

The Mystical Journey of Ratho Shenzi—

Vol. 1 Tanda Vas and the Golden Chest

CHAPTER 1 THE LETTER

“Ratho Shenzi! Ratho Shenzi!” barked the proctor.

“I’m Ratho Shenzi!” a blond-haired young man called out as he emerged from a group of students enjoying the sunshine on the eve of their well-earned summer vacation.

“This is for you,” the proctor said, impatiently handing him a sealed envelope.

“Thank you,” Ratho replied, turning it over in his hands.

His pulse started to race. There, on the back of the envelope, was what he was hoping for, the seal of Tanda Vas. Hiding his excitement, Ratho placed the letter inside his tunic, but his action had not gone unnoticed.

“What is it, Ratho?” cajoled Jeleya, the school gossip.

“It’s nothing....”

“Oh, sure! The proctor always hand-delivers letters to students!”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“Come on!”

“Well, it’s a response to a letter I sent....”

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

“No, I’ll open it later. I’ve got to go.”

Indignant, Jeleya called out to her friends, two of the biggest young men in the school, waving them over. Ratho quickly headed for the gate, but it was too late.

“Ratho’s got something from the proctor, but he won’t tell me what it is!”

“We’ll find out for you, Jeleya!” they chorused, stepping out to block his exit.

Adroitly Ratho slipped by one but couldn't avoid the other; whose simian arms were outstretched to prevent any escape. The dull-witted hulk looked like some kind of gigantic ape, and the thought made Ratho laugh aloud.

“What are you laughing at, runt!?”

Ratho sobered up fast as he felt a hand grab his tunic, pulling him off-balance. “Nothing! Nothing at all.”

Recovering, Ratho started to stomp on the attacker’s toes when he heard a familiar voice. It was his friend, Barjen Kolvi.

“Hey, you apes! Leave my friend alone!” yelled Barjen, tying back his long black hair with the leather thong he kept in his pocket.

“We're just having a little fun,” laughed the one holding Ratho, reluctantly releasing his grip as Barjen approached.

Barjen was taller than the troublemakers and very-well muscled. This made the bullies think twice.

“Come on Ratho... your father's waiting.”

“I'll see you all after vacation!” Ratho called out to the crowd that had gathered to witness the confrontation.

“See you!” they shouted as he and Barjen headed for the gate.

“Did you really come from my father?”

“Of course not.”

They both laughed.

Outside the gate, the two young men were met with the dusty commotion of Aloru Road, the busiest thoroughfare in town. Sounds of vendors hawking their wares and the squeaky clank of horse-drawn wagons punctuated the bustle of villagers going about their business. Women with baskets of fruit on their heads wove through the throng. The storefronts of the merchants were decorated in bright colors, hailing the coming of the summer festival, free samples of their

wares were displayed proudly, as was the custom of the season. Exotic aromas filled the air. Sandalwood scent, flower perfume and the irresistible smell of freshly barbecued lamb wafted past Ratho and Barjen as they made their way into the old quarter. There the road narrowed to a cobblestone lane, crowding the pedestrians shoulder to shoulder into its center. It was here that Barjen's father Olgar had his repair shop, and directly opposite was the apothecary and herb store owned by Ratho's father Mondok.

"I'm not ready to go in yet," said Ratho as they neared home. "You know how my father feels about Tanda Vas."

"Tanda Vas? You mean you got—"

"Yeah! I got the letter today," said Ratho, reaching into his tunic.

"Wait, not here. Let's go to my place. We'll have some iced mint tea out in the garden, and you can tell me all about it."

Slithering through the line of customers waiting to drop off or pick up items at the repair shop, Barjen motioned for Ratho to follow him into the family living quarters attached to the back.

"Your father's been looking for you," said Barjen's mother Sula, a sprightly woman with a perpetual smile.

"I know, I saw the look he gave me when we came in. But it's supposed to be my day off. I've just worked thirteen days straight, and yesterday even Father agreed I deserved a break."

"That's what I told him when he started asking for you this afternoon. But you know how it is when he's made up his mind."

"I know . . . Ratho and I are hot and dusty. We'd like some cold mint tea and time in the garden to cool off."

"OK, go on out back and relax in the shade. I'll bring your drinks after I've told your father. Oh Ratho, how's your sister? Your mother tells me the baby's coming any time now."

“She's fine. Father's been giving her special herbs to keep up her strength. Mother feels it will be a boy. Sansta says she's more than ready to be done. I think she's tired of carrying the extra weight.”

“I'm not surprised. The last time your mother brought her over, she looked like she would burst. Now go ahead you two, and I'll bring you some tea in a few minutes.”

Outside the shade was sweet under the fig trees. Barjen and Ratho relaxed in a couple of old handmade chairs and soon Sula appeared, carrying two glasses of chilled mint tea.

“Here you go. Enjoy, you two. I've got to go inside and help your father. When I told him, he grumbled and told me, *I should come and help him.*”

“Oh great! He wants to make me feel guilty. Well... we won't be too long.”

After a long drink Ratho put down his glass and took out the letter.

“What does it say?” asked Barjen between gulps, wiping the sweat from his sun-burned, olive skinned face.

Hol Kandar

Summer of Golden Rains

Year of the Firebird

“To master Ratho Shenzi,

I am pleased to inform you that you have been selected as this summer's student assistant. Upon receipt of this notice please make travel arrangements to meet at our new dig site at the ruins of Hol Kandar, two days after the end of summer festival. This year you are entitled to bring one parent or friend with you for the fourteen-day period. Be sure to include warm clothes. Please inform only your parents or guardian about this letter. We wish to avoid any unwanted visitors. Be discrete about your departure. When you join us here and see what we have uncovered, you will know why. Thank you TANDA VAS

“It says I can bring a friend! I want *you* to go with me, what do you say?”

“Wow!” exclaimed Barjen through a mouthful of ice. “Sounds great. But my father, how am I going to convince him to let me be away from the shop for *fourteen* days? And why all the secrecy?”

“Beats me.” Ratho finished his tea.

“I wonder what they’ve found? Maybe it’s some sort of treasure,” said Barjen, “that’s why they don’t want you to tell anyone and just sneak out of town.”

“Yeah, sure, maybe; but more than likely it’s relics or artifacts, and they don’t want people tromping around, messing up the clues at the excavation.”

“You’re probably right,” conceded Barjen, going for another mouthful of ice. “But anyway, what are you going to tell your father? It says you’re supposed to inform your parents.”

“Honestly? I don't know. I didn't think I had much chance this year, so many people applied.”

“So what are you going to tell him... Mister ‘I always got a plan,’” laughed Barjen.

“Well I’ve got to tell him something. But I don’t know what just yet.” Ratho was silent for a minute while he drank some cold water from the melted ice.

“Well, your mom’s no problem, right?” said Barjen, feeling a little guilty about his sarcasm.

“Oh, Mom’s all for it, you know how she is. But my father will never agree. He always gets that weird look whenever I bring up Tanda Vas and wanting to explore. He’s been like that ever since that old man came in with arthritis six months ago. The old windbag must have told him *something*, ‘cause he’s acted strange ever since.”

“Well, did you ask him why?”

“I tried to get him to tell me, but when I asked a few weeks ago he got angry— I thought he was going to hit me! Then he caught himself and backed off and said he didn’t want to discuss it.”

“Wow, that’s not like your father.”

“No, it’s more like *your* father.”

“Yeah, except you’re lucky. *My* father wouldn’t have stopped until he’d given me a few good licks!” Ratho thought about this for a minute. Barjen’s father Olgar had a bad temper and a short fuse. Many a time, especially when they were small boys, Ratho had hidden his friend from a certain beating. They’d huddled together in the root cellar, concealed among the pungent sacks of herbs, until Olgar had simmered down or Barjen’s mother had talked him out of it.

“Listen, I’ve got to go,” Ratho said, rising to his feet as he drained a few last drops of liquid from his glass. “We’ll talk tomorrow, and you can bet I’ll think of something. I’m not going to miss out on this just because my father’s got an attitude.”

Once outside the gate, Ratho walked quickly down the narrow alleyway. The usual foul odor leapt from the trash barrels lining the smoothly worn cobblestones. When he got to the road, the air smelled fresh again. Ratho inhaled deeply as he moved through the thinning crowd of shoppers to the other side. There he could see his mother, Adonia in the storefront window, rearranging the display.

The chimes rang out as Ratho opened the door, and the familiar smell of herbs greeted him— sweet and sour, pungent and bitter— to Ratho it all smelled like home.

“How was your last day of school?” asked Adonia, finishing with the new display.

“Oh, it went pretty quick, you know! They never do anything on the last day. All the classes are finished and everyone just sits around and talks.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound too bad.”

“Dya, I want to show you something, but not out here. Let’s go into the kitchen.”

“Sure, but let me close up the shop first, so we won’t be disturbed.”

When they were seated at the table, Adonia said, “Sounds mysterious,” and smiled mischievously, her dark expressive gypsy eyes dancing. “What’s happened?” Ratho’s face brightened.

“I’ve been accepted!” he said, handing Adonia the letter.

Brushing her long, straight raven-black hair out of her face, Adonia scanned the handwriting and the signature. “This is wonderful! Who are you going to bring?”

“Barjen of course!”

“Naturally.”

“But I’m worried too—”

“About your father?”

Ratho nodded. Adonia gave her son that certain look that mothers give and her eyes told him everything would be all right. Ratho smiled in recognition.

“I told Mondok my intuition about Tanda Vas was right.”

“Mom! What are you talking about?” Adonia stopped and looked at Ratho. Easing back in her chair, she assumed the familiar pose that told her son she was about to say something *important*.

“Remember the afternoon your father almost hit you? Well, that night, after you went to bed, we had a big fight.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“You weren’t supposed to. Anyway, it seems an old man by the name of Nelek told your father a horrible story concerning Tanda Vas. Nelek claimed that many years ago he was a member of a gang of pirates led by a ruthless captain, named Delfino the Dolphin. The man said this Delfino was none other than Tanda Vas.”

“Oh Dya, that can’t be right! The old man must be senile.”

“I’m not so sure . . . he said it was many years ago. When I was small, I remember my grandfather speaking the name Delfino. He had dealings with him, I think. I remember, because whenever he said this name, he was always smiling.”

“But it doesn’t make any sense. Everyone knows Tanda Vas donates all the profits from his discoveries to help the poor. Maybe he’s talking about a different man with the same name. That must be it.”

“Why does it have to be a different person? Let me tell you something: no holy man is born that way, and every saint has a human past. What counts is what a man does today and the next today. It *could* be the same man making amends for his past. That’s what a Gypsy would do if he wronged someone in another clan.”

“I never thought of it *that* way.”

“Most people brought up in a town never do. It must be because they live in the same place year after year. They think that once things are a certain way, they should stay that way forever.”

“You mean like Galeen!” This made both of them laugh. Galeen, the butcher’s wife, wore the same, ugly, brown dress to market every Thursday. It was a standing joke with the neighbors.

“I’m glad you understand,” continued Adonia. “People like that actually fear change, and because they can’t change, they assume nobody else can either. There’s an expression that gypsies call such townspeople. I never told you before, ‘cause it’s nasty.”

“Oh Dya, tell me!”

“Well, when a gypsy family gets pissed off by city folk , they call them ‘Dugoc.’ It means animal dung frozen by the winter frost.”

“I see what you mean... Even if it is Tanda Vas, so what? It’s not what happened thirty years ago that counts, but how he is today and what he does tomorrow.”

“Spoken like a true Gypsy,” said Adonia, leaning over to give her son a kiss.

“So why did Father get so mad at me the other day?”

“That’s what our fight was about. I told him my intuition suggested that even if what the man said was true, in light of all Tanda Vas has done to help the poor of Sansa Lae over the years,

couldn't he just live and let live? But your father can be stubborn when it comes to his ideals. I suspect, though, that was only part of it."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, think about it. Ever since you started talking about taking long trips to explore and discover, haven't you noticed his attitude getting sour?"

"Yeah, I couldn't figure it out. It started way before he'd talked to the old man."

"Exactly! He's afraid to lose you. He's afraid, now that you're old enough to be on your own, that you'll turn your back on all he's taught you and join up with someone like Tanda Vas and go traveling around the world. That's why he made you stay in school and learn bookkeeping. He wants to give you a running start at taking over the shop and making it more successful. You can't blame him, really. The more successful our business is, the more people are helped to get better and stay well."

"I know," sighed Ratho, "and that's what's got me torn up inside. I want to be a dutiful son, but I want to see the world before I settle down. I mean, one day, yeah, of course I'll take over. He's shown me so much, and it is an important service we provide. And you know I like running things when he's away. And I do like learning, and I think I'm getting competent...."

Adonia smiled.

"You're more than competent, Meska. You have a natural gift like your father. But I understand how you feel. You have just enough gypsy blood."

Adonia picked up the letter and studied it again.

"Whatever Tanda Vas was in his former life, it doesn't show in his writing. The hand that wrote this letter has a heart as big as a mountain. I get a warm feeling just looking at it. You're going., You are *going to go*."

"Really? All right, *Dyal*!" shouted Ratho, standing up to give his mother a big hug.

"I'll talk to your father when the time is right. According to the letter we have a few days. Don't worry, we'll figure something out. Oh, the monthly shipment came in today. There are

several bags of bulk herbs out back. I know your father would want you to bring them in and fill up the bottles on the shelves.”

“And seal up the rest and store them in the cellar, I know! Where is Father anyway?”

“Oh he’s gone . . . won’t be back until late.”

“The mayor’s gout again?” Mother and son both laughed. Wealthy patients demanded the personal attention of the best herbalist in town, which had always been Ratho’s father, Mondok.

“OK,” said Ratho, after a moment, “I’ll get started on the supplies and sort them out before dinner so Father won’t have any reason to complain.”

Charged with energy from Adonia’s encouragement, his mind racing with excitement, Ratho set about his chores with a new enthusiasm. After dragging the bulky bags to the cellar he started to work, his deft hands automatically sorting, measuring and restocking the large bottles with the herbs as he thought through possible scenarios with his father. The oils of dandelion, mint, and chrysanthemum flowers soaked into his hands. Ratho could feel the Earth’s healing power in the fresh scents and before he knew it, the job was done.

The old wooden stairs creaked and groaned as Ratho came up from the cellar and into the kitchen where the smell of the savory sauce his mother was cooking drowned out everything else.

“Perfect timing!” said Adonia, pouring the sauce over a heaping pile of steamed shrimp and vegetables. “I’m sure you’ve worked up an appetite by now.”

“And how! I’m ready,” said Ratho, seating himself at the kitchen table. “While I was downstairs I had an idea about what to tell Father...”

“Oh really? Tell me.” She sat down with her plate of food.

“Well, it’s more of a backup plan really,” Ratho smiled through a big mouthful of shrimp. “In case Father still says no after you talk with him. I... I really don’t want to say right now, it’s pretty devious.”

“All the more reason to tell me what you’re thinking.”

Ratho washed his food down with a gulp of cold water.

“It’s simple, actually. Instead of telling Father my real destination, we’d just say we’re going camping up at Ruolin Junction. We’d check in with Barjen’s uncle, the old man who runs the inn, I forget his name—”

“You mean old Sanma Gan?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Anyway, you get the idea.”

“I have to laugh, ‘cause now you’re really thinking like a Gypsy. I’m pretty sure I can convince your father, but on the off chance I can’t . . . then we’ll consider your idea. Is that OK with you?”

“Sounds fine,” said Ratho, helping himself to more shrimp.

When Ratho had finished, Adonia took the empty dishes and cleaned up the kitchen. Then, she dried her hands and turned to her son.

“Meska, I’m tired. I’m going to read in bed for a while. Will you make sure everything’s locked up before you go to sleep?”

“Sure Dya, good night.”

Ratho watched as Adonia turned and walked down the hallway. He had always thought of his mother as very beautiful; her lustrous, long hair and shapely figure were the envy of the town’s women. He noticed the extra attention the male customers paid her whenever she turned her emerald green eyes on them. Without being crude, she made the most of her gypsy animal magnetism. She said it was good for business to have a friendly relationship with the customers. But she made it obvious to any overbearing client that her personal affections were for Mondok alone.

Ratho locked the back door in the kitchen and walked into the shop to check the front door. All was dark and quiet except for the soft glow of the streetlamps in the storefront window, and the sound of the footsteps of a few passersby. Standing by the counter, he listened. Soon the

silence brought forth a high-pitched humming sound. As he concentrated, the sound grew louder until it drowned out everything else. Ever since he was a small boy, Ratho heard this sound when it was quiet and he was alone. Although he enjoyed the feeling it brought, he really didn't know what to make of it.

Yawning, Ratho gave the front door a second tug and then headed down the hall to the washroom. As was his custom, he scrubbed his face and hands thoroughly. Mondok always stressed that cleansing was a powerful preventative for many ailments that could occur later in life. Ratho might have disagreed with his father on certain things, but health and the care of the body were not among them. In this area Mondok's knowledge was beyond question and many of his clients called him a miracle worker.

Drying under the muted half-light of the candle, Ratho caught sight of himself in the mirror. He hardly recognized his own face and stepped back in shock. The growth of beard on his upper lip and jaw line looked darker and had filled in considerably since the last time he had checked. Stroking his chin, the new whiskers felt strange to touch. There was no doubt about it: he was becoming a man.

Ratho took the boar-bristle hairbrush and gave his long curls one hundred scalp-stimulating strokes. Then, he used his fingertips to firmly massage his dark, bushy eyebrows out to the temples. After rubbing his hands quickly to generate heat, he placed his hot palms over his eyes. The warmth was relaxing, and Ratho sighed as he felt his whole body and especially his mind let go. The excitement of the day had finally caught up with him. Blowing out the lamp, he felt for the doorway.

The back of the house was very dark. Ratho used his hands to feel along the hallway until he reached the door to his room. Slipping under the down comforter, he rolled over and soon was fast asleep.

The sound of a door slamming woke Ratho from his dreamy slumber. Sitting up with a start, he listened. After a moment he heard muffled sounds coming from his parents' room.

Ratho got out of bed. Setting the door ajar, he could clearly hear his father's voice coming from down the hall.

Adonia had been asleep when she suddenly sensed Mondok. By the heaviness of his gate she knew something had happened. Mondok was furious.

"I knew I was right about that Tanda Vas. He's nothing but a two-faced snake in the grass!"

"Calm down, dear," said Adonia, still half-asleep, "what's wrong?"

"He appears to be so high and mighty, giving away the fortunes he finds. But underneath he's just like the rest of us—"

"Mondok, slow down!" Adonia interrupted, reaching for a glass of water on the nightstand. "You're not making any sense. Why don't you start from the beginning and tell me what happened." Mondok relaxed a little. Taking off his coat and shoes he sat on the bed.

"Well, when I finished treating the mayor's daughter, he was so grateful that she was feeling better he insisted on buying me a drink at the inn. I tried to say no, but you know how he is. While we were at the inn having our little drink, in walks Tanda Vas."

"Really?" Adonia was surprised. "What was he doing there?"

"I was just getting to that. He really does have a commanding presence, I'll give him that. As he walked through the door, everyone in the place stopped and stared. Even the men playing their guitars took notice. He just smiled and waved and then sat down at the bar. Pretty soon a beautiful woman approached him. You know, one of the ones who work the market district at night. After a few minutes both the mayor and I saw him hand her some gold. She became excited and kissed him. Then he took her hand and they left together—"

"Oh, Mondok," said Adonia, mildly annoyed. "What's wrong with that? He's a man isn't he? He probably had the need..."

"You're missing the point. He shouldn't have been there in the first place, the way he talks."

“Why not? You were there.”

“But that’s different; I didn’t have a choice—”

“Maybe he was there for a reason.”

“A reason? You bet he had a reason!”

“No, I mean for a different reason than how it appeared.”

Mondok was silent for a moment. Why are you always defending him?” he continued, speaking more softly. “What is he to you?”

Adonia took Mondok’s hand and smiled. “It’s just that my intuition tells me that. *I feel it*. He’s a good man.”

“Oh, I see,” sighed Mondok, momentarily acceding to Adonia. Mondok had come up against the intransigence of his wife’s intuitive feeling in the past. They’d been down that road before, and he knew arguing was of no use. Still, this was a matter of principle.

“Well, I didn’t like what I saw,” Mondok declared, still protesting. “It didn’t make me *feel* right. I don’t want Ratho to have anything to with Tanda Vas, is that clear?”

“Come on Dom,” whispered Adonia, giving his shoulders a rub, “let’s go to bed. I’ll make you forget about Tanda Vas...” Mondok offered no resistance.

After he’d quietly closed his door, Ratho slipped back under his covers. But sleep did not come easily—a sick feeling gnawed at his stomach. He’d heard it with his own ears; his father would never give permission now.

Tossing and turning, still restless as dawn approached, Ratho threw off his covers, his sleep disturbed by a vivid dream. Wrestling with his inner torment, the young man found himself with his best friend. Dressed as warriors, the two had faced their fears and survived a great battle. On a hilltop, far in the distance, the enemy commander watched helplessly as his second in command lay dying, his entire army routed, by a *single* warrior.

A dark-haired man, standing beside a golden chest, turned toward Ratho and Barjen. Declaring victory, he raised his staff in salute, calling out the name... *Tanda Vas!*

Breathing hard, Ratho woke up in a cold sweat as if he had been right there on the battlefield with Tanda Vas. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to get his bearings, but the entire bedroom was filled with shimmering light. Thinking he'd overslept, Ratho glanced out the window, but it was still dark. Looking back toward the foot of his bed he saw a figure hovering in the air. Transfixed, he watched as the illusive shape of its lightbody came into focus. Glittering in silver and gold, a man's form began to emerge. His rugged jaw and close-cropped beard were illuminated by a pair of electric blue eyes that reached out, touching Ratho deep inside. The vision raised his right arm in a gesture of farewell, while speaking telepathically. Quickly imprinting two words into Ratho's mind, it melted back into the ethers, leaving the room in total darkness.

Springing from his bed, Ratho pulled back the curtain on his window. Outside, the stars sparkled with an extraordinary brilliance. Though he had never seen him, Ratho felt it clearly... he'd just met Tanda Vas, and this would change his reality forever.