Ours was a happy land, prosperous and bountiful. The rivers always had ample water and the trees bore enough fruit to fill the stomachs of the hungry. The land of Akol Akoa was famous for never turning a needy man away, friend or foe.

All in all, our smiles were full and houses fuller, with peace and joy.

But this is not how my children will see it. Off late something is plaguing on the innards of our lands. Stealing away all our glory and leaving us weak in the knees.

The very air that used to leash life in the dead of trees now stenches of rotten crops and corpse.

As I'm writing this, I see the dead body of a child being exhumed by what used to be our source of joy, the river Anda.

The gods themselves seem to be bearing a grudge against us. It seems that we have done something unknowingly that displeased them. For they have given us what I can only call Hell.

The elders insist that the only way out of this misery is by pleasing the Gods. They spend all their nights praying to the overlords to relieve them of their fate.

Humbug. That's what I call it. The only reason I visit the Shrine of Bhala is to please my mother. She has not been herself since the day my father was taken victim by this great plague.

Days and nights spent in the shrine, praying for his sanctity. A distant wail of despair and another one bites the dust.

I believe that there is some sense waiting to take over this chaos. The fate is urging us into action rather than wasting our times wishing for a saviour.

The chime of the temple bells bring me back to reality as the priests begin with the daily prayer. Yet another attempt, so futile.

The priests seem possessed to an extent. This has always amazed me, the dedication, the belief and the perseverance in the almighty even when the odds are stacked so high up against them. I have never been able to stick at a dead end for so long. Never.

The prayers come to an abrupt halt as a rumble rises up to the sky. With a deafening crash, a wall collapses to the ground. So much for faith. If the body is so weak, what of the "deities" inside.

The crash has caused some pandemonium in the crowd as dust blinds the night sky. Some people were trapped behind those rocks as I get forward to lend a hand to the clearing party.

It was a long and gruelling task but it was finally that stirred up some action. Felt refreshing. I wiped the sweat of my brow and that's when I saw it. There was some sort of concealed entrance buried under the debris.

That definitely piqued my interest. As far as my knowledge about this shrine is concerned, which was pretty darn good, there wasn't supposed to be any entrance; leave alone a secret one.

I immediately brought it to the elders' notice. This news seemed to liven the village folk in a long while. Soon a search party was formed to evaluate the site. It seemed that my people were clinging at anything dangling in front of them, whether it was a straw or not.

I pushed that thought out of my mind and for the first time there was a ray of hope inside me. I led the party deep inside, despite despair and joy, there was a fiendish fire inside all of us. We needed an answer.

I was a fool to believe in God. He is just a mirage for fools like us. Dead end. After all this while, we were staring at the back of a rock. Dejected and broken, Prasod reached

forward to lean on the walls when it happened.

Damn the elders. I smiled to myself as the secret switch revealed a huge atrium. It seems like our ancestors had foreseen this terrible future and done the needful. The atrium provided for immediate assistance for my people. It had enough food to last a few weeks and beds to nurse the sick.

It was a brief moment of joy but I knew that we need to look for a more permanent solution to this crisis. I decided to peruse the cave further hoping beyond hope that it will house a more lasting cure. Maybe they had foreseen

this calamity and done something to help their descendants.

I looked around the room. It was a lavish place with all bare facilities. In the middle stood a grand, life size statue of Lord Bhala. He was always shown with a divine smile, one hand wielding a sword and the other a book. It symbolized the wisdom of our clan to use power and the power to acquire wisdom. I was looking at the statue when I realized that there was something unexplained about the statue.

Something about it caught my eye and then I saw it. The book in his hand was not sculpted of the same stone as the statue. It was carved

later and thrust carelessly into Bhala's hand. I called someone to get me a ladder. I climbed up as people were murmuring behind my back. They thought it despicable for a human to touch the statue of our deity. But in my heart I knew that it meant something. I got the stone slabs out and between them I found an ancient manuscript titled – 'Kumari Kandam'.

Now that is something I had never heard before. I started glancing through the pages that described a land in the great ocean to the east which is famous for its varied topography and being a fertile place for medicinal herbs to grow. It raised my hopes

for finding a cure to the plague that is burning my land.

The book contained an appendix that contained the recipes for several potions. I feverishly turned the pages to find the one we desperately needed. And there it was. All this while praying to the lords above while the answer was just there in front of us, concealed till the time was right.

I prepared for the journey. Everyone seemed reluctant to accompany me on this journey, so I decided to embark upon it alone. It was better than idling time in the shrine.

I packed some basic supplies and left by an early boat. He was to drop me at the mythical

land of India where I could hopefully get a connecting vessel to Kumari Kandam.

It was to be a long journey but the dream of a cure for our problems kept me awake for nights. And finally I could see it at a distance, the shores of Kumari Kandam. The row men told me that we'd be reaching the Bay of White Water soon.

I ruffled through the pages to ensure that I had everything I needed. I couldn't miss out on anything. My land's future depended on this excursion of mine. There were people who were waiting for my return.

The potion I needed to brew required some extremely rare ingredients, which according

to the book were scattered all across the land of Kumari Kandam. It mentioned a Forest of Ghouls which would be waiting for me with the first ingredient – Blood of a Bleeding Ghoul.

Now that sounded tricky. Till yesterday I didn't even know ghouls could bleed, but then I didn't know many things before this book came along. I took the long walk from the bay to the forest. The forest was dank and dense, where animals scuttled around surreptitiously and I could feel their eyes boring into me. The silence

seemed to be lulling me into a false sense of security. A loud wail prickled the hair on my nape. This wasn't human, eh. (Bad time for my jokes). I hurried forward as I saw a ghoul, bleeding. The creature seemed to be injured and in some pain. I reached for my medical kit and that's when I remembered that I had left it back in the vessel. I panicked as I might need it anytime. The ghoul moaned again, bringing me back to the reality. I took out a handkerchief to tie the wound securely and put the ghoul up against a tree. After giving him some water I motioned him that I needed to collect his blood. It seemed to understand as it nodded and signalled towards his injured hand. I

scooped out a phial and quickly took a few precious drops. Deciding to spend the night back at the bay, I rushed away, bidding the ghoul farewell. I needed to get my medical kit before the vessel got away.

I got there just in time as I saw the captain was about to head south for some business. I thanked him for keeping my kit same and asked his heading.

He told me about a great temple on the island, famous for its moongrass. It was another ingredient I needed but the problem was that moongrass works in a potion only when plucked on a full moon night. And that wasn't

coming before 5 days according to my lunar charts.

I pushed that thought away for now as I decided to take the journey with the captain himself. A friendly face is a wonderful company in an unknown land. We had to pass through the windy grasslands by the sides of the Crystal Mountains, the massive stone structure that housed the Black Water Lake in its bosom. This land surely is picturesque at its very best.

Walking for a day brought be in the vicinity of the temple. The air around it had a mythical aura to it. I couldn't answer why. I decided to spend the rest of the days till the

The book called it the Rainbow Pebbles. They were formed by the broken boulders being washed away and deposited by the river. For some reason they pick up a strange vibgyor hue and were famous for absorbing a lot of heat. The book told that the potion needed the heat of these pebbles and not any normal flame.

The river made a pleasant gurgling noise as it crashed merrily against the huge boulders. I waded across it as the water lapped at my feet. It was neither too cold nor too warm. The only thing I could was that this land was magical.

I crossed the river and realised what the author by "Rainbow Pebbles". Here they were, scattered all over carelessly and emitting a radiant hue all around. I picked up what seemed like a good number for the potion.

Next up was the Valley of Agony. That name sounded very eerie to me. This land didn't feel like a place that would harbour agony. I stepped ahead with an uncertain cloud over my head. The Valley of Agony was a huge orchard with hordes of flowers of every colour imaginable.

I checked my notes to refer to the flowers I needed to pluck. The first instance and I realised why it was called the Valley of Agony. It was not the agony of a dying child but that of a mother who gives birth to her baby. The cry of pain that will lead to a lifetime of fulfilment. On picking one flower, it let out a tiny wail only to give away to a new bud. The agony now seemed like a mockery on life.

The final stop on my trip was the Bay of Golden Sand. According to the author, the

potion needed to be brewed here. The wind flow here favours the potion, greatly increasing its potency.

The thought of my family waiting for me stirred me into action. I set up the entire process and carefully started brewing the potion. Adding one ingredient after the other, adding the exact number of turns. I checked the time. The captain had promised to pick me up exactly 22 days after leaving the temple. I had a week more to finish the process. I set myself to the task again.

After about 4 days of efforts and after adding the final ingredient, the frothy water of the bay, the potion was emanating the

colour that the author had specified. The burnt shade of ochre with small bubbles floating just over the surface. I bottled the entire potion, careful not to spill a single drop of it. I was to administer one drop to each ailing person, in a goblet of water to cure them of their misery.

The end was near I thought to myself standing on the deck of the returning vessel. I bade the magical land of Kumari Kandam a farewell when it happened. There was a huge stir, as if the earth had skipped a heartbeat. And in one fluid motion, the land went inside the great ocean.

I was frantic with worry when the captain told me the story of this land. It was like Mother Earth takes a reincarnation every time when someone needed it most,

hibernating for the rest of the years. I was marvelling at the glory of this magical land and that's when I decided to record my memories in this journal. The world is an uncertain place and this calamity could come again. I must do what my ancestors did for me.