

A detailed illustration of a girl with long dark hair, wearing a grey dress and black shoes, standing in a misty forest. She is looking at a large, gnarled tree trunk that is glowing with a golden light. A small, fluffy black dog stands next to her, looking up at the tree. The background shows other trees in the distance, some with bare branches. The overall atmosphere is magical and mysterious.

The Girl
and the
Enchant Forest
Chapter 1

Imaya Goonasekara



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Tribute to Dear Madam Principal

Mrs. Shashikala Senadheera

With deep gratitude and profound respect, I dedicate this tribute to Dear Madam Principal

Mrs. Shashikala Senadheera, a guiding light whose unwavering dedication and wisdom have left an indelible mark on countless lives. Her leadership, kindness, and commitment to excellence have inspired generations, shaping minds and nurturing dreams.

It is with immense appreciation that I acknowledge her influence, which has played a vital role in my journey. Her encouragement and belief in the potential of her students continue to resonate, instilling values that extend far beyond the walls of the institution she so gracefully leads.

Thank you, Dear Madam Principal Mrs. Senadheera, for your tireless efforts, your boundless compassion, and your unwavering dedication to education. This book stands as a humble token of the inspiration you have imparted.

Foreword

Literary development is a yardstick to measure the development of a country. The Kotte and Dambadeniya eras stand out in the history of the world because they were literary enlightening periods. If so, this is the golden period in the history of the Mahamaya as well. This is the reason why our daughters have been enchanting through book writing for many years now. It is a special event that our writers have succeeded in building a culture of writing books in the school and spreading it to the entire school system and this time involving the global student community in it. Beyond this, this time the school community itself has also decided to rebuild the past Yatiwara writing tradition in the country in order to pay tribute to the founder of our school, Karadana Atthadassi Thero. The Pirivena student monks have also taken up book writing “The Herana Gatkarani” project was introduced. It is a matter of pride for me as the principal to lead the way in bringing about a qualitative change in the education of schools and Pirivena education through this academic and religious service, and it is also an achievement for the school. This book, which is the result of recognizing one's innate talent at an early stage in life and turning to writing, will undoubtedly be a help for future education and future life.

Shashikala Senadheera,
Principal,
Mahamaya Girls' Collage,
Kandy.

The forest was always quiet, its silence profound, as if it held a secret that only the trees could understand. The air was thick with the scent of pine, and the rustling leaves seemed to hum in harmony with the wind. Beneath the canopy, where shadows danced and light filtered in soft, golden beams, a young girl wandered, her bare feet lightly brushing the earth. She had no name, no one she could remember. Her past was a hazy blur, like a dream that slipped away each time she tried to hold on. She couldn't recall where she had come from or how long she had been in the forest. It felt as though she had always been here, surrounded by the timeless trees, with only the presence of her loyal dog, Shadow, to guide her through the mystery of her existence. Shadow was no ordinary dog. He was a shaggy, brown ball of energy with soulful eyes that seemed to hold wisdom beyond his years. His fur was thick and unkempt, as though he too had been shaped by the forest itself. He had never left the girl's side. He was her companion, her protector, her only constant in a world that felt uncertain. They had spent countless days exploring the forest together, as though they were searching for something—answers, perhaps, or simply a sense of belonging. Today, like all others, they

ventured deeper into the woods. The sun filtered through the branches above, casting dappled light onto the forest floor. The girl's long, dark hair fluttered in the breeze, her simple dress swirling around her as she walked. She didn't know where they were going; the path always seemed to change before she could ask, yet she trusted the forest—and Shadow—to lead her. As they walked along a narrow, winding path, the trees grew taller, their trunks thick with age. The air grew cooler, and the mist at their feet began to curl like an ethereal creature, twisting between the roots of the trees. The girl paused, her senses tingling. There was something different today—something she couldn't quite place. It felt as if the forest itself was holding its breath, waiting for something to happen. Shadow's ears perked up, and with a soft bark, he trotted ahead, his nose twitching as he sniffed the air. The girl followed; her curiosity piqued. They entered a small clearing, and in the center stood an ancient oak tree. Its trunk was gnarled and thick, with roots sprawling deep into the earth, as though the tree itself was part of the very foundation of the world. A soft, golden light pulsed from within, as if the tree were alive breathing, waiting. Shadow trotted closer to the tree, sitting at its

base with a quiet, contented bark. The girl approached with a mixture of awe and hesitation. She reached out, brushing her fingers rough bark of the oak. As her touch made contact, a strange warmth spread through her fingertips, as though the tree were alive and conscious of her presence. Suddenly, a whisper filled her mind—soft, like the wind through the leaves, but clear as daylight. “You are not alone.” The girl’s heart skipped a beat. She pulled her hand back, eyes wide, scanning the clearing. There was no one there, only Shadow, watching her intently, his tail wagging gently. The voice came again, like a whisper from the forest itself. “The forest has been waiting for you.” Her breath caught in her throat. “What... What do you mean?” she whispered, her voice trembling. The tree was silent, but the golden light pulsed again, brighter now, almost as if urging her to listen more closely. With a deep breath, the girl knelt before the oak, her hand trembling as she pressed it against the bark once more. This time, something shifted. A crack appeared in the trunk, a shimmering line that stretched wider with each passing moment. The girl gasped as the tree parted before her, revealing a hollow space within. Nestled among the roots, a small, golden key gleamed with an otherworldly light,

as if it had been waiting just for her. Shadow let out a soft bark, as though encouraging her, and the girl reached for the key, her fingers closing around it. It was small, delicate, yet pulsed with strange, familiar energy. She wasn't sure what it was for, but somehow, she knew it had great significance. She held the key up to the tree, as though waiting for some sort of instruction. But the tree remained silent, its golden light flickering faintly in the growing mist. The girl glanced at Shadow, who was now standing and wagging his tail, eager to move forward. "What do you think, Shadow?" she murmured, though she wasn't sure why she was asking. Shadow had always seemed to understand things she could not. Shadow barked once, his tail wagging faster, and trotted ahead down the path. The girl followed; the key still clenched tightly in her hand. The mist seemed to thicken around them, and the air grew heavy with an unspoken anticipation. The forest had always been her home, but now, with the golden key in her possession, it felt as though it was leading her somewhere—somewhere important, somewhere hidden. The further they walked, the more the trees closed in, their branches twisting together to form a canopy above them, blocking out the sun.



The air was thick with the scent of damp earth, and the faint glow of the oak's golden light seemed to linger, surrounding them like an invisible force. The girl's heartbeat faster with each step. Suddenly, Shadow stopped, his body tense, his ears raised. A low growl rumbled in his chest. The girl froze, her breath catching in her throat. She scanned the path ahead, but it was empty. No movement, no sounds—yet the feeling of unease pressed down on her. Then, from the shadows of the trees, a figure emerged. Cloaked in mist, its form was shifting, like a wisp of darkness given shape. It had no face, no solid form, only two glowing eyes that burned like embers. The girl felt an instinctual fear rise in her chest, but she didn't back away. Instead, she gripped the key tighter, feeling the warmth of the forest's presence surrounding her. The figure spoke, its voice a whispering hiss. "You should not have come." Shadow barked fiercely, stepping in front of the girl protectively. But she stood on her ground, her pulse racing. "Who are you?" she asked, her voice steadier than she expected. The shadowy figure tilted its head. "The keeper of lost things. And you... you have something that does not belong to you." The girl's fingers tightened around the golden key, its warmth pulsing against her skin like a

heartbeat. She could feel the weight of the shadowy figure's gaze, though it had no face—only those ember-like eyes that seemed to pierce through the mist. The forest around them felt dense, as if the trees themselves were leaning in, listening, waiting.

Shadow remained at her side, his stance rigid, his hackles raised. A low growl rumbled in his chest, a warning to whatever force lurked before them. The girl swallowed her fear, straightening her back. She had no memory of where she had come from, but she knew this forest, and something deep within her told her she belonged here.

“I found this key,” she said firmly, lifting it slightly. “The forest led me to it.”

The shadow figure let out a sound whispering chuckle that sent a chill through the air. “The forest does not always know what is best. Some doors are meant to stay locked.”

The girl glanced down at the key, feeling the strange energy pulsing from it. If the shadowy figure did not want her to have it, then that only confirmed its importance. She stepped forward, her voice steady. “If it was hidden, then it was meant to be found. And I think it was meant for me.”

The figure did not move, but the mist around it swirled, thickening as though alive. “You do not understand the forces at play, child. That key does not belong to you. Return it, and you may leave this place unharmed.”

A shiver ran down the girl’s spine, but she did not waver. “And if I don’t?”

The silence that followed was heavy, charged with an unspoken threat. The girl could feel the forest holding its breath around them. Then, the shadow figure extended to a wispy, dark hand. “Then you will face the consequences.”

Before she could react, the mist surged forward, tendrils of darkness reaching for her. Shadow barked and lunged, his body colliding with the blackened wisps. The impact sent ripples through the mist, and the shadowy figure recoiled with an eerie hiss. The girl stumbled back, gripping the key as a sudden force pulled at her, like invisible hands trying to tear it away.

“No!” she cried, resisting with all her might. The warmth of the key flared, and a golden light burst from her palm, searing through the mist like fire cutting through the night. The shadowy figure let out a shriek, retreating into the darkness of the trees.

The girl's breath came fast and heavy as she clutched the key to her chest. Shadow growled lowly, his stance protective. The presence of the figure had faded, but she knew it had not truly gone.

She turned to Shadow, her voice shaking. "We need to keep moving."

He gave a short, understanding bark, and together they pressed deeper into the forest. The air around them seemed charged, the trees whispering in hushed tones. The girl's feet moved with purpose now. She did not know exactly where she was going, but she knew the forest would guide her.

The path wound through towering trees, their roots sprawling like the veins of the earth. The golden key pulsed in her hand, growing warmer as if responding to something unseen. Then, up ahead, she saw a stone archway covered in vines, half-buried in the thick undergrowth. It looked ancient, as though it had stood there for centuries, forgotten by time.

Shadow hesitated at the entrance, sniffing the air cautiously. The girl stepped closer, brushing her fingers against the cold stone. As soon as she touched it, the key in her hand flared with light, and a soft vibration hummed through the

air. The vines covering the archway began to shift, retreating as if alive, revealing an old wooden door within the frame. It was adorned with intricate carving symbols she did not recognize but felt she should.

The girl raised the key, heart pounding. She knew what she had to do.

Taking a deep breath, she inserted the key into the lock. The moment it clicked into place, the door trembled, and a low, melodic hum filled the air. The carvings glowed with the same golden light as the key, pulsing in a rhythmic pattern. Shadow whimpered slightly but did not back away.

Slowly, the girl turned on the key. The door groaned as it swung open, revealing darkness beyond—a void that seemed to stretch endlessly. A gust of warm air rushed out, carrying with it the faintest hint of something familiar—something she could not quite place.

She turned to Shadow. “Are you ready?”

Shadow wagged his tail once, stepping forward without hesitation. The girl smiled faintly, finding courage in his presence. Clutching the key tightly, she stepped through the doorway,

the golden light of the carvings guiding her into
the unknown.





As soon as she crossed the threshold, the door closed behind her with a resounding thud. The golden light flickered and then vanished, leaving her in complete darkness.

For a moment, there was nothing. Just silence and the distant sound of her own heartbeat.

Then, a soft glow appeared in the distance, illuminating the space around her. She was no longer in the forest. The walls were lined with shelves, filled with old, leather-bound books and artifacts that hummed with unseen power. The floor beneath her was smooth stone, etched with symbols like those on the door. It was a library hidden sanctuary buried beneath the forest.

In the center of the room stood a pedestal, and atop it lay a book bound in deep green leather, its cover embossed with golden vines. The girl felt an undeniable pull toward it, as if it were calling to her.

She stepped closer, reaching out. The moment her fingers brushed the cover; a familiar voice filled her mind—the same whisper she had heard from the oak tree.

“The answers you seek lie within.”

Her heart pounded. She hesitated only a moment before opening the book. The pages

shimmered, words forming before her eyes. They told a story. Fragments of memories she had lost, pieces of a life she could not recall.

As she read, the truth unfolded before her. She was not just a lost girl in the forest. She was the guardian of its secrets, the keeper of the key. And she had been here before.

The shadowy figure's words echoed in her mind. "Some doors are meant to stay locked."

But now, she understood.

Some doors were meant to be opened. The room surrounding her was a silent enigma, its secrets concealed within the ancient walls. As her fingers traced the cover of the green leather-bound book, a sudden feeling of belonging washed over her, a sense of recognition she couldn't place. This place was familiar. She had been here before, or at least it felt that way. The air hummed with an energy that vibrated in her chest, and the book beckoned her as though it had been waiting for her return.

With a deep breath, the girl opened the book, the pages crackling slightly as they shifted beneath her touch. Words began to appear, glowing faintly in the dim light of the room, forming themselves into a narrative that felt like both a

revelation and a haunting. It was her story, or at least, the parts she could remember, but there was more.

She read aloud, the words feeling heavy on her tongue, as though they had power beyond their meaning.

"She was born to the forest, its heart beating within her chest. The wind whispered her name, the trees swayed to the rhythm of her steps. She was not of the world as others knew it, but of a place beyond, where time stood still and the veil between realms was thin."

The girl's breath caught. This wasn't just a story, this was her life, or perhaps, the life she had forgotten. She was born in the forest. It explained why it felt so natural to be here, why Shadow had always been by her side, why she had never questioned her existence in this timeless place. But what did it mean? How could she have forgotten something so vital?

Before she could dwell on the questions, a low growl rumbled from Shadow's throat, drawing her attention. He was standing at the edge of the room, ears perked and eyes glowing faintly in the dim light. His tail was stiff, and his body was taut with tension. The girl quickly shut the book,

the echo of its whispering voice still lingering in her mind.

“What is it, Shadow?” she whispered, her gaze following his. But there was nothing in the shadows of the library that she could see—nothing except for the heavy air and the stillness that had settled over the room. Yet, there was a palpable sense of danger, a sense that something was coming.

Suddenly, a faint, eerie sound echoed from the depths of the sanctuary, a sound like the rustling of leaves, but dry and brittle. It was followed by a whisper—just on the edge of hearing—one that sent a chill through her spine. It was not the forest’s whispering voice; this was different, colder, more insidious.

She gripped the key tighter, her fingers trembling as it pulsed in her hand, sending a surge of warmth through her body. Shadow stepped closer to her, his growl deepening into something more ferocious. The girl moved instinctively, stepping away from the pedestal and toward the source of the sound. Her heart raced, but she was not afraid—not yet.

The shelves around her seemed to close in, their contents shifting in the flickering glow. Books that had been motionless now trembled, their

spines creaking as if disturbed by an unseen force. The air seemed to grow heavier, thick with magic, and the temperature dropped.

“Who’s there?” the girl called out, her voice steady, though her pulse quickened. “Show yourself.”

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. Then, the shadows on the far wall seemed to ripple, as though the darkness itself was alive. From the depths of the library, a figure emerged. It was cloaked in blackness, indistinguishable from the shadows, yet its presence was undeniable. Its eyes, glowing with a cold light, locked onto hers.

“You should not have come,” the figure hissed, its voice like the rustle of dead leaves.

The girl didn’t move, though the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She held the key in front of her, though it offered no immediate comfort. She could feel its power surging through her, but it was still so unknown, so mysterious. The shadowy figure advanced, its form flickering like a flame on the verge of going out.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she said, her voice echoing with a defiance she didn’t fully

understand. “I’m here for a reason. This is my path.”

The figure laughed, a cold, hollow sound that seemed to reverberate off the stone walls. “Your path?” it whispered. “You are nothing but a tool, a pawn in a game for older than you can comprehend.”

The girl stepped back, her heart pounding. Shadow growled loudly, stepping forward protectively, but the girl held him back with a hand.

“No,” she said, more to herself than to the figure. “I’m more than that. This is my story. And I’m going to finish it.”

The shadowy figure’s eyes narrowed, its form flickering again as though uncertain. “Finish it? You are not the one who controls the story. You never were. The key you hold is a mistaken thing of power that should have remained forgotten.”

The air around them crackled, and the ground beneath her feet seemed to tremble. The girl could feel the weight of the figure’s words, but she refused to let them sway her. The book, the key, the forest was all part of her. This was her destiny, and she would not let anyone take it from her.

“I won’t let you stop me,” she said, her voice steady. Shadow growled once more, and she could feel the warmth of the key pulsing brighter in her hand, as if in agreement.

With a sudden motion, the figure lunged, a black mist swirling around its form, but before it could reach her, the girl held the key high, the golden light blazing from it. The mist recoiled, hissing in pain, and the figure shrank back, its form flickering.

“You cannot fight what you do not understand,” the figure hissed. “You will never be ready for what comes next.”

“Then I’ll learn,” the girl replied, her voice strong. “I’ll learn, and I’ll fight.”

The figure seemed to pause, as if reconsidering, before vanishing into the shadows, its presence receding like a memory fading away.

The girl stood there for a long moment, the silence of the room pressing around her. Shadow remained by her side; his posture relaxed but still alert. She let out a breath she hadn’t realized she was holding, her fingers tight around the key.



“What do you think, Shadow?” she asked, though she wasn’t sure if she was asking the dog or herself.

Shadow let out a soft bark and wagged his tail, as if to reassure her. Together, they turned back to the pedestal, the golden light from the key still glowing brightly in the dim space. The book lay there, waiting.

This was only the beginning. The book lay open before her, its golden vines glowing faintly with an otherworldly light. The pages fluttered slightly in the unseen breeze, as if urging her to continue. The girl hesitated for only a moment before turning the page, the words forming themselves as though the book had a life of its own. Her eyes scanned the text, each word filled with an unfamiliar, ancient weight.

"The girl of the forest, the one who walks between worlds, carries the heart of the earth. Her destiny is written in the stars, but it is she who must choose the path. The key she holds is not just a token, but a beacon—a guide through the darkness."

The words stirred something deep within her, a feeling that she had always known her purpose but had simply forgotten it along the way. Her connection to the forest, to Shadow, and to the

key felt as if it were all part of a larger tapestry, one she had been woven into from the very beginning. But there was so much more to understand—so much more to uncover.

She turned another page, the golden light from the key flickering as though in response to the text. As the pages shifted, the writing became more cryptic, each passage a riddle to be solved. It spoke of a great imbalance, a shadow that had been growing for centuries, hidden beneath the earth, waiting for the right moment to rise again.

"The darkness stirs, fed by the lost souls of those who have wandered too far. It seeks the one who would be the key to its return. The girl of the forest must face what she has been running from, for only then will the world be saved or destroyed."

A shiver ran down her spine. The forest had always been her refuge, her home, and now it seemed to be the stage for something much larger, something that could change everything. But what was the darkness? And how was she connected to it?

Her thoughts were interrupted by a soft growl from Shadow. She glanced up, her heart skipping a beat. Shadow was standing at the far side of the room, his hackles raised, his body

tense. His fur rippled with strange energy, and his eyes glowed faintly, casting an eerie light in the otherwise dim room.

“Shadow?” she whispered, feeling the weight of the room shift, as if the very air around them was changing. “What is it?”

Shadow growled again, this time louder, more urgent. He stepped closer to her, his eyes fixed on something in the distance, something just beyond the edges of her perception. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up as the atmosphere grew heavier, thicker, like something was watching them from the shadows.

The girl rose to her feet, her hand instinctively going to the key that still pulsed warmly in her palm. She glanced back at the pedestal, but the book was no longer the focus. Something else, something far darker—had entered the sanctuary.

She could hear it now, faintly at first: a whispering voice that seemed to be coming from everywhere and nowhere all at once. It was like the rustle of dry leaves, but with a tone of ancient malice that sent a cold shiver through her. The voice was distant, but it was growing louder, drawing closer.

The key in her hand began to glow more brightly, its warmth intensifying as the whispers grew. She felt the pull of it, a strange sensation that seemed to guide her toward the source of the voice. Shadow stepped forward, his growl deepening as his eyes darted around the room.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, she saw movement—swift, fleeting, like a shadow passing just beyond her sight. Her heart raced as the figure began to take shape. It was a silhouette, cloaked in black, its form shifting and warping like smoke in the air. The voice came again, a hiss that reverberated through the room, filling her chest with dread.

"You cannot hide," the voice whispered, its tone full of spite. "You are nothing but a child of the forest, lost and forgotten. And you will remain that way—forever."

The girl gripped the key tighter, her fingers trembling, but she didn't step back. Shadow growled fiercely, his eyes locked onto the figure, ready to protect her at all costs. The girl's mind raced. This was the darkness—the force the book had spoken of was the force that had been growing for centuries.

But why now? Why had it come to her?

The figure took a step closer, its form shifting with each movement, never fully solidifying. The whispers became louder, almost deafening, and the girl's mind began to spin with the pressure of it. She was overwhelmed, but she couldn't back down. She couldn't let the darkness win.

"I am not lost," she said, her voice steady despite the fear that gripped her. "I may not know everything, but I know this: I'm not afraid of you."

The figure laughed, a cold, hollow sound that echoed off the stone walls. It was a laugh filled with contempt, as if it had seen this all before and knew how it would end.

"You cannot fight what you do not understand," it whispered, its voice now a low growl. "You are the key, yes. But you are also the lock. The forest is bound to you, and you to it. You are the one who will unlock the door to the darkness—and the one who will unleash it upon the world."

A cold chill ran through the girl's body as the figure's words sank in. It was true, in a way. She had the key, and the forest had led her there. But she had no idea what unlocking that door would truly mean. Could she trust herself? Could she trust the key?

The golden light in her hand pulsed again, this time with such intensity that it illuminated the entire room, casting sharp shadows on the stone walls. The figure recoiled, its form flickering as though the light was burning it. The girl's heartbeat faster, her mind swirling with confusion and fear.





“No,” she said firmly, stepping forward. “I won’t let you take control. I will find a way to stop you.”

The key flared again, and this time, the entire sanctuary seemed to react. The walls trembled; the shelves creaked as though the very foundations of the place were shifting. The air grew thick with energy, the whisper now a roar in her ears. The figure screeched, its shape flickering violently, as if it were being torn apart by the force of the light.

But then, something changed. The golden glow began to fade, the warmth draining from the key. The light flickered once more, dimming, as if it were losing its strength. The darkness, too, seemed to be slow, but steady.

“Is this the end of you?” the girl whispered, her voice trembling with uncertainty. She took a step forward, the key now cold in her hand, but it still pulsed faintly.

The figure’s form wavered again, but instead of dissipating into the shadows, it solidified, taking on a new shape—one that was far more terrifying than before.

It was a creature of smoke and shadow, with eyes that glowed like burning coals. Its form was

tall, its limbs long and twisted, its features indistinguishable from the darkness itself. It was more than a figure; it was a manifestation of the very force that had been growing beneath the earth, waiting for this moment.

“You think you can stop me?” it hissed, its voice a low growl that reverberated through the room. “You cannot even comprehend what you are up against.”

The girl stood on her ground, the key still pulsing faintly in her hand. She wasn’t sure what to do next, but she knew one thing: she couldn’t let the darkness win. The forest, Shadow, the key—it all led to this moment. She had to make the choice.

The figure stepped forward again, its presence filling the room with an overwhelming sense of dread. The girl’s mind raced, but as she looked down at the key, she knew what she had to do. With a deep breath, she raised it high above her head, and the light flared one last time.

And then, everything went dark. The darkness descended swiftly, overwhelming her senses as though the very air itself had thickened with fear. The last remnants of the golden glow from the key faded, and she felt a profound emptiness settle within her. She was no longer

in the sanctuary; she was somewhere else—somewhere deeper, where the lines between reality and nightmare had blurred.

A low, guttural sound reverberated through the ground, like the hum of an ancient force awakening. The air around her crackled, and she could feel the ground beneath her tremble. The darkness was everywhere, pressing in from all sides, closing in on her. It wasn't just a shadow—it was alive, a living entity that sought to consume everything in its path.

Shadow was beside her, though she could no longer see him clearly. His silhouette flickered like a distant memory, a shadow of his former self. She reached out for him instinctively, but her hand met nothing but empty air. Panic clawed at her chest. Where was he? Had the darkness taken him too?

“Shadow!” she called out, her voice sounding weak and distant. “Where are you?”

There was no response.



The silence that followed felt suffocating, and for the first time, the girl felt truly alone. The key in her hand had gone cold, its pulse entirely gone. The darkness pressed in tighter, swirling around her like a tangible force, constricting her every breath.

“You are nothing,” the voice hissed again, its words echoing in every direction, as if coming from the darkness itself. “Lost in the shadows, just like all those before you. The key, the girl—it is all just a part of the cycle. You cannot stop it. You will never understand.”

The words felt like daggers, each one cut deeper into her heart. The weight of the creature’s presence was crushing, and she could feel herself losing strength, her mind fraying at the edges. But there was something else spark, a flicker of light deep within her that refused to go out.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to center herself. It was hard, the darkness overwhelming, but she had learned to trust her instincts. This feeling, this connection to the forest, to Shadow—it wasn’t gone. It couldn’t be. She was stronger than this.

The key had not failed her; it was simply waiting. Waiting for her to remember what she had forgotten.

With that thought, she reached down and gripped the key once more, wanting it to ignite with the same golden light that had once given her hope. She focused on the memory of the forest, the smell of the earth, the sound of the leaves rustling in the wind. Shadow's growl, the warmth of the sun on her face. All the moments that had led her to this point. The key was not just a weapon or a tool; it was a part of her, a symbol of her strength and her connection to something greater.

She could feel the energy of the forest around her, pulsing just beneath the surface. She could feel the ancient magic that had once guarded these woods, the forgotten spells woven into every tree, every stone. She wasn't just in the forest now—she was in the forest. She had always been a part of it, and it had always been a part of her.

The darkness was not the true enemy, she realized. The true enemy was fear, the uncertainty that had clouded her judgment. She had allowed herself to become lost in the shadows, but she no longer needed to be.

Her hand tightened around the key, and slowly, the golden light began to flicker. At first, it was weakly a spark—but it grew brighter with each passing second, as if the forest itself were responding to her resolve. The ground beneath her began to pulse with energy, the darkness retreating ever so slightly. The whispers that had filled her mind with doubt began to fade, replaced by the sound of something much more ancient: a song.

The song was faint at first, like a distant memory that she couldn't quite place, but as she focused on it, the melody grew clearer. It was the same song she had heard in the woods before, the one that seemed to call to hear a song that had always been there, waiting for her to remember.

It was a song of strength and defiance, of hope rising in the face of overwhelming odds. And as the girl listened to it, she felt herself rising with it. The darkness was still there, swirling at the edges of her consciousness, but now it felt distant—smaller, weaker. It was no longer the all-consuming force it had once been.

She could feel Shadow now, his presence at her side, solid and steady. He was more than just a companion; he was a part of her, a reflection of

the bond they shared. The key in her hand glowed brighter still, the golden light now a blazing beacon that cut through the shadows like a knife.

The creature's form flickered again, the darkness beginning to writhe as if it were being torn apart by the light. The whispers grew more frantic, the creature's voice rising in anger. "You cannot banish me!" it screeched. "I am eternal. I have existed since the dawn of time. You cannot—"

But the girl didn't flinch. She stepped forward, the key held high, its light now blazing so brightly that the darkness could no longer approach. "You are not eternal," she said, her voice unwavering. "You are fear. You are doubtful. And I will not let you control me any longer."

The key flared with a pulse of energy so powerful that it shattered the air around her. The darkness recoiled, shrieking as it was pushed back, its form disintegrating in the face of the overwhelming light. The ground trembled beneath her feet as the very fabric of the shadows began to unravel, the air clearing as if the curse that had gripped the land was finally lifting.

But just as the darkness began to fade, a deep rumble echoed from below. The earth itself seemed to shake as the creature's voice, now distorted and ragged, filled the space once more.

"You cannot destroy me, girl," it hissed, its voice barely more than a whisper. "I am a part of you. I always have been."

The girl faltered, the golden light of the key flickering as doubt crept back into her mind. What did it mean? Was it true? Had the darkness always been a part of her?

But she realized then that it didn't matter. The darkness had never truly been a part of her; it was the fear that had kept her from seeing the truth. It was the fear that she had carried with her, the fear that had tried to convince her that she was weak. But now she understood: the darkness was not inside her; it was something she had to confront, something she had to overcome.

The key flared one last time, the golden light expanding to fill the entire space, washing over the land and purging the darkness from every corner. The earth calmed, the air clearing as the last remnants of shadow were driven away. The

creature's voice dissolved into nothingness, and the world fell silent.

The girl stood alone in the quiet aftermath, the key still glowing in her hand. The darkness was gone, but she could feel the weight of the battle on her shoulders. There was no victory without loss, no triumph without sacrifice. The forest was still there, but it was changed—just as she had changed. She had faced the darkness and survived, but there was no going back to what it had been before.

The key grew dimmer, its golden glow fading as the last remnants of its power were used. But in her heart, the girl knew that she had found something far more important than light or magic: she had found herself.

And Shadow was there, at her side once again, his form solid and strong. Together, they had faced the darkness and emerged stronger, ready to walk whatever path lay ahead. For the first time, the girl understood that the song of the forest was hers to carry, and that her journey had only just begun.





Afterword

According to my concept, under the project that has been running since 2014 to direct school children to writing, we have been fortunate to have planted more than sixty thousand writer seedlings in the local literary field. The objectives of this project are to improve the quality of education, to promote literature that will contribute to the future development of the country, to hone the abilities of the future generation, and to build a platform to showcase the creations of children. It is our social responsibility to create the fertile soil for those seeds to sprout and grow. This is the only project in recent history that has been implemented continuously for several years at the school level, provincial, national and international levels for the sake of the productivity of education. This time, it is special that the Pirivena student monks have also been involved in this. The nation should be grateful for the dedication shown by the Principal, daughters, teachers, parents and alumni of Mahamaya Balika Vidyalaya. The printed book is still the main tool of our education. The enjoyment that a child gets from a book cannot be provided by anything else. It is experimentally proven that the use of various electronic devices to store human knowledge and the distancing of children from books has been detrimental to the quality of education and has created various problems in society. This project, which is being implemented as a solution to this, has been adapting the smart younger generation of the digital age to modern technology by writing electronic works for the past two years, together with school children in the country. To take their creations to international readers, Mahamaya girls have built a digital fiction for their own, literary creative abilities. My congratulations to the young writers who have entered it through their creative abilities.

Project Founder and Coordinator,

Senevirathne Maha Lekam