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The
River in the Sky
and the
Banyan Tree

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PART 1



And the storyteller sat at the fire, her eyes open, seeking our gaze, as she commenced yet another tale from the centuries past. This is what she told us...

The stars are our people, who ascended from the past to take their place in the vaults of heaven. Every star is a house, and the light we see is the brilliance of their eternal hearths, over which they prepare their gift to us -- the gift of water.

The heavens above are a cosmic play between fire and water. A long time ago, the Sun, father of all fire, used to steal water from his sisters, the Winds. The Sun would have kept all water for himself, if not for his brother, the Moon. The Moon used to sneak into the Sun's house and steal his water while he slept. This, he would gift to his people, *our people*, who sit around star-fires. Our ancestors would then boil the Moon's gift over their hearths. For us.

The Sun, the Moon, and the Winds do not fight any more. Their battles have ended, their enmity buried. Instead, they gift. The Winds gift water to the Sun, and the Sun now gifts some of it to the Moon. The Moon continues gifting to our people, who in turn gift water to us.

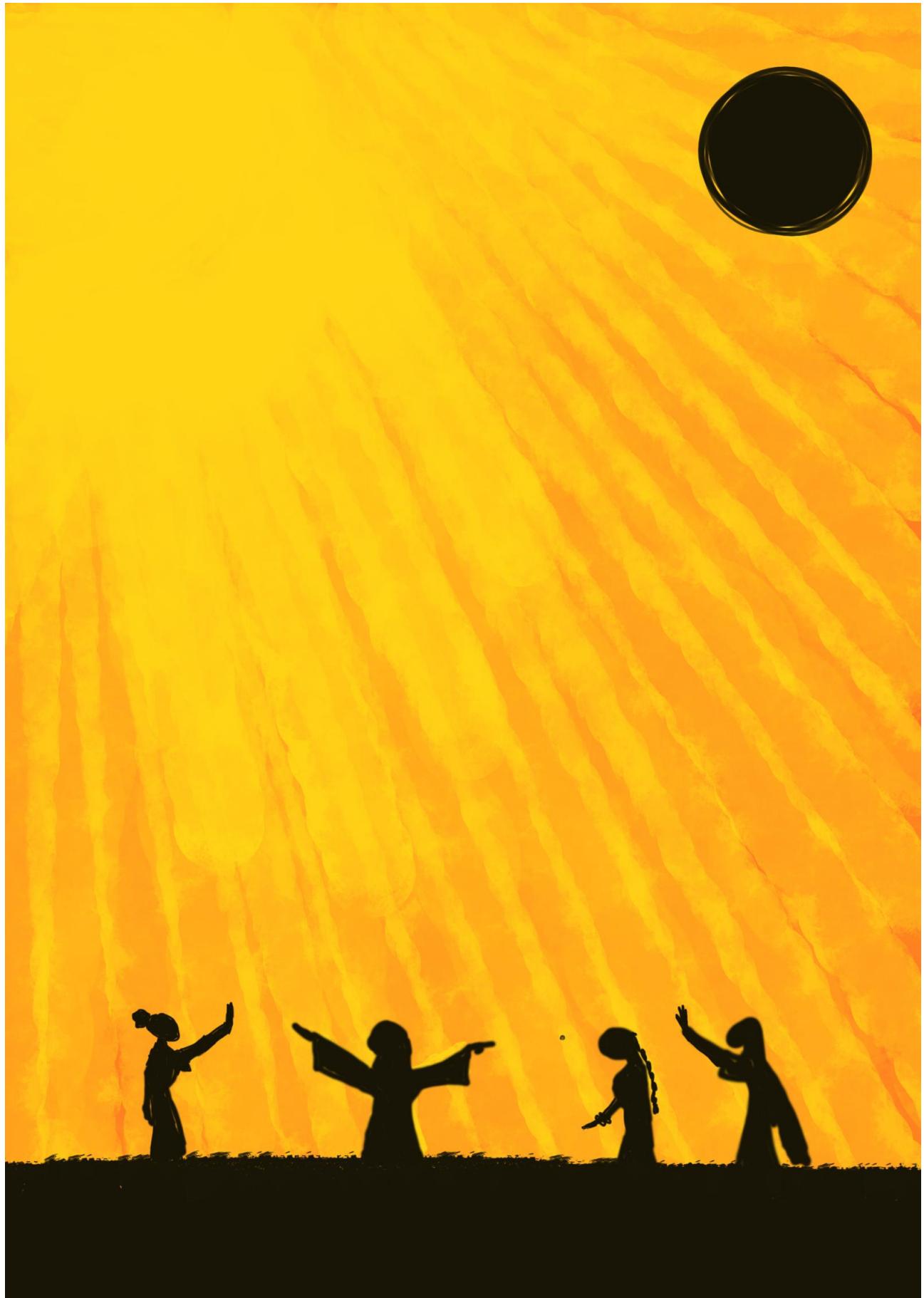
Even now, if you want to see the steams from their fires, look at the night sky towards the archers' homes. Look! That is where the stars are most dense and their fires brightest. The steam from their hearths gather around their homes. Cloud by cloud, the steam gathers strength. It moves. It roils. It flows. It becomes the River in the Sky, the source of life, all life.

But there is an issue. The River in the Sky is too far up, too far away from the Earth to come down to us. How then, do we receive our ancestors' gift?

For that, my dears, we need to know about the Banyan Tree.

The storyteller ended the first part of her tale here, promising to finish it next week.

PART 2



After a long week, we gathered around the fire again. The day's work was done. A quiet night lay ahead. The stars wheeled over us. The moon was a thin crescent, floating in the east. A cold wind washed over our backs, crackling the flames in front of our eyes. The storyteller said nothing, waiting for us to settle. As our voices faded to match the evening quiet, our gazes aligned in her direction. She noticed. Drawing breath, she resumed her story without ceremony:

My dear people, I've already told you about the River in the Sky. Look up, and you can see it floating up there, its many currents made from the steams of our ancestors' fires.

I told you about the Sun, the Moon, and the Winds, about how they fought with each other for precious water. I told you how the Sun stole water from his sisters, for himself. I also told you about the Moon, and how he saved our people from the Sun's greed. I told you about how our people received the Moon's gift with gratitude, and in turn, boiled the stolen water to gift to us.

There is someone I haven't spoken about, and that is the Earth. We do not know where the Earth came from. Some say the Earth was born of the Deep Fires and the Salt Waters, long before they rose to the heavens to create the Sun and the Moon. Others say the Sun and Moon came first and that the Earth was made when the Fires and Waters sought a greater home.

Whatever the truth, we know that the Earth is respected. This is why all life is first born in her realm, before travelling to reside with the Moon. We are the Moon's people, but the Earth's children.

It was the Earth which first sweetened the Salt Waters. You and I have never seen them, but we have tasted salt and know what it does to water. The Earth drew the Salt Waters into her own realm, pulled the salt out, and pushed the sweetened waters up to make the first springs. She did this to create life. The first birds, the first animals, the first humans -- if not for the springs, they wouldn't have walked.

The Earth then spoke to the Winds. "Sisters" she said. "If you wish to see life walk, you will do what I say."

She gifted the sweet springs to the Winds, and asked them to spread the waters far and wide across her realm. What a sight it must have been! Remember, these were the days before rain. The Winds wove water into wide sheets, shimmering and transparent, which they cast like blankets over the barren ground. Every blanket soaked the dust, churning it to mud for the first seeds. Blanket after blanket was woven from the springs, each a hundred fathoms long, a hundred wide. Day after day, the woven blankets would be flung by the Winds to moisten the earth. Petrichor filled the world, the first scent to perfume this realm.

The Sun watched with envy. The Earth had built a home and the Winds were freshening it. The Moon was making the first seeds of life, to be planted in the new soil. What could the Sun do? Bright and shiny, he could only glower. With no role to play in the creation of life, he sought to make trouble. It was then that he decided that he would create his own life, and he would do so with

the very waters sweetened by the Earth.

Burning with rage, he swooped down from the heavens, snatching the blankets of water carried by the Winds. The Winds became hot and dry. The water sizzled and steamed, to be snatched up by the greedy Sun. Even as the stunned Winds fell back to the Earth, the Sun went a step further. With another blaze of fire, he boiled the first springs themselves, and carried them to the skies.

All of this had been so swift that the Earth and the Winds did not recognise their thief. Stumbling from the immense heat, the Winds carried a broken search for their lost waters. The Earth tried to sweeten more of the Salt Waters, but her strength was spent. As the Sun wheeled towards his house in the west, and the skies darkened, the frustrated cries of the Earth and the Winds filled the sky.

It was the Moon who realised what was going on. As he rose in the east, listening to the fury of his sisters, he saw a haze surrounding the setting Sun, darkening his brow. He knew it to be water. Climbing down, he conferred with his sisters. Learning about the thief, the Earth raged. Her ancient fires burst out of the ground and pillars of flame were flung into the firmaments of heaven. It is said that some of these fires still burn, far out, in the East.

However, her calm was as swift as her anger. Gathering herself, she conferred once again with the Moon and the Winds. They knew the Sun would refuse to return what he stole. The only path to creating life was to fight him. The Earth commanded the Moon to carry out this task.

But the Moon, parent of our people, was not strong enough to challenge the Sun. The Sun was his elder and far more powerful. How then, could the Moon reclaim the waters back from him?

My dear people, you will see that in times of great sorrow and anger, answers emerge from unusual places. For the Moon, the answer came from the very first of his children, the Banyan Tree.

The storyteller stopped here. We protested. Hadn't she promised to tell us about Banyan Tree? She hadn't even begun! "Keep calm!" said the storyteller. "Without telling you about the Earth and her role, how can I begin to tell you about the Banyan Tree?". She promised the story would be told in full next week. Grumbling, we turned towards our homes.

PART 3



The week felt longer than usual. Though many of us hadn't cared much for the story initially, we became more invested in it over time. As we went about our work, we wondered what the Moon did. We debated why the Sun and Moon no longer fight. When did our ancestors enter this story? As the week drew to an end, we gathered around the fire once more, eagerness writ on our faces. The storyteller smiled and began:

My dear people, I had told you about the Earth and how she drew sweetness out of the Salt Waters. I told you about the Winds and how they wove the waters of the first springs into sheets for soaking the ground, to prepare for life. I told you about the Sun and how he stole these waters from them. I told you about the Moon and how he was commanded by the Earth to return these stolen waters.

But the Moon, my dear people, is not a warrior. He does not know how to fight. Even if he could have fought, he would have been no match for the Sun, his older and stronger brother. After all, those who commit crimes are also those unafraid of challenges. And often, there are good reasons for such absence of fear.

How then could the Moon complete his task? Pondering his role, he circled heaven's firmaments. The heat of the scorched earth burnt his countenance and addled his senses. He could not think straight. He needed a place to rest.

It was then that he came upon the Lone Mountain, the greatest and tallest of the peaks in our land. Here, he paused in wonder. Do you remember me telling you about the Winds and the sheets of water they wove out of the first springs? How they flung these sheets far and wide across Earth's realm? The Lone Mountain had also been soaked.

But lo! Listen! Our Lone Mountain was tall. It stood so high that its peak had been too far above the ground when the Sun burnt the Winds and the ground with his grasp. Some water remained on the peak! The Mountain still feared the Sun though. And in its fear, it had turned cold, freezing the waters into snow. Pale and gleaming, the snows of the Lone Mountain winked back at the Moon, cooling his senses on that hot night.

Trembling with anticipation, the Moon descended. He set himself below the snows, on a shoulder of the Lone Mountain, just above the darkened valleys. Some of the snow had melted at this height and had pooled into a hollow in the ground. The Moon scooped this out and soaked a patch of earth with it. Once the earth had been soaked, he planted the first of his seeds. The seed of the Banyan Tree.

You must remember, dear people, that this was the first seed of life. It was too weak to grow alone. Hence, the Moon cut off one of his moonbeams and infused it with the Earth's sweet water, before thrusting it into the ground to act as the seed's home. Thus protected by water and moonlight, the seed sprang to life.

Before the night even reached its peak, the first roots spread down. The first branches thrust themselves into the sky. The First of Life would grow to become the greatest of all trees in Earth's realm, but its children would always carry the original weakness. This is why Banyan seeds never grow in the ground -- they always need the protection of another tree, its water, and moonlight.

Thus, the First of Life emerged, on that lonely shoulder of a lonely mountain on a burnt and broken earth. The Moon was filled with fear. How could his child survive these dreadful times? It was then that he got his courage, the desperate courage that comes to every parent when they need to protect their child. He could not fight the Sun. But he could do what the Sun himself had done. He could steal the waters back from him.

The Sun had gone to sleep on that dark, starless night. The Moon rose into the skies and swiftly ran west, to the Sun's night home. As the Sun snored, the Moon crept below the horizon, into his home. The waters clouded the Sun's brow, turning his fiery countenance grey. The Moon reached out,

gathered some of the clouds and ran back above the horizon. He crossed back over the black skies to the Lone Mountain, where the slender young Banyan Tree awaited him.

With melted snow and the stolen water, the Moon set to work. Before the night ended, he completed his greatest creation on Earth's realm. The Neera river sprang to life around the Banyan Tree and tumbled down the slope. Over the years, the Neera would grow, far beyond anything the Moon imagined it to be and become the source of life for all of us. But always, always, the Neera would first serve the Banyan Tree.

Thus it continued, night after night. The Moon would sneak into the Sun's home and steal some of the clouds around his brow. He would replenish the Neera river, which in turn would replenish the Banyan Tree. The Banyan grew tall, wide, and strong. When fully grown, soaked with the waters of the Neera and soil of the Earth's realm, she gave the world the First Fruit, a fig. When the fig cracked open, out climbed Aakasai, the First of Our People, grandchild of the Moon.

The story of Aakasai is for another day, for one night will not do it justice. There is too much to tell. The Banyan Tree brought her up in her first years, on stolen waters from the Moon. The Earth befriended her. On many nights, Aakasai and the Earth would play beneath the Banyan, on the banks of the Neera. Many years later, she would cross the Earth's realm and heal the burnt grounds with the Moon's help. She fought the Earth's fires and banished them to the East. She even considered challenging the Sun, but was dissuaded by the frightened Moon and the Banyan Tree.

But Aakasai was also the parent of our people. Even as she grew old and retired into the arms of the Banyan Tree, she extracted a promise from her grandfather. Her people would always have a home in the Moon's realms. Thus, her people grew, partaking of the Earth's gifts before ascending to the skies where the stars formed their hearths. The Moon continued to steal water at night and gift them to our people, both on earth and in the skies. Back then, there was enough for everyone.

The storyteller paused. "For the rest of the story..."

"No!" we protested. "Too long! Too long! We cannot wait another week!"

"But..." she began, but we protested again.

"Please! We cannot wait..."

The storyteller smiled.

"All right." she said. "I'll finish it tonight."

PART 4

The Storyteller thus continued...

My dear people, you may have wondered what the Sun was doing while all this was going on.

You see, he had noticed that he was losing his stolen waters. But back then, the Sun had been a younger and more arrogant being. He could not imagine someone was clever enough or brave enough to steal from him. He was also frustrated. Unlike the Earth or Moon, he did not have the power to make life. One day, scowling with irritation, he looked back at the Earth's realm.

Imagine his surprise! This was long after Aakasai had healed the ground and defeated the Earth's fires. Her people walked freely on the land. The Moon had planted other seeds in the ground, and they had all sprung to life. The Earth's realm was filled with trees and plants and animals and birds. The Salt Waters were brimming with fish. And at the centre of it all, the mighty Neera river wound over the land, draining back into the Salt.

With a roar of rage, the Sun descended to the ground once more. He knew something was wrong, that someone had cheated. Surely, the waters of the Neera were the same as the ones he had seized? How had they ended up here? Burning with fury, he swept down to the Lone Mountain, to the source of our river. Once again, he sought to steal back the Earth's waters and drag the Neera back with him.

But these were not the days of old. Aakasai had changed the land. Even though she had long disappeared into the Banyan Tree's arms, her spirit still suffused her mother's branches. The Moon was yet to rise, but his light of life, the fruits of his great sacrifice, still moved with the tree's sap. And most of all, there was the Earth. Her soil nourished the tree. The Earth remembered her days with Aakasai. She remembered how the Banyan Tree gave Aakasai to the world. Most of all, she remembered the Sun's original crime, and how she had long sought justice for it.

The Earth's mighty power spread throughout the Banyan Tree, strengthening her beyond any other form of life. Roots grew from her branches and branches grew from her roots. With a thundering crack, the Banyan Tree grew. It grew and grew and grew. It reached into the sky. It spread across the land. A tree that became a forest, the mightiest forest in all the land, one that spread all along the Neera. From headwaters to coast, roots dug into the ground and branches sprang overheard. The Sun could not touch the Neera's waters.

Even as the Sun paused in confusion, the Banyan Tree grew taller. With a mighty sweep of all its branches, the Tree summoned the Winds. Remembering the Sun's ancient crime, the Winds howled. They swept up from the Banyan Tree's branches and flung the Sun back into the heavens. Sweeping into his home, they gathered the last of the clouds and set them free. Unlike the Moon, they didn't channel the waters into the Neera. Instead the clouds burst above the ground to create the first rains, blocking out the Sun as they nourished the lands.

The Sun crept back over the horizon, stunned by the response to his act. As his beaten eyes swept over Earth's realm, they caught sight of the mighty Banyan Tree. It was then that the Banyan Tree spoke to him.

"Who are you, O Sun, to steal the waters of the Earth?" demanded the Tree. "Who are you to deny my children, the Moon's grandchildren, the ancient right that was given to them by the Earth, in her own realm?"

At this, the Sun's old resentment burst out.

"Who am I?" he cried in rage. "By what law does the Earth deny me the right to make life? She made the springs. She brought in the Winds to soak the lands with water. She asked the Moon to make the first seeds. Where was I in her grand scheme? Why would she leave me out of the making of life? Am I that unworthy, that disgraceful, that unwanted?"

"Why, O Banyan Tree, why shouldn't I steal those waters, if the Earth began her scheme by denying me the same?"

At this, the Earth climbed up the branches of the Banyan Tree to speak to the Sun.

"O fiery one." she said. "All you had to do was ask."

At this, the Sun's face reddened with embarrassment. He realised that of all the actions he had taken over the years, the one thing he hadn't done was ask whether he could take part. O my dear people, anger can come from many places, and is sometimes justified. But before we unleash our rage on anyone or anything, we need to ask if we have done all we could to avoid it. The Sun had failed to do so.

"Even so." said the Banyan Tree. "The fault is largely the Sun's, but not his alone. After all, before life was born, all the world was made up of two elements -- water and fire --- and four types of beings. The Earth, the Moon, the Winds, the Sun. The Sun was the only one left out of the making of life. Was it that hard to notice his absence?"

It was now the Earth's turn to feel shame. Sometimes, O people, we neglect that which lies right in front of our eyes. And even if it's not always our fault, we may still reap the fruits of our neglect.

It was there, among the branches of the Banyan Tree, that the Earth and the Sun finally called truce. Much life had already been created, but much life was still unmade. The task of creating all remaining life was given to the Sun. The Earth taught him to how to draw sweetness from the Salt Waters and he pulled fresh waters into the sky. These, he made into clouds, which he gave to the Winds to carry over the Earth and make rain.

The Moon taught him to make seeds. His own light, stronger and more powerful than the Moon's, infused the new seeds he created with strength, leading to tall forms of life which could stand on

their own. Not since Aakasai had such beings emerged on the Earth. But unlike the Moon's descendants, the Sun's children also carried his heat. This meant that his children could be both generous and bold, but also quick to temper and madness. Many years later, they would cut down the Banyan Forest downstream and regain the banks of the Neera there. The Banyan Tree would retreat to her original form on the Lone Mountain. But that's a story for another day. Many years of peace would roll by, before violence would emerge again.

Meanwhile, the Beings agreed to one final task. While our people could partake of rains, we grew best with the waters of the Neera river. When our people in the Earth's realm were finished with Neera's waters, the Banyan Tree agreed to gift the waters of the Neera to the Sun. He in turn would gift it to the Moon, who gift them to our ancestors among the stars. Our ancestors would hold onto this water until our people on earth would need them again.

This is when they created the River in the Sky. Look up into the heavens, O people and see where the River flows! It flows in the direction of the Lone Mountain. That is no coincidence. For the River in the Sky is nothing but the Neera herself in another form. As she steams above our ancestor's fires, she moves towards where the Banyan Tree still stands.

It is the Banyan Tree which catches the Neera in her branches and brings her back to Earth, to nourish all of us once more. Thus, the cycle repeats again, another time. Neera flows from the Banyan Tree to be used by us. She is then taken up into the heavens by the Sun to be given to the Moon. The Moon gives her to our ancestors who boil her waters, waiting for the time we would need the Neera again. When the time is right, the River in the Sky is set in motion, to return to the Banyan Tree, to flow out of her first home.

And thus, we live, in concert with the world.

And with this, the Storyteller finished her tale.

Author's Note: The above tale is part of the *Dodda Nadu* Universe, a fictional world where my first novel (which I'm currently writing) is set. *The River in the Sky and the Banyan Tree* is a legend that's popular among a particular community of people in that Universe.