have,” Ahilya completed, her teeth gritted.

Naila shook her head in furious protest. “No, no, not like that. It’s a matter of safety. No one should be out here.”

Ahilya remained rooted. The dome above was a mere handbreadth away now. Sharp-pointed leaves reached so low, they tickled her ears, but the instant they made contact with her skin, the pinpoints shed themselves. Instead, the stem budded softer leaves. Ahilya smelt the warm, sticky sap of regeneration.

If she didn’t move soon, she’d be entombed in a layer of foliage. Nakshar’s living architecture would sheathe her in her own personal wooden armor. That had been Ahilya’s plan, for her and her expeditionary team. *Rage* Iravan and his raging interference.

“I’m staying here,” she said, voice cool. “You can tell Iravan-*ve* that.”

Naila extended a robe-covered arm upward toward their cocoon. Her skin, like Ahilya’s and most natives of Nakshar, was terra-cotta brown. Naila’s veins, however, began to glow an iridescent green as she influenced the vegetation around them. A thousand tattooed vines and creepers grew on her arms underneath the translucent sleeves of her uniform’s robe. Some of the leaves touching Ahilya retracted.

“Please, that is really not wise.” The condescension had left Naila. “I know this design. It’s ellipsoidal, like a sunflower seed. We’re in the outermost shell. This is where the greatest impact will be. That’s why everyone was asked—*requested*—to the temple, to Nakshar’s core. You received the instruction through your citizen ring too, didn’t you? I know you did.”

Ahilya rubbed a thumb over her single rudra bead. “It flashed and rang a few hours ago. But I know the city will provide an alternative.”

“At great cost. The architects in the temple will have to divert unnecessary trajectory to keep you safe here. You’re risking the reliability of the entire construction. Nakshar could crash into the jungle instead of landing safely.” Naila jingled the rudra beads on her wrists as though to emphasize the burden of her responsibility.

Her words and actions were typical architect manipulation, but Ahilya had spent more than a decade married to a Senior Architect. “Is that really

true, Naila?" she asked quietly. "Because I asked the temple about this. I was told I could wait here."

"That was before Iravan-ve altered the landing design. Your old permissions don't apply anymore."

Ahilya clutched her satchel. Of course. She should have guessed Iravan had been behind the design's change. Still, she could not help the abrupt anger and shock throbbing under her skin.

Iravan knew why it was important she leave right away. Without the data from the expedition, Ahilya could forget about being nominated to the council. But, of course, he had never fully thought her capable of being a councilor. Was that why he had done this? Because of the vacant council seat? Iravan was *on* the council but he had his own plan for the vacancy. One that involved Naila.

She studied the Junior Architect, the suddenly nervous gestures, the newly feigned concern, the barely veiled contempt. Naila had sounded logical with her warnings about safety, but there was more there, an undercurrent of unbending dogma lacing her words. Architects were so used to the world submitting to them, they could never see how terrible it was that civilization was designed to be architect-dependent in the first place.

Ahilya wouldn't have begrudged it so much right at this very instant if it weren't for everything else with Iravan. The beginnings of a headache formed behind her eyes, at the thought of giving in now, acquiescing to his silent call for obedience. His attempt at maneuvering her was so feeble, it was almost insulting. She felt suddenly tired, outrageously defeated.

"You should go," she said. "Go be safe."

"I can't abandon a citizen to potential danger," Naila said, her voice incensed. "If I leave you, it'll go on my record as endangering Nakshar. I'm a *Junior Architect*. I can't afford transgressions."

"Nice try," Ahilya shot back. "I know you're well on your way to becoming a Senior Architect one day. Wasn't that the real reason Iravan gave you a key to accompany my expedition? To add the jungle to your field of experiences so he can *nominate* you to the council? I hardly think he'll hold you accountable for my stubbornness."

True to her profession, Naila switched tactics at once. “Well, then, consider. I can’t disobey a Senior Architect. If you don’t come with me, Iravan-ve will question me. Perhaps even forbid me from accompanying the expedition altogether. And then where will you be? No architect, no expedition, remember?”

Ahilya stared at her. “They teach you how to influence people as an architect, too?”

Naila smiled, a tightness to her mouth. “No, we gather that on our own. Can’t maneuver anything beyond a plant, but I suppose the principles of trajectory remain the same.”

Against her will, Ahilya felt a strange morbid amusement. It was almost impressive, how skilled Naila was. None of the other Junior Architects the council had provided to her for previous expeditions had displayed such an effective change of strategy so quickly. No wonder Iravan had picked her to be his protégée. In Naila’s quick-thinking and casual arrogance, Ahilya detected glimmers of Iravan’s own personality. She sighed and clutched her satchel close to her. Her nod was curt.

“Hold on,” Naila murmured. She closed her eyes and opened her palms in front of her. Her veins flared again, the iridescence making Ahilya’s eyes water. A dozen dizzying patterns of vines formed and died on the architect’s skin.

For a long moment, they remained motionless.

“Well?” Ahilya said. “Are we going?”

“We *are* going,” Naila said, cracking open an eye. “We’re descending. Can’t you tell?”

Ahilya blinked.

Their little nest looked no different. The canopy was still touching their heads, thorns on all sides, no wind of passage. Were they falling downward toward the city’s core? Or was Naila changing the plants around them, outside of their nest? Perhaps the nest wasn’t passing through a tunnel; it was destroying and reconstructing itself, using the plants of the city to undulate them through the architecture.

Ahilya's head spun. Contrary to what she had said to the Junior Architect, she *did* know some things about trajectory. The power was inborn; it could not be learned. Even though under ordinary circumstances, Ahilya could ask the city's plants to react to her desires, that was a charity provided by the architects who allowed their energy to flow through the foliage for the citizens to use. Ahilya had no *true* control. Only architects could directly influence a plant's consciousness, forcing it to change form.

Yet for Naila to do it this way, in such an invisible manner...

Either the Junior Architect was more skilled than Ahilya had credited her with, or the architects had learned new tricks in the time since Ahilya and Iravan had held a proper conversation.

"How are you doing this—" she began.

The nest jerked. Ahilya's knees buckled.

"Sorry," Naila panted, steadying her. "Rougher than I intended. Trajecting is harder outside the temple, this close to the landing."

"I suppose you could have brought me with you without waiting for my permission, and I wouldn't have known," Ahilya said reluctantly.

Naila threw her another amused look. "Architects aren't tyrants. This way."

Her fingers twitched, a waving gesture. The leaves in front of them separated to reveal a small courtyard. They stepped through and new bark closed behind them.

In the distance, vast tree trunks collapsed as though crushed by a giant hand. Foliage folded into itself, then tightened into stony bark. What had once been apartment complexes in trees—schools and playgrounds and homes—all changed as Nakshar coiled in on itself. When Ahilya glanced behind, bark chased her footsteps. Small florets became hard seeds. Supple ferns developed rough calluses. Needles and cones grew where a moment earlier there had been languorous sprays. The courtyard morphed in front of her eyes.

She had no idea where she was. Nakshar's architecture was called a maze for a reason. Even in ordinary flight, everything except for the city's fixed landmarks grew and changed. A path was provided for citizens by the

trajection coursing through the plants—except Ahilya no longer had any influence over the architecture. She hurried after Naila's blue-green light. It was one thing to be cocooned on a terrace that would become the best entry point to the jungle; entirely another to be encased within an unknown layer of the city. Sweat coated her upper lip at the thought of how little power she had.

She had lost measure of how much distance they'd covered when they reached another wall and Naila's iridescence flared again. The wooden wall transformed into a doorway. They stepped into a narrow, shadowy passageway. Bark closed behind them.

Naila slowed, her breath releasing in a huff. The Junior Architect grinned and gestured for Ahilya to precede her.

First came the scent: the rich, heady smell of moist earth. Then the lilting sounds of excitement and laughter. Tiny sunengineering glowglobes, like stars trapped in plants, emerged from the foliage to guide Ahilya's way as she strode farther in. Ahilya squinted as her eyes adjusted to the swelling brightness.

A narrow archway beckoned at the end of the passageway, from where tiny white buds hung down in curtains. Ahilya's breath caught in her throat. Jasmine was her favorite. Could that be Iravan's doing somehow? But no, not after the way they had left things the last time together, not if his punishing silence were any indication of his feelings. She was being foolish.

For a long moment, Ahilya hesitated, staring at the jasmine. Her heart hammered in her chest; she recalled his expression, how he'd walked away from her, how angry he'd been. All the dread and outrage and confused love she had nursed for seven long months bubbled within her.

Ahilya took a deep breath, parted the fronds, and stepped into the light.