

CHAPTER ONE

Two child soldiers escape from imminent death

We had just finished burying the second bottle of explosives and were making our way back to base camp.

Before we entered the jungle, we had to cross a clearing. We walked stealthily, treading delicately as if walking over a sea of rose petals.

The sun was starting to set. Arafat walked slowly. I was behind him. He stopped frequently, listening intently. He seemed to hear something strange. He turned his head to look at me, and bending down slightly, put a finger to his lips to signal that I should not make a sound. After a moment, we carried on walking until we reached the jungle.

Suddenly, my friend stopped and stayed motionless for a long time.

Arafat grabbed my arm, forcing me to crouch down. Bringing his face close to mine, he whispered, "Stay with me. We are about to be surrounded. When I start running, follow me, get out of the jungle and don't stop: head for the mountains. We've got a couple of hours of light left before it's fully night."

I started to feel afraid. I could hear footsteps hurrying over the ground, not far from where we were. There was a rustling in the bushes to our left.

Arafat jumped up and we began to run. Whistles raised the alarm. A military patrol had discovered us.

"Run, Sandokan," my friend shouted. "Run, for God's sake."

A voice, almost a shriek, cried out "HALT!"

I turned and saw figures chasing after us. There must have been about twenty of them. Where had they all come from?

The Sinhalese soldiers started shooting. The bullets whizzed past us. Dry gunshots mixed with machine gun fire. Filled with panic, we ran through the dense jungle. For us, the shrill sound of their whistles was like the trumpet of the first angel, the one who mixed fire and blood and hurled it down upon the Earth, burning up all the green grass.

Suddenly, I fell flat on the ground. I had tripped on a tree root. My weapon landed a few metres away. Before I could realise the danger I would be in if I didn't act fast, I felt someone hauling me up under my arms and placing the gun in my hands.

I turned, but could not see anyone in the gloom. Shadows had now invaded the inside of the jungle and I could not clearly make out any figures or details in the enveloping darkness.

A shadow came running towards me, grabbed my shirt and pulled me forward.

"What are you doing? For God's sake, Sandokan, follow me," Arafat ordered, dragging me along.

Running to the left, we found our way out of the jungle. The rocky slopes rose abruptly up from the plain in front of us, with the road winding its way through them.

We were running so fast over the rocks, streams and tree trunks that our mud-logged boots barely seemed to touch the ground.

We heard the noise of jeeps behind us.

“Head for the plantations!” ordered Arafat, immediately changing our route.

Our path took us through a bamboo forest and paddy fields; among ficus, orchids and palm trees, rhododendrons and azaleas. It became easier to orient ourselves; we did not bump into trees, or trip over roots, nor did we have to protect our eyes against branches, invisible in the dark. But we did sink into the soft ground. Arafat was confidently making his way in front of me; he occasionally stopped, trampled the ground, and grumbling, carried on along our way.

“Tread in my footsteps, Sandokan,” he said to me along certain stretches.

We went up one sloping area of ground, then another, and started to ascend the slope of the mountains at higher altitudes. During that sudden ascent, we noticed that the air, which was becoming cleaner and more humid, started to hurt our lungs as we breathed it in. Far in the distance, the sun started to dip down, hiding behind the high mountains.

We were soaked with sweat. We started to slow down. We were not used to the altitude.

I stumbled and fell to the ground. Arafat lay down next to me on the earth, swallowing huge gulps of air. We were exhausted and panting. We could hardly breathe. We sprawled out on the ground like elephants bathing in the dust; after a moment, we regained our senses slightly.

The soldiers started launching mortars. They were trying to corral us to where they wanted. They wanted us to move to the right, so they could hunt us down.

My hurt started pounding and as the sound of the explosions drew closer, I thought it might burst out of my mouth.

“They’re going to kill us, Arafat!” I said, crawling on all fours, struggling to breathe in and out, in short jerky breaths.

“Not without a fight, they’re not,” he said, leaping to his feet.

Arafat ran back and fired his AK-47 until it was empty.

I stood up immediately, grabbed a grenade that was hanging from my jacket, pulled the security ring off and hurled it as far as I could. The explosion made a heavy sound, as if the muddy ground had suddenly been pierced by a road drilling machine. We carried on, up towards the tea plantations. Any delay would mean an irreparable loss: our death, by a gunshot to the head.

I clenched my teeth, and finding it hard to breathe, I staggered desperately onwards with my friend and comrade. I moved like a robot; I no longer felt tiredness, just a heaviness in all my limbs.

Behind us, we could hear explosions and machinegun fire in the distance.

“I think we’ve lost them,” said Arafat. “They must be chasing an animal, and mistaken it for us. Perhaps it was a leopard. We should carry on, in any case.”

Just before nightfall, the sky began to turn orange.

The ascent had been incredibly tiring for us, for two boys who were born and grew up next to a fishermen's beach. Several kilometres of treacherous paths, in the most difficult conditions I had ever experienced.

They could no longer reach us.

"I can't go on, Arafat," I panted.

Despite the fresh and fragrant surroundings, we were starved of oxygen. To the right, I saw a row of lights below me. It was a small village of adobe houses clustered on the slope, where the tea pickers lived. We had orders not to ask for help from native inhabitants, as they might alert the Sinhalese military.

Seeing that Arafat was not stopping, I followed on behind. I wanted to ask him to let me rest for a while, but I was ashamed.

"Let's rest here for a moment..." said Arafat, lying down on the ground on his back, breathing heavily. "They've given up the chase. The tiger hunt didn't go well for them, because the wild beast has fangs to defend itself."

My heart was beating so violently that I could feel the pulsing of blood in my neck, in my chest and thighs. I shook my head, trying to awaken my deadened senses. My mind was foggy. I felt dizzy. Lying on the ground, I filled my lungs with the fresh air.

Below us, we had left behind the dense, dark jungle and a rocky mountain range that seemed to emanate a faint bluish glow. Beyond, we could see the winding road where we had heard the army jeeps, snaking its way through the rolling leafy terrain until it disappeared out of sight.

A single thought was hammering my mind: I wanted to rest, not get up, not carry on climbing the hill. I breathed in as deeply as I could, and suddenly my mind, as if by magic, rid itself of everything that was paralysing it. The feeling of pressure on my head suddenly lifted away.

Thoughtfully, I gazed at the magnificent landscape. Everything around us was so beautiful. The beauty and peacefulness of it seized my heart.

"Down there, death is waiting for us," said Arafat, sitting beside me. He raised his arm with some effort in the opposite direction and, exhausted, he added, "And up there, do you know what's waiting for us?"

"No."

"Silence."

It was true. The place filled you with an incredible feeling of calm and tranquillity. I looked up. The only noises giving life to the landscape were the distant chirrups of the birds and a gentle breeze ruffling the tea plants and trees.

I was touched by the peace and silent beauty of the mountains. Night was falling.

"I've never seen anything like it," I said, overwhelmed.

"Our country is amazing, Sandokan. You'll see, tomorrow at dawn."

After a brief silence, I asked him, "Hey, it was so dark back there... how did you know I'd fallen over?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

“When we were going through that dark bit of the jungle, I tripped over a tree root. I thought it was game over, but then someone lifted me up and handed me my gun.”

“Well, it wasn’t me...” He looked thoughtful and then said very seriously, “Hey, I wonder if it was the ‘ghost of the tooth of Buddha!’”

“Who’s that?”

“You don’t know the legend?” my friend asked me in surprise. “Well... this is no time to stay here... soon it will be completely dark and we have to find a place to sleep. Let’s keep going!”

We walked very slowly, due to the altitude. With every step it seemed that we were walking aimlessly, that we had lost our way, that we were wandering.

Now we were climbing a different hill, but I thought I could still see the same horizon we had seen before, when we were scaling the other hill. I wanted to get Arafat’s attention, but I didn’t dare. He was the most experienced guerrilla in our camp. He clambered onto an enormous rock, cupped his face in his hands with his open palms and shouted at the vast landscape below us with all his energy:

“I will be king, and you, you will be queen! Oh-oh-oh-oh, oh-oh-oh-oh! Just for one day!”

I did not understand the words, but I felt like my friend was splitting the air, his voice was the voice of someone coming out of the tunnel that connects life and death.

It was a sound that revealed the absurdity and pointlessness of violence, of cruelty, of moral indignation; a gut-wrenching cry that revealed the abuse of power, of a war between countrymen, of two child soldiers who had escaped their impending death.

None of my later raids or missions would ever compare to this: the feeling of being on the tightrope between the realm of the living and the abyss of death, that time I fled with Arafat after burying butane bottles filled with explosives and shrapnel in territory controlled by the Sinhalese army.

We lay on the ground, looking at the crescent moon hanging in the clear night sky.

I opened my eyes wide, my lips forming an ‘O’ shape. Billions of stars above our heads winked at us, sending down their light. Arafat traced the Milky Way with his index finger, from one end to the other. The bright, peaceful strip.

“Do you really not know about the stars?” he asked me suddenly.

“No, no...” I replied shyly, overcome by the magnificent scene above us.

“You should learn, Sandokan. If you ever get lost in the jungle, you can find a clearing or climb a tree, and by looking at the sky you can work out where you are, to find your way safely. That’s how I usually know where I’m going. What did you think? That I’ve got supernatural powers? See those stars?”

“Which ones?”

“How do you mean, which ones? Look where I’m pointing.” Arafat pointed with his index finger in the direction of north.

“That, my friend! That’s the constellation of Ursa Major. Can you see seven big stars that make up a kind of chariot, with a spear?”

I looked at those stars. I was so taken aback by the beauty of what I was seeing, that I could not say anything.

“Yes, I see them. That’s awesome.”

As he named them, Arafat drew the stars in the air with his finger, as if he was touching them one by one. They changed colour, twinkling in different shades.

“But to me it looks like an animal, not a chariot,” I remarked.

“Well... some people say it’s a bear, although bears don’t have such a long tail, and so some people say it’s a swan... In my village some people said it was an elephant, others a horse, and I’ve even heard some people saying it’s the shape of a dog...”

“And why are there seven?”

“I don’t know, but what I can tell you is that the number seven brings good fortune to all adventurers. It’s a lucky number.”

“And what does the number seven have to do with adventurers?”

“Well. I’ve thought about that a lot, actually...”

After a short silence I asked again, full of curiosity, “And why are they joined up like that?”

“I suppose it’s because they want to be, and that’s why they’re inseparable. Like us, Sandokan.”

“Good point, Arafat. If those stars are inseparable friends, then so are we.”

The stars seemed to understand one another, blinking at each other with their shining eyes.

We woke before dawn. It was so cold during the night that we slept clinging to one another for warmth. Our clothes were soaking wet from the humid night. I started to cough.

We began our descent, and as dawn came, the rays of the sun illuminated the white clouds suspended like cotton wool above the valley, lighting up tufts tinged with orange, blue, yellow and red. Our feet slid over the soft texture of the moss-covered rocks, and on the narrow paths, they sunk into the mud.

Stopping for a moment, we surveyed the immensity of our surroundings. We were enthralled. The landscape was like a painting of paradise. We felt like we were in a world of our own, free, leaving behind everything that could oppress us, like the fear and anxiety of dying by committing suicide, if, to avoid being captured alive, we had to swallow the cyanide pill we wore around each of our necks. During our tough training as child soldiers, we had sworn before our superiors that, before being captured by the Sinhalese, we would end our own lives.

We carried on walking.

The silence that reigned made me dream. I found myself smiling at my thoughts, gesturing and babbling words.

“What are you saying?” Arafat asked me.

“Nothing, nothing.”

As we continued walking, I breathed the fresh air in and out deeply. We avoided several obstacles that we saw, or Arafat saw. The tea plants came up also to our waists. I ran my hands through the gleaming leaves and broke off one of the bright green buds.

“Smell it, Sandokan,” he advised, walking in front of me.

I did as my friend suggested. I observed the solid, juicy leaf and smelled its humid, musky scent. I put it in my shirt pocket.

“Aha! I spotted you, Sandokan,” said Arafat, laughing as he looked back at me. “I saw you keeping it. Who do you want to give it to?”

As he was walking behind me, he did not see me blush. I was thinking of my friend Ambika. I wanted to show her that leaf; for her to experience the heady feeling when you inhaled its scent. As she had never left the beach and its surroundings, I was sure she had never been to a tea plantation.

Arafat started singing in English, a song by his favourite artist.

*Heaven loves ya
The clouds part for ya
Nothing stands in your way
When you're a boy
Clothes always fit ya
Life is a pop of the cherry
When you're a boy
When you're a boy
You can wear a uniform
When you're a boy
Other boys check you out
You get a girl
These are your favourite things
When you're a boy [...]*

At our base camp, my friend had a radio-cassette player and a shoebox full of tapes that he kept inside a suitcase. A foreigner who worked for a humanitarian organisation had visited his village and given him a load of cassettes of English music. Arafat had made copies to keep them safe, because he told me that dust and damp had damaged several of them.

He used to listen over and over again to a singer whose name sounded like an alien to me at the time. It was David Bowie. Arafat learned the English language by listening to Bowie's songs on repeat.

It was 1984. The decade was marked by increased tensions in the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The international terrorism that had been prevalent in the previous decade had intensified. Differences in development between various world populations were evident, and the existence of AIDS became public knowledge for the first time. During those years, international NGOS started to proliferate in Asia thanks to the

snobbery of 'postmodernity', and in Sri Lanka, like any structure with vested interests, these NGOs were more interested in surviving and reproducing than in achieving their apparent objectives.

As we descended, the fine mist over the tea plantations dispersed, revealing the bright daytime colours. We crossed fields and meadows.

"These fields are so quiet now," said my friend, turning his head towards me and pointing at the plantations. "You should see what happens in a month's time. All the local people will be working from morning until night."

At midday we reached the area surrounding my village, Maboombu, inhabited by a community of fishermen.

Suddenly, a roar broke the silence. We both looked up into the trees, searching left and right. We pointed our machine guns in all directions. Our guns were poised, ready to fire at the slightest threat.

"Did you hear that?" I asked in a whisper. "Is it a tiger?"

My friend and comrade listened hard. I looked at him in silence for a long while.

"Nonsense, Sandokan," Arafat said finally, his voice steady and more relaxed. "It's a female leopard looking for food. She heard us, got scared and climbed up that tree. There's no danger. The only tigers here are us..."

I smiled, blushing, and looked down.

I began to hear the sound of scratches, followed by sobbing, and suddenly, the deep barking of a dog that made me anxious.

I opened my eyes. I sat up in bed with a feeling of panic, frantically looking around the room. Once again, an episode from my past life as a child soldier in Sri Lanka had come to me during my sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

A mysterious man appears

As usual, the dream had been so realistic that I was incredibly relieved to wake up; like I had been in a situation of immediate danger and had been rescued by the legendary Garuda bird.

Next to me, my girlfriend Miriam was fast asleep, and on the other side of the door I knew my dog was waiting for me, tail wagging, eager to go out for his walk.

Every day, before dawn, I leave the house with Koba, my Labrador, to run around the port area of Marseille. After about half an hour, I head to the fish market to buy fresh fish for my chef, Jean-Marie. That day was a Saturday, a very busy restaurant for my restaurant, Kattamaram.

“How’s Koba doing?” asked Henri, who sells the finest bluefin tuna, wahoo and gilthead bream in the whole of the French Riviera.

“He’s tied up there at the entrance,” I replied. “He’s great.”

“Oh! What did I tell you? A dog has to be well-trained, or he’ll cause a lifetime of problems for his owner,” he said, moving his stocky, hairy arms in an exaggerated manner, as if to make his point more clearly. “As the proverb goes: ‘Animals are such agreeable friends - they ask no questions; they pass no criticisms’,” he put his large, sharp knife down, and leaning with his arms wide over the ice counter, added, “Right, what have we got today?”

I handed him the list I had jotted down in the kitchen the previous day with my chef Jean-Marie.

I began approving every fish he showed me.

In my restaurant I always serve fresh fish. Kattamaram is renowned by local customers in Marseille and tourists: many of them come because they have read the excellent reviews that always appear in guidebooks and specialist travel magazines. But, above all, because of word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied customers.

French cuisine always includes a starter, a main dish and a dessert. However, in my kitchen, pieces of *mi-cuit* tuna or barbecued bream, all accompanied with sautéed baby vegetables or potato puree, go side by side with steak tartare or steak with green pepper sauce, barbecued shoulder of lamb or duck breast.

The main reason for the success of my business has been the fact that I am personally responsible for buying the food, and especially the fish. But it is also due to the design of my kitchen and the exquisite variety of my daily menus.

Not only do we offer classic dishes such as snails with parsley, or half-cooked *foie gras* served with a sweet and salty compote on toast, or the famous fish stew known as *bouillabaisse*. In my restaurant, I want my customers to feel like Alice in Wonderland, where elements are transformed and nothing is what it seems. My intention is for the Oriental to become Western; in this way, the Western is orientalised and contrasts appear and disappear in harmonious combinations.

An acclaimed food critic wrote about my restaurant, “There has been no restaurant in France that experiments like this with the avant-garde. There is no *a la carte* menu, but a tasting menu not to be missed.” An author of best-selling historical novels wrote in a national newspaper, in his Sunday column, “If poetry exists in *haute cuisine*, it is represented at Kattamaram. This is world class gastronomy. They not only serve the best Mediterranean cuisine, but also the finest exotic dishes prepared in Europe. Especially the Asian food. It has to be tasted to be believed.”

My speciality, of course, is also Sri Lankan cuisine. It required some essential spices – the way they are mixed is fundamental to the elaboration of a dish – such as turmeric, chili, coriander seeds, cumin, mustard seeds or fenugreek. With these you can make a curry, which, depending how you season it, gives one result or another. Needless to say, Sri Lankan cuisine is hot and spicy.

I cannot find the basics I need to make this food in France, and so I must travel to Milan, where there is a large Sri Lankan community, to buy spices. On one of these trips, I met my girlfriend, Miriam. She is the one in charge of the administration of the restaurant. As well as being stricter than I am with the staff, she is wonderful when it comes to dealing with the customers.

It was 8:30 am by the time I left the fish market and began my run back home with Koba. In my head I was going through the day’s schedule. Miriam would have opened up by now and my staff would be arriving. Majid, my headwaiter and magnificent sommelier would be late – this was becoming a habit of his lately. I warned him last time that he should not be coming into work late, but he takes no notice of me. At 10:00 am, Henri’s assistant would bring all the fish I had selected to the restaurant. Gerard, the wine and spirits distributor, would arrive at the same time to deliver my order.

And at 10:30 am, the food distributor would arrive punctually to restock the pantry and cold room. I had twenty minutes to get home, have a shower and change and go to the restaurant. As I had a few minutes to spare, I decided to stop in and see my friend Besnard.

When you become a regular customer of a café at a certain time of day, the manager or the waiter behind the bar will serve you ‘the usual’ without you having to say a word.

“Another terrible terrorist attack,” commented Besnard, serving me coffee and handing me a newspaper. “I mean, when the hell are those Islamist fanatics going to leave the Israelis alone? Don’t they realise that the Israeli army are going to retaliate severely?”

“That’s exactly what *those* terrorists want,” said a customer who was sipping a glass of liqueur. “They want to provoke them. They intend for the Israelis armed forces to react how they always do when they are rightly defending their citizens, and when that happens, they will intentionally call the foreign press correspondents, and in front of the cameras they will begin to cry to the international community for the damages caused to them.”

“They are cowards,” replied Besnard to the customer on the other side of the bar, pleased to have someone he could get into a heated discussion with. “They always use women and children as human shields.”

“They are even firing rockets at Israel from schools,” added someone else.

They then became embroiled in a discussion of the events in the Middle East, as if they were a couple of experts in political analysis on French television. The topic inevitably moved on to the time when Algeria was under French colonial rule.

But my attention was not on savouring my coffee, or on the newspaper I was pretending to read, or on the conversation.

The man sitting at a table near the door had been following me. Judging from his dark complexion, like mine, he looked like he was from the south of India or Sri Lanka. I remembered seeing him in front of the fish market as I was tying up Koba at the entrance. But before that, when we were running through Fort Saint-Nicolas, he had been hurrying along the opposite pavement, hiding from time to time in the doorways of buildings.

Absolutely nobody where I lived knew about my past. I had been a terrorist in the Tamil guerrilla group, called the 'Tigers'. I had been a child soldier. I had managed to escape and go into exile under a new identity. My survival instinct was always on the alert, however, whenever unexpected coincidences or sudden events occurred.

When I left the café, at a glance I could see that the stranger's presence did not represent any physical threat. He looked like an official.

On my way home, I deduced that what this man wanted from me was information. He wanted to tell me something. But he was being careful. Perhaps he was afraid of me and did not want to approach me impetuously. He was following me to make sure that I was the man mentioned in the confidential information he might have. I assumed that in a matter of hours, or minutes, I would be hearing from him.