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# Forever the Road

Anthony St. Clair



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**rucksack**  
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Rucksack Press

## **About *Forever the Road***

### **Travel. Destiny. Beer.**

**The world's greatest traveler never thought he'd be staying put.**

Jay had planned to move on after marking Agamuskara, India, off his list of places to see. Then two strange men steal his passport, and the long-roaming loner stays in Agamuskara to find it. After years of globetrotting with no companion but his trusty big backpack, Jay befriends the stout-quaffing, ever-grinning Faddah Rucksack, the world's only Himalayan-Irish sage. Now Jay finds himself being steered toward an unknown fate by a man who lost his own destiny long ago.

No Jake or Jade is better than Jade Agamuskara Bluegold at slinging drinks, destinies, and decisions. Yet after spending ten years helping The Management keep the world turning, the solitary, mysterious bartender at the pub at Everest Base Camp has begun to doubt the life she chose over another path. When Jade's uneasy friendship with Rucksack leads her to help him unravel the mystery at the heart of the city, Jade finds her loyalties changing in ways she never could have imagined.

When the bartender and the backpacker meet, forces are set in motion that won't just change the world forever—they might end it. Then Jay accidentally awakens an ancient evil, and only Jay, Rucksack, and Jade stand between it and its terrible purpose: destroying all life in a smiling fire.

**Part of [The Rucksack Universe Series](#)**

The [Rucksack Universe](#) is the exciting world of wit, adventure, and beer that fans call “buoyant with a unique humor, twist and focus on international travel,” and “perfect for fans of Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman.” Enjoy this ongoing, non-sequential urban fantasy travel fiction series wherever e-books and books are sold.

“Agamuskara shares its name with the river that runs through India’s holiest city, which is also its unholyest. While no records survive to tell us when Agamuskara was founded, local lore maintains the area was settled by the first people to come to the Indian subcontinent. History also does not explain why the city and the river should be named what, in the Hindi, translates as ‘smiling fire.’ This mystery, the delights of daily life and Indian culture, and the unrivaled drinks at the Everest Base Camp Pub and Hostel continue to attract travelers from all over the world.”

— Guru Deep, *India Through the Third Eye*

# I

“**IT COULD BE** a mirror eclipse,” Rucksack said to Jade. Her hand jerked. The pint glass banged against the tap, sending the black Galway Pradesh Stout foaming and sloshing. She set it down so the beer could settle before resuming the seven-minute pour that made for a perfect pint of GPS.

“But there hasn’t been a mirror eclipse since The Blast,” she replied. “And that was nearly two hundred years ago.”

Rucksack looked up from the newspaper and ran his gloved left hand over his bald brown head. A dark sadness flickered over his eyes, as brown and black

as earth and trees. “Well, in two month’s time, there may be.” His accent, an ambiguous combination of Irish and everywhere, refused as usual to acknowledge the sound “th,” so “there” sounded more like “t’ere.” His gaze flicked from Jade’s face to the bottles at the back of the bar, then slowly came back to her.

“Mirror’s not for certain, though,” he said. “They won’t know till closer to the time. Just says the atmospheric conditions may be right.” He harrumphed. “Bloody irresponsible, saying that. All it’ll do is scare people. And mentioning the damn Blast on top o’ it...”

Jade poured, then set down the brimming pint so it could finish settling, black beer under snow-white foam. “Let me guess,” she said. “There’s no cause for alarm.”

“O’ course,” Rucksack said. “It’s all coincidence.” His thin, tight smile said the rest.

Even the steaming-hot India day outside couldn’t alleviate the chill in Jade’s gut. She remembered talking of The Blast as a schoolgirl, scared hushed whispers after history lessons about the strange double-sided eclipse that had burned before Night’s Day, then a world changed and scarred. As an adult and a Jade, many times she had tried to ask The Management what role The Blast was supposed to play, but they never spoke of it. Then again, there were many things they never spoke of.

Jade handed Rucksack his pint. The heat didn’t matter. At her touch, the glass and beer became the perfect temperature for the stout, as if the Irish pub were in Ireland itself, instead of the middle of one of India’s hottest cities.

“I’ll be outside,” Rucksack said. “Suddenly I feel a chill.”

*You’re not the only one,* Jade thought as her first customer of the day opened the double mahogany doors. Flat yellow sunshine spilled heat into the pub, but she still felt cold.

Once the doors closed, Jade eyed the liquor, where not so much as a speck of

dust dulled the bottles or the glass shelves. The bar's lights glinted off the bottles, which sat on shelves against the mirror that ran from the ceiling to Jade's waist, as wide as the length of the bar. It was well stocked for now, though later she knew there'd be a run on the cheaper stuff: Ram Rum, Liquid Courage, Manager's Reserve, Jimmy Runner, Potato Juice, Blue Label Special, Nirvanic, Captain's Special Box.

The knock-off Indian booze might all taste like sugary antifreeze, but it had the best names. Jade chuckled and wondered who had thought of them all. In the mirror, the light caught her smile and her blue-and-gold eyes, framed by her almond face, olive skin, and the kinky brown-and-black hair that hung just past her shoulders.

Then she reached down, just there on the paneling, just below the bottom shelf of the mirrored bar, just below the phone that never rang. Jade tapped the spot and the cabinet opened. Unseen and unseeable by anyone but her—though lately she wondered about Rucksack—the cabinet held her true duty.

A soft, silvery light shimmered from no distinct source. The cabinet could have opened to the sky; the small space inside seemed to have no back, no bottom, no sides, no top. *All these years*, Jade thought, *and sometimes I still don't know*. She reached inside, wondering if she would just keep reaching and reaching, but as always her knuckles rapped on the wood at the back of the cabinet, the same deep mahogany of the bar and the doors.

The bottles seemed to float on the light: Green #2, Red #4, Brown #5, Yellow #6, Blue #7, Orange #9, Silver #10. Almost an ordinary day, except that there was extra Blue #7 and Red #4. No Gold #1, Gray #3, Purple #8, or Black #11, but those came only with special circumstances. Two or even three could be combined. All eleven were never supposed to be mixed together, except under personal guidance from The Management. For a moment Jade wondered why The Management had never been able to figure out a twelfth elixir. It was said that they nearly had, just before The Blast, but after the

catastrophe they had stopped trying. The twelfth elixir remained a myth that could not be made real.

Jade glanced at the clock. Early the hour and empty the pub, but hot was the day, and people would be thirsty. The news spoke of The Blast and another mirror eclipse. People would be scared, indecisive, unsure. The people would need those extra elixirs, and Jade would be ready to steer them.

She closed the cabinet, rose, and turned to face the doors. Her eyes blazed, but her insides still felt cold. For a moment, her mind faded back to long ago, to another life that seemed further away than The Blast.

“Why are you posting me here?” she had asked The Management.

“Because of who you are,” the three hooded, floating figures had replied. The voices of The Management always seemed at once like three voices in perfect unison and like one voice that they passed to each other like a ball.

“But I’m just me,” she had said.

If they knew her thoughts, they gave no indication. Jade couldn’t figure out if they read minds or not. All you could ever see were the hoods—never a face or limb or any indication of what The Management were behind their cloaks. In a way that still haunted her every move and decision, they had replied, “You are here because you are the best of us, Jade Agamuskara Bluegold.”

She hoped she still was. Lately, she didn’t feel so certain. No matter how perfect the drink, no matter how she steered the drinker down the path that life needed him or her to take, she no longer fully trusted her decisions or her own path. Whoever she helped, her own choices rang in her mind all the time. *Who am I now?* she thought. *Why did I choose this, instead of saying yes in Hong Kong when he asked?*

But that was another life ago.

When the pub door opened again, her thoughts returned to where she was: behind the bar of the best pub and hostel in Agamuskara, India. A man entered and sat at a table. His straight black hair hung ragged, as if he’d given himself a

haircut after drinking a few beers—a common look with many of the budget backpackers she'd seen pass through the hostel. His clothes suggested a young American, and in his brown eyes hung doubts of his place in the world, how he was trying to find it but had a hard time knowing where to look. He stuck his nose in his guidebooks, a dry thirst in his throat and a yearning in his heart.

Jade ignored him.

A few minutes later, a woman came in, sat at a different table, and quickly buried her nose in her guidebooks. The pub lights gleamed off her short blonde hair. A ferocity burned in her, one that Jade knew well: a brittle wall, hard voice, and driving velocity that concealed intense fear and doubt.

Jade ignored her too. *The less you do*, she thought, *the more they do what they were supposed to do anyway*. So Jade stood behind the bar, her back to the tables. After a few more minutes, first the man and then the woman approached the bar. Jade kept her back to them, waiting.

“Excuse me,” the man said.

“Oy!” the woman said.

Jade turned around. “Oh, hello! What can I do for you both?”

“I’ve been here for—” they both began in unison.

“Oh, oh, so sorry!” Jade replied. “What can I get the two of you?”

“We’re not together,” the woman said, looking at the man for the first time.

“No, um,” the man said, looking back at the woman, “I’m, um, over there.”

“I’m surprised,” Jade said. “I would’ve thought you were traveling together.”

The woman’s eyes widened. “Why do you say that?”

Jade pointed at the book each was carrying. “You each have *Deep’s Enlightened Guide to Spiritual Travel* and *India Through the Third Eye*. Seemed like a for-sure.” Jade shrugged. “Even a bartender can’t be right all the time.”

“Oh,” the woman said, not just looking at the man but also paying attention to him for the first time. He looked at her, then at the worn, identical book in her hand. “Are you heading to Godhpur?”

“Um, yeah,” said the man. “Yeah, I was, I mean, it’s—”

“It’s amazing!” the woman said. “I’ve been wanting to find myself there for years!”

“Me too!” the man said. “Well, I mean, find myself, not yourself. I, um, you know...”

*Gotta be Californian*, Jade thought as she smiled at him. “You want a Deep’s Special Lager,” she said, then nodded to the woman. *Australian, no doubt*. “And you want a chardonnay.”

Both nodded.

“I’ll bring your drinks right over. Why don’t you sit and swap travel plans.”

They both wandered over to the woman’s table and resumed talking.

*Now for the hard part.*

While they pointed to the same highlighted sections in their guidebooks, Jade looked at the paths of their lives—how they connected, intertwined, ran together for so long.

How they broke apart.

*Falling in love*, Jade thought. *It’s easier than falling down the stairs.*

But he would never show his confidence, and she would never let down her guard. In time, their bright eyes would turn cold, their words sharp. Eventually, there would come a day when they would turn away from each other, preferring the coldness of the world to the frigidity of each other’s company.

*That’s the future*, Jade thought. It was all there in the paths that only Jakes and Jades could watch—and influence. She grinned as she tapped the cabinet.

*Unless I do my job.*

Neither the man nor the woman saw Jade pour the beer and the wine. Nor did they see her smile as she pulled out Red #4 and Blue #7. “Best to you both,” Jade whispered, tipping drops into each glass. The drinks brightened for a moment, as if revealing some inner divinity, then faded back to their usual merely golden selves.

*They should be lifelong, Jade thought. But they will let themselves get in the way, instead of trusting each other enough to be their true selves with each other. Jade set the drinks on the table.*

*The challenge isn't falling in love, she thought. The challenge is landing safely and staying in love.*

An hour later and well past their first round, the man no longer stammered, and the hard edge of the woman's voice was gone. The woman looked deep into his eyes, one hand near his, almost but not quite touching. Not yet. Though too far away to hear, Jade needed only to watch to know what was happening. They sat closer now, knees touching, hands occasionally tapping a shoulder, arm, or thigh. From serendipitous wonder had come laughter. Now the talk was serious with "you do? me too!" moments.

Then it happened.

Mid-sentence, the talk ended. The man and the woman looked deeply into each other's eyes. He leaned toward her, his hand on her hand. She leaned toward him. They connected in the smallest, most passionate, tender, relieved-to-have-found-you-in-such-a-random-heartless-world first kiss.

The couple left soon thereafter, toward their shared lifetime ahead. Jade smiled, but only for a moment. *I can help anyone fall in love, she thought, but myself.* Like the smile, this thought lasted only a moment. *I am a Jade, she thought, and I am the best. Love has no place in decision and destiny.*

She went back to work.

**T**HE NO-SHOCKS, NO-WORRIES TRUCK clunked in and out of another pothole. For the millionth time since hopping in the back of the truck at Mt. Everest Base Camp in Tibet, Jay bounced up and slammed back down into the truck bed. His bruised body seared under the blazing Indian day. He hardly winced anymore. The effort wasn't worth it.

When Jay was crammed into the corner where the truck bed met the cab,

the jarring and jostling affected him less. He tried sitting on his backpack again. Instead of merely pounding his arse, each bump nearly tossed him onto the cracked road.

Jay sat back down on the hot metal of the truck bed and patted his backpack. Faded, black, waterproofed by dust, nearly as wide as Jay, and as tall as his tenderized torso, the backpack dozed next to him like a dog beside its master. A round lump stretched the fabric at the top of the pack.

It had come back.

Again.

A triple shot of fear, awe, and revulsion washed through him. Jay had lost track of the number of times he'd dropped the *thing* off cliffs, flushed it down toilet holes, and lobbed it into rivers. Each time, he'd hardly zipped up his pack when the lump would appear again. Jay looked away. Instead of thinking about the... thing, Jay tried to think about Agamuskara. Guru Deep's *India Through the Third Eye* called it "India's holiest and unholy city," though the guidebook never explained why.

Jay couldn't explain to himself why he felt so compelled to go there. It was said that people went to Varanasi to die holy, but they went to Agamuskara to live fully. Jay figured he really must want to live, even if his manner of getting to the city suggested otherwise.

After three days of the truck's tires barely not going over the edges of cliffside roads in Tibet, nearly crashing to a halt from axle-bending potholes in Nepal, and using endless horn blasts to navigate the oncoming trucks and standstill cows of northern India's river plains, Agamuskara couldn't be much farther now. Before setting out this morning, the driver had told Jay they would not be going to the city center, but that was fine. He'd make his own way to the middle of town, even if he had to walk. With his skin clogged with grit and his throat caked in dust, all Jay wanted right now was a hot shower and a cold beer. India was India, though. He suspected he would get the opposite. But he would rest

and clean up. Then he'd find his way through the city and figure out what he had to see, what drew him so.

The rattling truck moved so fast that the world passed in a blur, but Jay marveled at all he saw. Countless people wore brilliant colors and smiled from weathered, driven faces. They defied the washed-out landscape and the humid mat of the air. Every village had been here before time was time, it seemed. Each village also brought a glimpse of temples and shrines, elephant-headed gods, bulls, monkeys, multi-limbed deities rendered in brick, stone, concrete, and reverence.

Approaching Agamuskara, Jay now understood that India was four things: heat, humans, history, and gods. They shaped India not so much into a country or a culture but a world. India was all of the world, all of time in every passing moment, and every emotion, every depravity and transcendence, every hope realized and every futility suffered, of all the human race.

And, gods, was India heat. Humid, blazing, sopping heat. India felt as if wet blankets had been baked for an hour in a pot of water, then, steaming and boiling, wrapped around the country. Even Jay's sweat glands felt sluggish. The humidity jellied the will. It softened the wood of the few meager trees. Even the concrete blocks of houses and shacks seemed to sag, drip, and simmer in the midday, clear-sky blaze of sunlight.

The truck turned onto a highway, renown throughout northeastern India for being maintained. The road reminded Jay of the interstate highways of his left-long-ago home, except that as far as the traffic was concerned, the four lanes were simultaneously one lane, three lanes, twenty lanes, and no lanes. Still, the truck's consistent speed and motion brought a soothing breeze to Jay's skin, and the smooth road took him from a blazing sear to a nearly gentle simmer.

For once, Jay's tenderized rump stayed in one merciful, bounceless spot. After a few kilometers, he relaxed like a roast chicken resting after coming out of the oven.

The view from the highway wasn't as interesting. The heat haze dulled the flatlands, and it seemed as if a wink and some rupees had made the scenery vanish. Jay almost pined for the cliffs that, just a couple days ago, had dropped off from the side of the truck. Every rock bouncing down into nothing had terrified him, but the trees, cows, and occasional village had been fascinating.

“Namaste la vista, baby,” Jay said, mimicking the formerly white t-shirt he was wearing. He lifted the shirt to gain access to the treasures below. Wrapped around his waist and tucked into the front of his tan, dusty cargo pants, the thin fabric of his money belt was already soaked through. But no matter. The treasures would be dry and safe. Jay took out a wad of plastic, then unrolled, unfolded, flipped, and eventually unwrapped his most prized possession: the small, dark-blue booklet of his US passport.

The formalese of government speak greeted him: “...requests all whom it may concern to permit the citizen/national named herein to pass without delay or hindrance and in case of need to give all lawful aid and protection...”

Jay wondered how much he still looked like the photo. The green-and-gold eyes were the same, as was the light-brown hair. But the skin of that face? Dust, heat, sun, cold, ice, rain, beer, hot breakfasts, cold breakfasts, no breakfasts had all leathered his face, hardened his eyes, softened his smile. But it was still Jay. Jay, once from Idaho, now of the world.

He flipped through the pages—past the backgrounds of cacti and mountains, past the important information that addressed everything from about your passport to loss of citizenship. Then he opened the last five years. Visas, stamps, signatures—most of them official and some, to put it mildly, questionable. Jay thought about the so-called visas that had been added not at an official immigration checkpoint, but by hands unsteadied after a bit of backroom blather, boozing, and baksheesh. He flipped through the countries: South Africa, Tanzania, Kenya, Gambia, Morocco, Ireland, England, Scotland, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Austria, Croatia, Germany, Sweden, Russia,

Kazakhstan, Mongolia, China, Tibet.

There should have been a visa for Nepal, but instead there was only a blank page. Before arriving at the border checkpoint between Tibet and Nepal, the men in the truck had hidden Jay under a blanket. Jay didn't ask why. They'd hardly slowed down since.

And now—officially—Jay was in India.

Adventures taken, people met, sights seen—all condensed to stamps on pages. Jay re-wrapped his passport in the plastic and stuck it back in his money belt, behind the photo where the man and woman always smiled at him.

“I hope you're still having a good time,” Jay said to the couple in the photo. For a moment, his anywhere voice lost all the twangs and lilts of his globetrotting, and he was just a regular guy from Idaho again. He started to take out the picture, but the truck's grinding, slowing gears stopped him. The driver stopped blaring on the horn just long enough to slap the door twice. Jay rustled his money belt and clothes back into place.

*End of one road, he thought. Now for another.*

The truck stopped. Jay grinned. He grabbed the pack, ready to lose himself in all the adventures that came from putting one foot in front of the other on an unknown road—a road that could be the one that would finally go on and on forever, as long as he just kept traveling.

At the edge of the city, Jay jumped out, thanked the two men, and handed them some worn notes. The drivers nodded and laughed at the crazy traveler who thought he'd just stroll into the center of the city. As the truck rumbled off, the indistinct faces of the two men slipped out of Jay's memory. He couldn't understand why it was so hard to remember what these men looked like, especially after spending so many days traveling together. *Must be fatigue*, he thought.

Jay swung on his backpack, set its buckles, and adjusted its straps. Despite the ringing in his head, the tiredness, the bruises, and the extra weight, the

touch of the pack to his back brightened his eyes and straightened up his stooping body. It'd be a good walk. A long walk. A tough, hellish walk, sure, but then again, travel wasn't supposed to be easy. The pack did feel heavier, though, now that the little... thing spun in there again.

If anything weighed him down, it wasn't the road-weary fatigue, the not-quite-remembered moonlit night at Mt. Everest, or the Chinese police and all those Dalai Lama portraits. It was the quiet, slow, incessant *shr-shr-shr* as the thing turned, rubbing the fabric of his faithful backpack.

"One foot in front of the other will put it out of your head," Jay said, the Idaho gone from his voice and replaced by the patchwork of places stamped in his passport.

The city center couldn't be that far. *Once there, he thought, I'll beeline to a pint, a shower, and a bed—in whatever order works best. For once, I even know where I want to go.*

Backpack-laden, his skin and clothes were so soaked he wondered if sweat glands could get sore. With every step, Jay tried to understand how the Indians did it. Children ran, laughed, smiled, circled him, joked, and asked for a pen or a piece of candy. Women, wrapped head to toe in yards and yards of sari fabric, walked everywhere carrying baskets. Men in pants and long-sleeve shirts held hands with each other and talked like they were all brothers. Their animated voices and gestures defied the dulling, steaming humidity.

Jay had no idea what the men said. The women didn't look in his direction. The kids tired of him and returned to their games.

With every step, the age of the country seemed to whisper alongside the *shr-shr-shr*. All around him, in every pebble and blade of grass, in every buffalo-dung patty drying as fuel on the sides of shacks, Jay saw and felt the gods whose presence and personality had shaped all people, all moments, all things.

The acrid scent of burning tires stung the air. A cow rooted through plastic and garbage. Jay wondered why the gods couldn't have made things smell better.

As he pressed on, the heat melted his resolve. He was now wearing a boulder, not a backpack. Sweat poured and feet dragged, but Jay kept going. Some old saying about single steps and thousand-mile journeys flitted through his mind. It had to be close, though, had to be. The miles pounded the bottoms of his worn boots, and the scene around Jay changed. At least the ground was flat. Other than a tall hill off to the west, the land here was even, with hardly a rise at all.

Covered in drying dung-fuel patties, the shacks gradually gave way to one- and two-story buildings. Shops. Homes. Offices. Sometimes distinct, often all jumbled.

The humid floating dust changed character too. The scent of fields, cow dung, and fires still clung to his pores and his soul, but a new layer of sound and soot settled on him: car and rickshaw exhaust, cooking food, open sewers. Jay had always heard of India as a land of diversity. Walking it now, he understood they meant the smell.

Stopping a moment to rest, Jay had hardly stood still when an open-sided, three-wheeled black-and-yellow rickshaw taxi pulled up next to him like a buzzing, rattling bumblebee.

“You need a ride?” the driver said. “Get in. I will take you to my friend’s hotel.”

“No, I’m fine,” Jay replied, but the driver was already running over to him.

“So tired,” the driver said, reaching for Jay’s backpack. “Let me put that in for you.”

Jay’s eyes widened and he stepped back.

“I’m fine,” he repeated, his voice flat and final. “No taxi.”

“Cheap ride.”

“No taxi.”

“Special price, my friend,” the driver said.

Jay flung out his hands, shook his head, and started walking away.

The driver shrugged. "You tourists."

"I'm not a tourist," Jay replied. "I'm a traveler."

The driver smiled. "You tourists. Always walking around with houses strapped to your backs! But it is okay, my friend. Sooner or later, you always need a ride, and when you need a ride, I will take you."

Jay left the taxi behind, but the taxi didn't leave him. As he trudged onward, the taxi would flit beside him or buzz behind him or singe Jay's nose with a whiff of putrid blue-black exhaust.

A few kilometers later, Jay stepped wrong and tripped.

Banging his knee on the rough asphalt, he winced and his eyes watered.

When he looked up, the rickshaw had stopped in front of him.

"My friend," the driver said. Something about the man's indistinct face seemed familiar.

Jay sighed. He looked past the driver to the skyline of the city proper.

"The heat makes things seem closer," the driver said, "but it is still far."

"How far?" Jay asked.

"Farther than your feet."

The rickshaw's back seat looked soft. There weren't any springs poking out, and the roof would keep the sun off him. Jay's knee throbbed. His feet threatened mutiny and blisters. Jay sighed and surrendered.

"Everest Base Camp," he said, limping into the rickshaw and setting his pack between his grateful feet.

**"OY! JADE!"**

The laughter-laced shout blasted through the pub door and nearly made her drop the glass she was polishing.

*Ah*, Jade thought. *Rucksack must be ready for his next pint*. She brought a fresh glass to the tap. As she did, The Management's strange warning rang in her

head, the way it did every time Rucksack was around: “This man is dangerous.”

She thought back over the last few months to when the three hooded figures had appeared in the pub. It was just minutes after the letter had arrived and she’d read it. Later that day Rucksack had come in for the first time—but The Management had visited first.

The surprise had made her drop the letter. The Management hardly ever came to the Jakes and Jades in person. Or in being. Or whatever they were. “Why is he dangerous?” she had asked, picking up the sheet of paper. “Who is he?”

“Some say he’s a broken hero,” said the figure in blue and green.

“Some say he’s the world’s only Himalayan-Irish sage,” said the figure in brown and black.

“Some say he’s just a freeloading drunk,” said the figure in silver and gold.

“None of these things has ever been proven,” they all said together. “All we know is that he is an unknown quantity.”

“An unknown quantity?” Jade had said. “What does that even mean?”

“It means he has no destiny. He is as a ghost to us. He is outside of us all.”

“How is that even possible?” Jade had looked at each of the three figures. If they could look sheepish, this was the closest they had ever seemed to it. “What do you want me to do?”

“Your duty has many guises, Jade Agamuscara Bluegold, and some are more dangerous than others. We know little about Faddah Rucksack and far less about his path. Be wary of him but watch him. Learn from him but keep your distance. Stay close but do not get involved. A man without a destiny is a man who might do anything.”

The Management faded away into nothing, as they always did. Jade stood alone, still holding the letter.

She came back to the finished pour. *Who are you, indeed?* Jade thought. Blinking at the glaring midday sun, she carried the brimming glass out into the

bright world.

The white walls of Agamuskara collected light, stored it, packed it tightly, and shot it back into the world like munitions. People, bicycles, vehicles, and animals trudged and flowed—a river of thousands moving past one-story, two-story, and three-story buildings.

The brown-and-black sari was a shadow amongst the white glare and the thousands of colors. The woman caught Jade's eye for a moment. Then the woman was gone, downstream in the river of flesh and steel.

Scooters, rickshaws, taxis, trucks, cows, dogs, children, men, and women teemed through the streets. Many things tried to occupy the same place at the same time. Not even a square of dirt or pavement showed beneath the slow incessant press of tires, feet, and paws. From the people rushing and meandering to the buildings that seemed to shimmer and wobble in the light, all the world moved.

Except for him.

Faddah Rucksack sat at the black iron table, the pub's single table outside, to the right of the door and near the corner of the building, where two wide streets met at an acute angle. His back to the pub and dressed all in black, he sat like the city's shadow—the only shadow amidst the white walls and brilliant colors of the people and trucks. Clad in a black leather glove, his left hand rested on the table next to an empty pint glass. His bare right hand seemed simultaneously earth-brown and cloud-pale.

He read a sheet of paper covered in a scrawl whose language Jade couldn't determine. As she approached, he turned it over and set it down. Rucksack looked toward the roving people. Jade couldn't see his eyes, but everything in how he stared said that the man sitting right here was also hundreds of years and thousands of miles away. He set his left hand on top of his right.

Jade blinked. Coming from the low lights of the pub, it was hard adjusting to the sunlight. She looked at his hands again. Maybe it was the glove, but his left

hand seemed smaller than the right.

“Rucksack?” she said. “Are you okay?”

He turned his head and noticed her for the first time. It took but a moment for the faraway man to return. Rucksack’s face was everyone and no one, everywhere and nowhere; he could’ve been from Ireland, Tibet, Kenya. For all Jade could tell, he could’ve dropped out of the clouds. His tight face let loose a wide smile, bright as the city walls. “There’s never a fear, as long as there’s beer, there’s only smiles and glee,” Rucksack sang. “Now that you’re here, let’s drink in good cheer. Hey, barkeep! How about a couple for free?”

Jade laughed. “Have you ever paid for a beer?”

“It’s like a dog, only more loyal and useful,” Rucksack said. “I cannot help the extensive credit that insists on following me wherever I go.”

*And that comes ahead of you too,* Jade thought. The letter had arrived an hour before he had first walked into the pub all those months ago. The Deep, Inc. stationery was familiar enough, having appeared on many an invoice and letter accompanying kegs of Deep’s Special Lager (“Thank you for making *Every Night Special!*” and Galway Pradesh Stout (“The World’s #1 Beer!”):

One Faddah Rucksack, a traveler of worlds and doer of deeds,  
does come to Agamuskara for an indeterminate length of time.  
Mr. Rucksack’s purchases are free of charge and will be  
reimbursed to you. Thanking you in advance for your  
understanding.

The scrawled signature had been as indecipherable as the strange language on the paper Rucksack had been reading, but the money had come every week. *Good thing too,* she thought. *It’s so bloody hot here, I hardly ever carried GPS until he arrived. I swear the man could put a straw in a keg and drain it.*

Jade set the pint on the table. The beer’s white head wobbled just above the rim. “I’ll never understand how you drink stout in this heat.”

“A pint at a time, my lass,” Rucksack replied. With a tilt of his head, he raised his glass to her. “Besides, o’ all the barkeeps from Ireland to India, not a one pours a GPS as fine as you do, Jade. And believe you me, I would know.”

Jade couldn’t help but grin. All these months and they had hardly spoken, except to exchange pint orders, natter about the weather, or discuss the day’s headlines. “Such a compliment,” Jade replied. “You’re not... drunk... are you?”

Rucksack dimmed his smile, a seeming seriousness in his eyes. Then he winked. “There are two things I never do,” he said. “I never stop drinking. And I never get drunk.”

“It’s just that when I came out here, something about you seemed off.”

Rucksack looked at her in a new way. His gaze moved from Jade to the paper, then back to her. “Have you ever lost someone, Jade?” he said.

“Someone close to you? Someone who mattered more than all the world?”

For a moment, she was there again: painted concrete, his outstretched hand, the shape of his mouth, the glint of the ring in his fingers—and then all the world had gone still. “Yes,” she said. “Long ago. In a different life.”

“In a different life.” He nodded, clenching and unclenching his left hand. “Yes, that’s a good way to put it. I have too,” he said. “Lost someone. Long ago.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And I thank you, as I am for you too.” Rucksack traced a bare finger over the sheet of paper. “I got a letter recently, saying that the someone I lost, I only thought I lost. And that if I came to Agamuskara, I’d find her.”

*A lover? A wife?* she thought. *A sister?* Jade took a step toward the table. “Who was she?”

Rucksack opened his mouth to reply, but the words froze. All the world seemed to hold its breath.

Both Jade and Rucksack doubled over, as if they’d each been punched in the stomach. On the two streets, everyone and everything stopped moving. No one

spoke. Thousands of eyes only looked around, wondering what was so suddenly different about the world.

The glaring walls of the city grew brighter yet softer. From the Agamuskara River, a breeze blew whispers and wet earth, caresses and cool summer nights. A million dawns rose from every soul in the city. Every dream shimmered like gardens in the first morning light, dewy green leaves scintillating. Though it was midday, the world seemed like the slimmest golden glimmer of sunrise, like the birth of a child, like the first time you see the person you fall in love with.

Jade fell onto one knee, her right hand grabbing the other chair at the table. All that had happened, all the doubts, all the wonderings and questions, all washed away. She was only Jade, no longer a Jade or the Jade. Just Jade. Just herself. Not her decisions and her destiny, only her possibilities. *I can do anything*, she thought. *I can be anyone. I can choose anything and nothing and everything.*

The world shimmered. Double helixes of silver-and-gold light rained down.

Shaking, Jade staggered back to her feet. Helixes. Ever since her training, The Management had said to think of decision and destiny as a double helix, the DNA of existence that flowed forever, intertwining without touching, influencing the other without crossing paths.

Of course, no one else noticed that part. She glanced.

Except Rucksack.

As quickly as the world had held its breath, it exhaled. Life began moving again.

Jade looked at Rucksack and caught him staring at her. The world teemed by again. Rivers of endless people, animals, and objects flowed and flowed as if nothing else had happened but moving forward.

“No one else saw it,” he said. “But you did, didn’t you?”

She said nothing.

Rucksack smiled. “I figured you were one o’ them. You’re not the first I’ve ever seen or known, Jade Agamuskara Bluegold. I’ve seen as many o’ you as

pubs I've lightened kegs in over the years—dozens o' you the world over. I still don't know quite what you do with that special wee cabinet that no one else is supposed to see, but near as I can tell you don't do anyone evil by it, and I'm okay with that. So, let's not lie to each other here."

Confusion flooded her. *How did he know my full name?* she thought, looking away from Rucksack to the people. *How could he have seen the helixes? Only Jakes and Jades can see them, and I'm the only one in Agamuskara.*

The Management's cryptic warning whispered through her: "Learn from him but keep your distance."

But Rucksack wasn't shying away from what they'd seen. *If I were to get close,* she thought, *if I wanted to understand him, then he would have to understand some of me too.*

The Management hovered in her mind, and their warning coursed through her again: "A man without a destiny is a man who might do anything."

*Okay,* she thought, *so what is he going to do?*

Jade smiled. "Seeing destinies," she said. "We've got that in common. Usually it's obscured, tucked just beneath the skin of all things. What we just saw, it's like suddenly seeing the air we breathe."

Rucksack sighed and drained his pint. "There was a time I would've been able to read every one o' those lives wandering by, helixes to heads. I would have known them all." His fingers touched the paper in front of him. All the bluster, the bombast, the big smile, and the bigger words all vanished. He looked away from her. "I can't do that anymore."

The rest of him seemed as withered as his hand. Jade's confusion turned to pity. She pulled out the chair and sat down. "Maybe. Maybe not," she said, getting her mind out of the way and letting her instincts, her training, take over. "But I know what you can do."

"What?"

"You can help me figure out what that was."

Rucksack shrugged. "Things happen that don't necessarily mean anything."

"Tell that to anyone in western Ireland just before The Blast," Jade replied.

"That meant a lot."

"What does The Blast have to do with any o' this?" The letter crumpled beneath his fingers.

*It happened so long ago,* Jade thought. *Why does it bother him so much?* Instead she leaned forward, locked her gaze onto him, and said, "From every person and animal and object, the helixes trailed away like paths. They should flow like bright water."

Rucksack stared at the wrinkled sheet of paper and nodded.

"Then tell me, Faddah Rucksack, why did so many of them wither into black and ash and nothing?"

He turned to look at her, his left hand closed tight. "We don't know," he said.

"We don't," Jade said kindly. "But I think we owe it to these people to find out. It just might save their lives."

For a while, Rucksack said nothing. The city wandered. The sun blazed. A meandering cow walked by and left behind a steaming pile of dung.

*Forget it,* Jade thought. She started to go back into the pub, when at last he spoke.

"Whatever changed just now," he said, "we'll figure it out."

Jade turned around. "Where should we start?"

Something in Rucksack relaxed, as if he were relieved. When his gaze held hers, earth turned to stone and a fire blazed up inside his brown-and-black eyes. "I'm going to start right here, have a think and a pint. There's tales o' this city I need to remember. That... and I need to wait for something."

Jade nodded. "Okay," she said. "It's a start. What should I do?"

"Make sure you have a bed available," Rucksack said. "And bring me another pint o' GPS. I need to see clearly."

“I thought you were staying a few blocks away?”

“I am,” he replied. “It’s not for me. We’ll find out who it’s for soon enough.”

“Then I’m going to get back inside and see what else the day brings.”

She walked to the door, thinking of helixes. Then it hit her—the last thing she’d seen before the helixes had faded from sight. They had trailed from every person, every object, every animal. So many of them flashed like bright chains, only to blacken, char, and disappear.

Except him.

Rucksack had sat there, staring out at the still crowd, at the shimmering helixes. But no helix had come from Rucksack. No chain of destiny, no flowing paths of decisions and possibilities. The Management was right. Rucksack was like a ghost yet alive. Wandering but without a path.

His voice stopped her at the door. “Who were you before?”

Jade looked down at the cracked, somewhat-white pavement. Years and lifetimes coursed through her like blood. She opened the door and said, “Who were you?”

Neither answered.

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— Guru Deep, *Hong Kong Through the Third Eye*

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— Guru Deep, *Ireland Through the Third Eye*

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Globetrotter, homebrewer and writer Anthony St. Clair has walked with hairy coos in the Scottish Highlands, choked on seafood in Australia, and watched the full moon rise over Mt. Everest in Tibet. Anthony's travels have also taken him around the sights and beers of Thailand, Japan, India, Canada, Ireland, the USA, Cambodia, China, and Nepal. He and his wife live in Oregon and gave their son a passport for his first birthday.

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