

Tulabara Excerpts

(From Tulasi's Story)

The First Key

So yeah. I have my issues with money. It was something of a bone of contention between my parents, siblings and I as I grew up. I don't think I ever grew out of being the 'impractical' or 'creative' one that chose sentiment and empathy over statistics and strategic networking. So eventually I did what they wanted and got a steady job with a decent income. Sometimes empathy is so strong, it makes you do things that are not driven by feeling just so you don't make those you have empathy for feel like they are unfeeling. A word to the wise: Don't try to unravel the knots of my logic, they form a pretty beautiful fabric if you take a step back and observe for a few minutes.

Speaking of empathy, my brother introduced me to this game that he found. I've always trusted his taste and he mine. Or at least I like to think he trusts my taste, and refuse to hear otherwise. The name of the game is Tulabara. I was familiar with the concept, of course, since it was exactly what the story of my name was about. Literally, Tula was a weighing scale (hence the name is used for the zodiac associated with Libra) and bhara was a weight. I am always curious when I see a name that is borrowed from Sanskrit or Tamil. Quite often, I find that the root of the name comes from one or other ancient language but the person using the name is unaware of the root, they simply ascribe it to the language most familiar to them. Or they found it on a baby naming website and thought it was cool. Either way I was piqued.

I opened the light, but sturdy, box. A hard cover book with a supple spine fell out. At the edge of the spine, as though the book were meant to be an old school clipboard, there was a sleek clip that could hold perhaps 4 sheets of paper, not more, and was snag proof. Above it was an inset groove that had a hidden pen, about the size of my Galaxy S10 Note stylus, and just as pretty. Sweet. The cover of the book had an ornate pattern, that at first glance appeared to be nothing more than a pattern. My double-take led me to observe that it appeared to be a script of some sort - it looked vaguely like glyphs or early kanjis or something that was meant to be read. And my triple take realized... this was a QR code.

I hesitated for a while, chewing my upper lip, scrunching my nose and for no particular reason wincing at a pain in my shoulders that cropped up whenever I forgot to pay attention to my posture. It was very likely some sort of marketing ploy that would end up in me being the product,

but then... I'm not really convinced that I'm a product worth having. So here went nothing. I pulled out my phone, and scanned.

My phone tinkled with the sound of bubbles popping followed by a bottle cap falling to the ground. It was an unobtrusive yet unmistakeable sound - I might just have to store that as a ringtone.

“You have just unlocked the first key to your adventure. Should you choose to accept the key, you will be provided with a list of quests that are available at this time. The outcome of these quests are random, but all will benefit your character in some way. Your acceptance will also unlock your character stats page, where you may access your in game appearance, your progress journal, a personal knowledge bank where you may store text notes, and finally, access to the community center, where you may ask for advice on quests, share progress, make friends or join guilds. The terms and conditions governing privacy and decorum are part and parcel of accepting the key. Please navigate to the link for the legalese.”

I'm sure you've had that moment. The moment where you just can't help thinking of Alice in Wonderland, wondering what would have happened if she hadn't followed the rabbit or eaten the cake. What would the world be without the phrase 'curiouser and curiouser?' I've had that moment multiple times. Now was one of them. It isn't often that I find a product in the world that screams Tulasi.

I'm not typically mainstream or norm nor am I the type to disavow the norm and mainstream, so I'm usually not swayed by packaging and unless it is a book I am not likely to persist past the first round. Once I get past the first round, I don't feel compelled to keep going. I never binge-watched HIMYM or Arrested Development. I fall off the bandwagon for most shows after a season or two. Given these trends in my life, I was almost sure that even if this game seemed to click almost off the bat, it wasn't going to last. But I was still curious, so I stepped into the parlor...

~*~

Ramar Anil

The first step was fairly standard, a popup with the option to choose a username, with a 'surprise me' button that I clicked a few times to see strings of names that sounded like they were from strange and exotic land, then it offered me 'Chris.' I reflected on how in the world of fantasy or

mythology, you never see the names that people consider ‘normal.’ It’s their turn to be abnormal. I imagined someone struggling to pronounce ‘Joseph’ as though it were a name that they could not figure out.

“It just doesn’t quite roll off the tongue, does it?”

“No, I think I hurt my jaw trying to pronounce it.”

I snorted. It is so odd that when people refer to ‘most people’ in the phrase ‘most people find it difficult’ they don’t realize the size of the Asian population. Most people are far more likely to find Joseph difficult to pronounce than they are to have problems with Tulasi. And yet, can you all guess which one falls under the category of ‘normal?’

I very unimaginatively chose ‘Tulasi’ as my handle. Quite fortunately, albeit not too unexpectedly, it was not taken. After that, a popup with the terms and conditions that required me to accept after scrolling down a fair bit presented itself. I did not read, because... well - if you are diving into the deep end, you’ve made the decision to take everything that comes with it. After I accepted the terms and conditions I was confronted with a page of neatly tiled avatars along with a custom avatar button that would allow me to upload an image and create an avatar on my own. I chose a stock avatar, the third from the left in the second row. My avatar was a round faced, smiling, slightly green-tinged humanoid with pudgy, short limbs and a bun at the top of my head. Something about her screamed ‘librarian with a bite.’ You know, the kind that is good-natured until she sees you defacing a book. That actually sort of sounded like me too - I cringe whenever I see someone laying a sheaf of papers on a desk or table with the corners curled under.

Now that I had my name and my avatar, the game directed me to a page that had a frame of options. The default option was the quest offering. This section had twelve sections with what looked like ancient texts from different parts of the world. One was on a scroll, as to be expected. Another appeared to be a series of glyphs. Yet another was a single kanji. To my surprise, at the bottom left corner, there was even a whatever the name for the thingy with dried palm leaves is. The name escaped me momentarily, which was quite embarrassing.

A thing they don’t tell you about kids that are children of immigrants is that there is an enormous pressure to be the ambassador of a culture that you are only part of in what feels like an indirect, second-hand way. Even people who are born and brought up following that culture in a place where everyone talks the talk and walks the walk have trouble keeping some facts straight. There is almost always so much to remember, which in turn makes the pool of things to forget pretty darn large. And then when none of it features in your day-to-day life, but you are expected to remember it anyway and resent when someone distorts it... well *you* go ahead and try feeling that righteous indignation at cultural appropriation when you are barely aware of the practice that is being appropriated. And then being confronted by someone who knows more but doesn’t feel

particularly resentful that their beloved heritage is being tainted. I know it is a small consideration in the grand scheme of things, but it is still something that rears its head even when you are playing a game and you see an icon that ought to be familiar.

So anyway, I chose the one with the *olai-chuvadi* - OH YEAH, *that's what it was called!* - just to see what it would be about. A page turned in the middle of my screen and a story appeared with the words *Ramar Anil* at the top.

Ramar Anil

It was not a past life. It was this one. It was a small life. I was a small creature. I scrounged for roots and berries. I nibbled a small bit. If it was tasty, I carried it back. If it was not tasty I dug a hole and buried it. Berried it. Berried. (*chitters gleefully*). I like berries and roots. My life is nothing but going back and forth. Back and forth. Small with small claws. I am no rodent. I am no rat. I do not gnaw flesh and bone. I do not foam at the mouth. I do not have rabies. I am squirrel. Hear me roar!! (*chitters gleefully*).

I was small. Then a glowing, golden-hued hand, caressed my face with the gentle touch that only my mother could have had. It was my mother, touching my cheek. Mother Earth. Such deep, sweet love. Like the sweetest coconut. Stuck in my teeth. *chellakkoni thengaiye pallidukkula poonthaaye!* Thaaye! Mother Sita. It could be no one else. My mother, Mother Earth, mother Sita had touched my cheek. (*chittering wildly with joy*). I was small no more. Nom more. Nom nom. I no longer needed the berries and roots. I needed Sita Nom. Naam. I needed Sita Rama. Rama Nama. And then the mother was carried away! He took her away!!! My brothers, sisters and I charged after the flying chariot. We were loud and clear in our anger! But we could do nothing. As we returned to the hut in the forest, we saw Him. Too late. He had lost her. We tried pointing where she went. He followed, unable to contain his panic. His panic screamed in our ears as we led the way. My brother was the first to spot the jeweled toering that had been on her second toe.

“Seethammaaaaa!!!!” Wailed Lakshmana.

He had not had that reaction at the sight of her *kundalas* or the *vangki* that had adorned her arm. Those were not ever in his field of vision, as he had eyes only for her feet. Just as we squirrels - for those feet were what we saw every morning as she exited the hut to scatter some sweet seeds and coconut! for my brethren. She was our kind mother and she was lost. (*chitters in a softer tone*).

We followed Rama and Lakshmana for many moons in search of Sita. When it became apparent that we would not catch her before she had reached the destination her captor had intended, we stopped. I recalled Rama's distress as he sat on a rock, head bowed, *kodanda* loosely held. We wrung our hands, unable to help and unsure what to do. We were there when *Jatayu* the fallen vulture, brother of *Sampati*, had relayed to Rama that it had been Ravana who had carried Sita

away to *Lanka*. As Rama passed the Rishyamukha mountain we noted Hanuman testing the stranger to ensure that he was, indeed, Rama, the crown prince of Ayodhya. We were there when Rama had agreed to help Sugreeva, the wronged brother, returned to his home after Vali had driven him out. Our kin in the forests of Kishkinda had collected the flowers that were strung together for a garland that would identify the monkey king so Rama would not choose the wrong vanara. We were there when the brothers Nala and Nila, the monkey architects, had crafted the plans for the bridge from the southern tip of Kishkinda to the island of Lanka.

And we finally had a chance to help. As the *vanaras* lobbed huge stones and boulders in attempt to make the building of the bridge a swift success, we saw that the cracks and crevices between the stones were jagged and sharp. How could we let those cut the lotus feet of our mother's lord? We formed a league gathering the smoothest, smallest pebbles to fill the cracks. We ran along, all the way, all through the night, filling crack after crack, not resting till our task was complete. Finally, the bridge was finished.

Rama picked me up in his palm and looked me in the eye.

"Dear little one," Rama softly intoned.

"You are a reminder that it does not take large boulders and grand gestures to make a difference. It does not take great deeds and heavenly architects or plans drawn out by the most adept of geniuses to make a difference. It takes the small hands filling an essential need. It takes the compassion and kindness that you displayed here. You will forever be a symbol of service to the world."

He gently stroked me with three fingers, and it felt as though a warmth from within me rose to meet his fingers along the length of my back from head to the tip of my tail. From that day forth, my entire clan would bear the same three lines, earning us the name '*Ramar Anil*.'

~ * ~