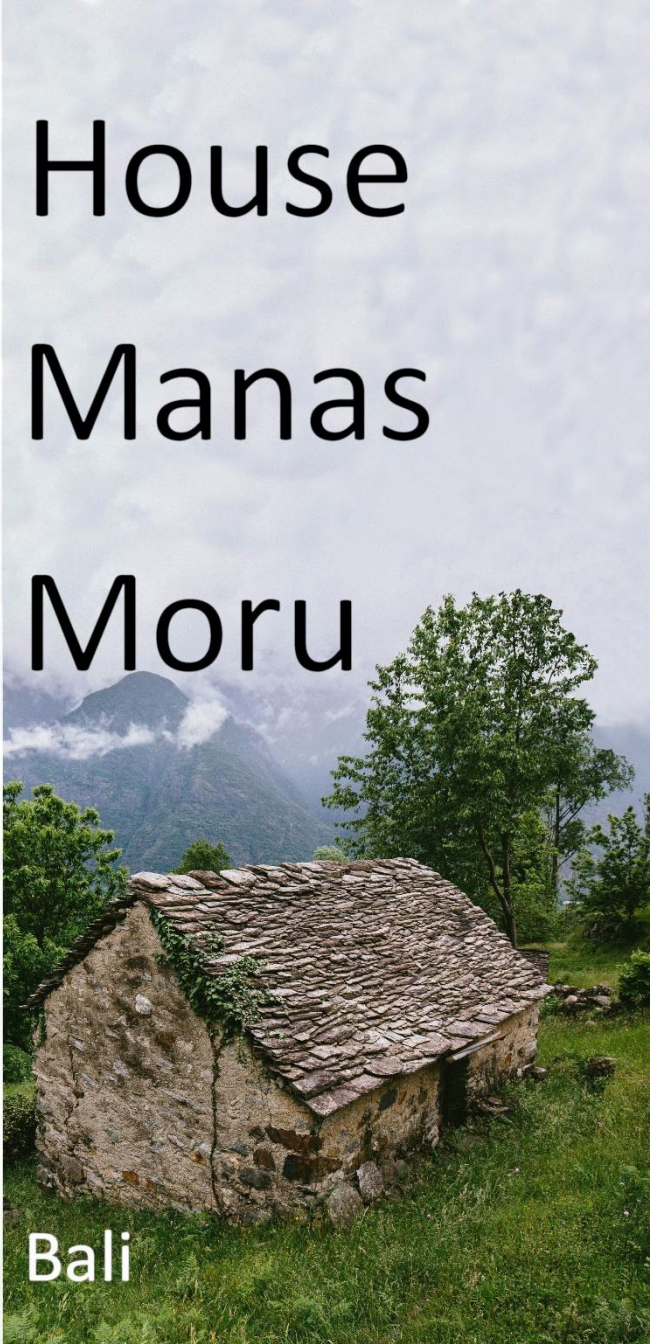
The House of Manas Moru



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BOOK ONE

LOCHAN

1 Manas Moru

Manas Moru died far from his stone house on the river, far from his sons, his wife and his servant boy. He left one son crying for his father and one as yet unborn. He was murdered, I was sure. Murdered by Prem, weasel-faced Prem who cut him down where the evil could be hidden high in the frozen Himalayas. I was only his servant, Lochan, and could do little, and no one else cared, but I knew. Manas Moru was killed for Dalia his wife and a red stone.

If we had grown up with his hand on our shoulders, who knows what our lives would have

been. But Manas died, and his sons and his servant Lochan journeyed where he had never imagined. Or perhaps he had, for he was a wanderer himself.

Manas was his name, but in Muni village they called him Manas Moru. Moru because of the worms. The villagers often told the tale. How they were plagued by worms. How in the huts that clung to the mountainside and huddled by the river their children's bellies swelled. How Manas the herb gatherer returned from the eastern hills, his grin triumphant.

"I'll cure everyone," he called, spreading his arms to embrace the village as he crested the curve of the mountainside, black hair ragged across his neck, sack swinging on his shoulder.

For among the screeching birds and steaming growth of the foothills far below, an old woman had shown him the *moru* tree and its purple berries, delicious on the tongue but poison to the

worms. And he came home to rescue Muni village from its plague of worms, a boy hardly showing a beard.

Great handfuls of the dried fruit he piled on the outstretched palms of the villagers. "*Moru* fruit," he told them. "Mulberry. I've brought it for you. Soak it. Let the children drink it. The more the better, to defeat the worms."

The more the better, he said, for he was a boy, and his ardour was greater than his wisdom.

The children were cured of the worms, and the villagers were grateful. But they never forgot the sleepless nights, the abdomens twisted by cramps, the howls of pain the medicine brought. Manas could do nothing but regret he had made the dose too strong and let time ease the bellies.

"So Manas Moru is my name," he told me. "Manas Mulberry. And the lesson I learned from the mulberry," he said, "you must learn too,

Lochan."

"What lesson, Manas-ji?" I asked. I was a servant, but he taught me as a father teaches a son.

"Remember, Lochan," he said. "You may recognise the symptoms and devise a cure, but still the way can be unclear. Harm can be done. The power to heal is also the power to harm."

It was years before I understood. Years until, having the power to do good, I did harm. Then I knew what Manas Moru meant.

But for now I was a child living in his house. I pressed my palms together, lowered my eyes and said nothing, even though I thought he was wrong. I knew the plants. I knew the dosages. I would not make mistakes.

From the village and along the Vipasa River, people climbed the stony path to Manas Moru's door for ointments and powders. I rummaged on

the shelves for what was needed, since Manas was often away, wandering the secret streams and cliff sides of the Himalayas gathering leaves and roots. Only in the resting season when the plants lay deep under snow was he with us in the stone house, mixing salves in the light of butter lamps that made the room smell like sweetmeats.

Then Manas Moru was dead, Dalia gone, and childhood shattered. I lay on the rocky slope behind the house, sun hot on my eyelids, pebbles slipping between my fingers, plotting how to bring it all back.

But daydreams could not overcome facts. Manas Moru and his hopes for me were dust in the river. A new family would warm itself by the hearth in Manas Moru's stone house. Dalia would never return to the mountains.

2 Not as it Should Be

"Remember your duties, Lochan," Manas Moru always said when he left, pressing my back and punching my shoulders. "You're a child of eleven years, nothing remarkable except for your bushy eyebrows, but I trust you. Look after your mistress and keep the boy close."

He stepped with his walking stick off the little verandah, black moustache ragged and thick above laughing red lips. Past the other huts dotting the mountainside, down the path to the valley and the white-frothed river, *dhoti* billowing beneath his

blanket. Sometimes he turned toward the town, clambering down where the river crashed over a wall of rock, basket of dried herbs tied to his back. Other times he raised a cheery hand and headed upriver with digging tools and empty sacks to the cliffs where herbs grew. Always a blanket wrapped his shoulders and a cooking pot dangled in a sack for the great hot mouthfuls of barley and lentils he ate on his nights away.

When he pushed through the door on his return from the mountains, a jumble of roots and leaves filled his sack and the smells of mountain sun and rain clung to his blanket. When he returned from the town he brought salt and knives and tiny pouches of powdered spice, a bangle or comb or face cream for Dalia, a clay animal for his small son Sundar.

Whatever my task, feeding sticks into the oven or coating the floor with fresh clay or punching water into barley dough, I rose to touch his feet.

He grasped my head, tipping it from side to side, pinching my cheek.

Once he brought me a blanket pin, its head shaped into a bullock.

“You’re old enough,” he said, and showed me how to pin my half-sized blanket at the shoulder.

“So, Lochan,” he would ask. “All’s as it should be?”

I lowered my face to avoid his searching eyes, for I knew it was Dalia he asked about.

“All’s as it should be, Manas-ji,” I assured him.

Sometimes the neighbour stayed with Dalia and Sundar, and Manas Moru took me with him into the mountains, but most often I waited at home.

“It’s only because of you I can bear to stay here,” Dalia said to me, crouching to spin out the curly wool Sham the shepherd brought her spring

and fall, the spindle thickening with yarn as it whirled on the ground before her.

"You're like a little brother to me, Lochan," she said, softening her skin with flour paste, oiling her black hair smooth as water, brushing her fingers over the beadwork on her skirts and shawls as she folded and refolded them into her cedarwood chest.

Sundar, his brown body gleaming with oil and smeared with dust, clattered sticks, flung pebbles, slept in a limp tangle in Dalia's lap.

"I don't belong here, Lochan," Dalia said. "I belong to the heat and rolling hills, and trees so tall they blot out the sun, not to these cold mountains where the sky spreads out forever. Manas Moru took me far from my home."

She was right, I thought. Manas had brought her from the foothills, the mulberry place. He had managed to make the *moru* grow in a sunny valley

near the village, but Dalia had not rooted so well.

“Dalia, where are you? Where’s my son?” Manas would shout when he returned, thrusting a cup from the shelf toward me to fill from the clay water jug, swooping Sundar from the floor and lifting him high. Startled, Sundar cried, and Dalia appeared in the door frame, twirling a long tendril of hair or pleating the folds of her shawl over her shoulder, glancing behind to check the drape.

“Will you eat something?” she asked, her hands folded in greeting, her voice flat.

For a moment, Manas Moru’s eyes clouded

“See what I’ve brought from town,” he would say, if he had been downriver.

“Here, Lochan,” he would say if he came from the mountains, handing me a sack of roots. “Sort and dry them carefully.”

And so the days of my childhood passed. I made sure the food was cooked, the bedding aired, Sundar bathed and fed. Sometimes because Dalia ordered it. More often because Dalia took no thought of it, braiding and twisting her hair and pleating her skirts. Always we waited for Manas Moru. For Manas to return from the mountains, to return from town, to leave again. And whenever he asked me, “Is all as it should be?” I knew he was placing the peace of his home in my hands.

But the time came that Manas Moru did not return. One morning he threw his collecting bag over his shoulder, waved and turned upriver to the mountains, and that was the last I saw of him. Still I struggled to keep all as it should be, but who was there to care?

3 Snakebite

It was clear what had happened. Clear to me if to no one else. We lost Manas Moru because of Prem and the chunk of rough stone Manas found in the mountains.

Prem was from the south, a merchant of Harappa. I never saw him till the day he picked his way with Manas up the path from the river. The trees by the verandah were turning brown but the afternoon was bright and warm.

“Dalia,” Manas called out. “Bring a seat for my

friend."

Dalia glanced at me. I scrambled out of the house with a woollen rug and faded red cushions and spread them by the step.

"Sit, sit," said Manas to the stranger.

Dalia appeared in the doorway with Sundar on her hip, her nose sweeping above the graceful curve of her cheek bones. Her head cloth was stiff with embroidery. Coloured stones cascaded from her throat and ears. A princess, she looked, in a hut on the mountainside.

The stranger, startled as he lowered himself to the ground, dipped his head politely, then landed with a bump on the blanket.

"Lochan, bring water," Manas ordered.

I scooped warm water at the hearth and, balancing the large pitcher, returned outside to the

guest. Manas slid a rolled cushion against the stranger's back.

"Here is Prem, come to honour our house," he said to Dalia, who sank cross-legged onto the verandah. Sundar grunted in excitement, straining against his mother's arm, holding out his arms to Manas.

"One moment, my son," said Manas, reaching to tousle Sundar's hair. "Lochan, be quick. Rinse off our travel dust so I can greet my child properly."

Prem stretched out his hands and feet. I splashed them with water, and Manas Moru's too.

"This is Sundar my son," said Manas, grabbing up Sundar with hands damp from washing.

"He's everything to you," said Prem. "I see from your face."

Manas grinned and flattened his lips in a loud

kiss on Sundar's forehead. Dalia tossed her head.

"Prem-ji's agreed to winter here," Manas said to Dalia.

Dalia tossed her head.

"If you will be so kind, sister-ji," Prem said, looking at Dalia. "I'm told it's too late to leave for Harappa since the snow will fly early this year. My men and bullocks will stay in town but Manas, kind friend that he is, brought me here."

Dalia raised her eyebrows, spread her hands with a shrug.

"Consider this your house," she said.

"Bring snacks, Lochan," Manas said, pressing my head against his chest, smoothing my hair, "and whatever our guest asks for."

Prem tipped his head in thanks and glanced at me. Pointed nose, squashed chin, fine black beard

hairs pulled close. With his cream-coloured shawl drawn tight across his neck he looked like a marten I had seen in the forest scurrying down a branch after a squirrel, yellow throat, glittering eyes.

“Lochan’s been with us since he was Sundar’s age,” Manas said. “Dalia relies on him. He keeps us in order. Correct, Lochan?”

I folded my hands and bowed.

When Prem returned to Nadri town a few days later to see to his wagons and men, Manas clapped him on the shoulders and urged him to be quick.

“Make the time short till you’re back,” said Manas “We’ll keep your blankets ready.”

The last brown leaves fluttered to the ground. I aired the cold weather woolens in the sun and packed away the vegetables drying on the roof. Manas Moru called the stoneworker to strengthen the walls and the carters to pile firewood in the

yard. The day the shepherds came down from the mountain, their sheep nosing for leaves through the first thin fall of snow, Prem climbed back up the river path, levering himself over the steep parts with both hands on his walking stick.

He stayed with us through the snowbound winter. He sat by the clay hearth, drinking milk from the cows who breathed warmth into the house from the next room. He ground Manas Moru's roots and he powdered leaves. Sometimes he wrapped his feet and pointed face with lengths of cloth, clutched a blanket round his shoulders, and ventured with Manas Moru down the river to trade in Nadri market. And for a time he lay burning, then shivering, in his blankets in the corner while I bathed his forehead, brought hot stones for his feet, and dosed him with herbs. Dalia sat near, spinning wool and yanking Sundar away from the hearth when he toddled near.

I broke the ice at the river's edge and dipped the

water buckets, cleaned the cows' quarters and laid fresh straw, chopped wood for the hearth. On sunny afternoons I bundled Sundar in blankets and took him up the hill to slide in the snow.

Once when we burst back into the stuffy house, our nostrils filled with bright air, Prem's eyes and Dalia's high cheekbones swivelled toward us.

"Back already, my son?" said Dalia, her voice high and unnatural.

I had blundered where I was not wanted. The room quivered with tension. Something unspoken hung between them. I turned to leave, but Sundar was cold and dusk was closing in, so I stayed, setting the baby on the floor to toddle to his mother.

"Good boy," said Dalia, drawing him to her lap, and the room returned to normal.

Dalia was not easy with me for several days

afterward.

As afternoons warmed and lengthened, Prem prepared to return to the plains. The river rushed with melted water, black earth leached through the snow, and green shoots pushed up through the cracks in the stone roof.

One morning, birdsong echoing our delight in the spring, Manas caught Prem in a massive embrace and saw him off, loaded with wool cloth from the weavers up the river, packets of herbs, jars of ointment, and a month's worth of supplies for his men and his bullocks. Manas thrust Sundar toward Prem for a blessing.

"You pour so much care on this child it's a wonder he can stand under the weight," said Prem.

Manas Moru's laugh was loud. The baby caught his breath, about to cry, but Manas bounced him up and down until he smiled. Dalia watched from the verandah as Prem disappeared around the river

bend and Manas set off over the mountains, leaving me to watch over Dalia and Sundar.

In summer, Manas came again upon Prem in Nadri town, trading cotton cloth and finely-worked beads for woollen yarn and furs and bits of coloured stone. Together they climbed beside the river to the stone house on the mountainside.

“Bring food and cushions,” Manas Moru’s voice boomed out. “Here’s our friend from the plains, returned at last.”

Sundar ran to his father, clutching his legs and gazing up, his wide eyes and heavy hair the same as his mother’s. Dalia shrank back into the doorway. I thought she was self-conscious about her body, thickened with a baby soon to come.

Two mornings later, Manas and Prem set out for the mountain heights. I brought them food and water as they sat in the shade before they left. Manas unstitched a packet he had brought from

Nadri town and poured dried apricots into Prem's hand, pressing Sundar to his side, face beaming.

"Friends have no secrets," he said. "I'll tell you a tale I've kept to myself until now."

"You've hinted at something for days, my friend," said Prem. "A chest of buried silver in your floor? A fish stuffed with gold pieces in the river?"

"Prem-ji," said Manas, "laugh all you want now, for when my tale's finished, you'll be struck to silence. Many days from here, there are cliffs where little grows and nothing moves but the wind and the hawks, and I've a wish to journey there again, this time with my friend Prem."

"You found something at these cliffs?" asked Prem.

"Long ago, when Lochan here was too young to walk. For years I've waited, and now, with my friend to advise me, my plan is firmly rooted. It's

time to make something of it."

"If it's a trading venture, you'll find me ready," said Prem. "But you're talking in riddles. Tell me openly."

"What I tell you now is not to be flapped in the wind for all to see," said Manas Moru. "Guard this in secret, as I have all these years."

I stood stock still, forgetting the jar I held. It bumped to the ground, splashing beads of water in the dust.

"Years have passed, but it's as clear as yesterday," said Manas. "I was wandering the cliffs, weary of the sky and the moaning wind. Then far above me, I saw what I was seeking. A clump of *somalata* plant, jointed leaves, red berries. A powerful plant, gives life to a failing heart, and I wanted it. For Lochan's mother. In those days she was our servant. She died in the end, her memory be praised. But back to the *somalata* plant. How

was I to get it?”

“I pulled myself up the rock and crept along the narrow ledge above till I knew it was right below me though I couldn’t see it. I was nervous. I admit it. Afraid I’d slip off the edge if I bent over, so I just clung, alone with the rock and the wind and a tiny spotted gecko flashing its pink tongue, quite at home there unlike me. I thought I was defeated. That I’d have to creep down from the cliff without the plant.”

“I’m becoming impatient,” said Prem, his face screwed into a grin. “I’m waiting to hear about the treasure.”

He was teasing Manas. I could tell he thought Manas was exaggerating.

“Be patient,” said Manas. “I clutched a corner of the rock wall where I stood. Pulled on it little by little, and it held my weight, so I eased down to tug a handful of stems of *somalata*. A clump broke off,

my arm jerked, I teetered on the edge. The stone point I clung to was wrenched off the rock and crashed down. I threw myself against the cliff. I still had the marks on my face by the time I returned home. You were a baby, Lochan. You don't remember."

He pushed back his hair to show the scarring at the side of his forehead.

"My feet held true. I was safe," he continued. "When my heart stopped hitting my chest, I glanced down at my feet in case the plant stems had lodged there. They hadn't. No *somalata*. But Mother Himalaya had given me something better. On the ledge by my toe."

I held my breath. Even Prem's eyes were wide with anticipation.

"I thought I was dreaming at first," said Manas. "I'll show you. It's always with me."

He drew a roll of cloth from his *dhoti*, unfolded it in his palm.

“What do you think of it?” he asked.

A chunk of white rock lay on the cloth. He moved his hand out of the shade. The stone glistened in the sun. Caught in one rough edge a red pebble gleamed, as lustrous as a drop of blood, as smooth as sesame oil.

Prem’s face lit up.

“A ruby?” he said.

“When the spur of rock broke off in my hand, this beauty was dislodged from her hiding place,” said Manas. “And more where this came from, I’m sure,” he said, “if we can find a way to mine the cliff.”

“It’s not an easy thing to mine mountains,” said Prem. “But I’d like to see this cliff where rubies hide.”

Manas passed the stone to each of us to hold, even

Sundar, then wrapped it and slid it back into his *dhoti*.

Prem's driver arrived from Nadri town and drew the bullock cart before the verandah. Manas Moru and Prem gathered themselves to begin the trek to the upriver villages. And to the place of the ruby.

Manas planted kisses on Sundar's face and shoulders.

"Time to go, Manas Moru," said Prem. "You dote on him too much. He'll still be here when you get back."

We watched them till they disappeared in the curve of the river. Once again, Dalia and I settled to wait for Manas to return.

In early autumn Prem's driver laboured up the path to the house.

"Prem sent me ahead to inform you," he said. "I regret to say it. Manas Moru is no more. I'm sorry.

Manas is no more."

"Manas is no more?" asked Dalia. "Are you sure?"

"Manas is no more," said the man. "He's with the gods, taken by snakebite."

4 Cast Off

The driver knelt at Dalia's feet. Dalia tottered forward a few steps then sank to the verandah floor, her eyes locked on the driver. Sundar pulled at his mother's arm. I drew him to me and watched, waiting for Dalia to speak.

"Snakebite?' she asked the driver. "Where? His arm or his leg?"

Then she laughed, an eerie echo in the silence.

"It doesn't matter, does it," she said, her voice

dull. “Sundar’s fatherless. That’s what matters. Who’ll care for him now?”

My throat ached, but there was nothing to say. I ran to fetch the neighbours to sit with her.

“Take Sundar and ask my son to feed you,” said the one we called “Auntie”, pushing the child into my arms. “Go sit with my grandchildren and pray to the gods to welcome Manas Moru. Leave us alone with Dalia. The new baby’s asking to be born.”

“Who will care for Sundar?” Dalia had said. And who would care for me, I thought, huddled on an unfamiliar verandah in the dusk. Manas Moru’s laugh, his huge hand on my shoulder, were gone forever. Without him there was no one to watch out for me.

Not Dalia, certainly. “You’re a good boy, Lochan,” she often said, but only when she noticed me.

Not my mother, who was just a memory, a face hovering above me, a brush of fingers on my cheek. She came from Nadri town, Manas had told me, from a household glad to be rid of a servant with a fatherless child. Manas welcomed her, even with me slung over her shoulder in a piece of sacking, to wash and feed his old mother and tend the hearth. In time the old woman went to the gods, and my mother followed her, but still he kept me with him.

Now who would have me? And what did it matter with no Manas Moru to pat my shoulder?

On Auntie's porch I sat with Sundar and Prem's driver and rubbed my finger back and forth across the blanket pin at my shoulder. The little bull on the pinhead was smooth and glossy like Manas' face the last time I saw him.

"Listen to the story of how Manas Moru left this world," said the driver. "Store it in your heart and tell this child when he's old enough to hear how his

father died."

Sundar whimpered in his sleep as I shifted him from my lap to a blanket on the floor.

"It happened after they came back down the mountain," Prem's driver said. "They'd left me and the bullock in a stone hut while they went up onto the rocks. It was windy and barren enough where I waited, the trees all twisted from cold, so I was glad to stay behind and let them go with their secrets to where the wind was even drearier. They were after precious stones, of course, like the others who climb to the cliffs for treasure and end by leaving their bones."

"But these two came back safe," I said.

"Indeed," said the driver. "'A successful venture,' your master told me. 'Now Prem-ji knows to believe when I speak.' On the return journey, they joked and pounded each other on the back like drinkers at a harvest festival. We came to a village

where we'd slept before on our way up. The headman there was glad to see us. To see Prem especially. They'd become fast friends in just the one night we spent there."

"Which headman was this?" I asked the driver.

"I never heard the name," said the driver. "He was an old man. They called him 'Uncle'. At any rate, he started a long tale about some village quarrel he'd settled, and Manas Moru went out to check on the bullock."

That was Manas Moru's way. He visited the animals in the evening, praised them for the day's work.

"Manas Moru went to the shed for dried grass," said the driver, "and next thing we knew, he was stumbling through the door, cradling one hand in the other.

"'Bitten,' he said. 'A snake. Struck from the fodder.'

"We covered him with blankets and held him while he shivered. The headman found the marks on his wrist.

"'Viper fangs,' the old man said. 'The outcome won't be good.'"

"But didn't you twist a rope around his arm?" I asked the driver. My voice trembled like a little child's. "You could have saved him."

"We did that, and cut the wrist open too. We did what we could. But Manas knew it was the end. 'The pain is blooming,' he said. 'My fate is clear. Care for my son and my second son soon to be born.'

"We watched his hand swell and bleed and turn blue and blister. The priest burned herbs and chanted, but I doubt Manas knew it. He was gone long before his body died."

Where was this village and this headman

without a name, I wondered.

"It doesn't matter where it is," said the driver. "I'll not have to find the place again, and couldn't if I had to. It's a place for hawks and ibex, not for men and bullocks. We were like blind men, no idea where we climbed when they led us there and back. You have no need to go there. Prem-ji did what needed to be done for Manas Moru's remains and the river's taken his body now."

Manas' death washed over me again. I felt sick. I lowered my eyes.

"It's strange about the headman," I said, "giving Manas up for dead so easily. Mountain people know remedies for everything, especially snakebite."

"They said there was no hope, and so it proved," the driver said. "He died with friends beside him. Thank the gods for that."

Friends beside him, or maybe enemies, I thought.

Auntie's daughter brought a message the next day.

"Dalia has a second son," she said, grinning with excitement.

The baby's father should have been there, to give silver for her good news.

"Dalia needs you, Lochan," she said. "She's waiting for you."

I climbed the path to the stone house, Sundar's head against my shoulder. Auntie stepped out onto the verandah, a bundle of bedding in her arms.

"Stay with her while I scrub this in the river," she said.

Inside I set Sundar on the floor. He leaned against my leg, unsure about the scene before him.

Dalia lay on her side, one hand under her cheek, the other gentle on the newborn's shoulder. Her black hair was bunched on the embroidered pillow, her body wound in a rumpled cloth. The baby was bundled beside her in a shawl, his face wrinkled in sleep like a walnut. Sundar climbed onto the cot, reaching for his mother.

"Careful, Sundar," Dalia said. "You're big. The baby's very small."

He drew back, startled. I picked him up, kissed his cheek.

"Sit, Lochan," said Dalia. "There are things to do, and they must be done quickly."

I sat cross-legged on the floor by her feet.

"Manas is gone," she said, "and I'm alone in this village. I have to make my own way now."

"You're not alone, Dalia-ji. I'll help you," I said.

“Of course you’ll help me, Lochan. I’ve no doubt of that,” she said. “But it’s a protector I need, not a boy trained to serve.”

I felt my face flush.

“You might not know, Dalia-ji,” I cried, “how much I’ve learned of Manas Moru’s craft. He taught me everything. I can find the streams where orchids grow for cooling the throat, the hidden slopes of *jatamansi* that sweetens hair, the snow lotus sheltering under *bhurj* trees, stinking like goat but cooling the fire in wounds. I know the roots and stems that Manas knew, the drying, the pounding. I’ll trade them in Nadri town, just as he did.”

“Lochan,” said Dalia, “it’s not Manas’ craft I want from you. I have another duty for you.”

“Whatever you ask, I’ll do,” I said, disappointed.

She pulled herself up, leaning on one arm.

“Take Sundar to the shepherds,” she said. “Sham and Nina have no child. They’ll welcome a son.”

“Welcome a son?” I asked. “But he’s ours. He’s your son, and Manas Moru’s.”

I clutched him with both arms.

“The shepherds will keep him,” she said.

“When will he come back?” I asked.

“Listen, Lochan. I’ll explain,” said Dalia. She looked inward and smiled.

I stared, my jaw stiff. Her husband dead, a baby born too soon. Maybe her mind had broken from the strain. How could she smile?

“Lochan,” she said. “You wonder why I’m not collapsed in grief? Listen to me. The gods have thrown a calamity at me. I must make of it what I can.”

Her eyes sparkled, her hand sliced the air as she spoke.

“Later I’ll think of the husband I’ve lost,” she said. “Now we have to act quickly. Prem will return soon, and everything must be arranged by then.”

What had happened to the mistress who patted my head and cuddled Sundar on her lap, hardly noticing the work I did or how he played? The mistress who spun a little wool or kneaded *chapatti* dough if it caught her fancy but more often daydreamed while she combed her hair. Today her jaw was set, her fist clenched.

“This is how we’ll do it, Lochan,” she said. “You go to Sham and Nina. By now they’ll be coming down from the high pastures.”

I was silent, still hoping I had misunderstood.

“You doubt me, Lochan. I can see by your face,”

Dalia said. “Try to grasp this. I’ve thought it through for the best.”

My lip trembled, but I said nothing.

“Look at this newborn son of mine,” she said.

She pushed aside the shawl, pulled at the strips of cloth binding the infant. She stretched out one tiny arm for my inspection, then the other.

“You see, Lochan? Burdened before he’s even begun. His right arm is useless. Will always be, they say.”

It was true. One of the baby’s arms was shrunken and limp.

Sundar stretched to touch his brother. Dalia moved to push him away, then relented and guided his fingers to the baby’s cheek.

“Everyone loves Sundar,” said Dalia. “He’ll be fine. The new child is different. The world will be

cruel to him. He needs his mother to see he grows up happy. A mother can shield him."

"Sundar won't be happy without you," I said.

"I can't take him, Lochan. Prem would never let me bring two all the way to Harappa."

"You're going with Prem?" I asked.

"I'm going with Prem if he'll take me," she said. "With one small baby I'm sure he will. Sundar must go to the shepherds. It's the only way. Tie up your things in a cloth, take him and go. Auntie's son will set you on the path.

"Listen to me, Lochan," she said. "You're only a child, but you understand like a man. I'll shrivel up in this village with nothing to do but spin wool, and not even Manas Moru's comings and goings to look forward to."

I hung my head. I, too, would shrivel without Manas.

"Prem will take me with him to the plains. I know he will. And he won't mind the baby, but I

can't manage two on such a journey. Sundar will be better off with the shepherds. They'll love him like Manas did, and I'll be free of this place."

"If Prem doesn't like this new baby, then what will you do?" I asked.

"This baby he'll know from birth. It's different," said Dalia.

Manas Moru gone. A new baby for Prem and Dalia. They had no need for Sundar. Dalia was right. Sundar must be gone before Prem returned.

"Look at me, Lochan," said Dalia. "You understand, don't you? Now that I've explained?"

"I understand," I said. "I understand everything. It's good I take Sundar where he'll be safe."

I thrust the child toward Dalia.

"Bless him before I go. You're his mother," I said.

She laid her hand on his head for a moment. I swept him up, balancing him with one arm, pulling a blanket from the chest by the wall.

“Whatever else I need, I’ll get from Auntie,” I said.

My voice was gruff with resentment. Already Manas Moru had been forgotten by his widow.

I stepped from the verandah onto the stony path. My throat ached. My eyes were hot with tears.

“Lochan,” Dalia called, “this new one needs me more. Sundar will be fine. You’ll see.”

Her voice faded. I walked on without answering. What was there to say? Manas Moru was dead. Dalia had cast away her son. And cast me away too.

BOOK TWO

SUNDAR

5 Broken

“How deep is it?” Sundar asked the boys from Gaadwar.

The pool gleamed below, the steep rock leading down to it almost as high as he was.

“Deep. Deep as the mountains,” Jeeti said. “How else could it live there?”

“What?” Sundar asked.

“The giant fish. With huge teeth. Drags people

into his mouth alive," Jeeti said.

"Jump! We dare you!" Jeeti's brother cried out. "Or are you frightened? Shepherd boys are always afraid."

Sundar stiffened his arms to stop his trembling.

"You're the cowards," he said. "If I let you climb the high passes with me, you'd be shaking the whole time. Don't worry, though. I'd hold on to you."

Jeeti's brother drove his fist into Sundar's shoulder. Sundar kicked back at his shin.

"Of course, when we got to the very highest place I'd shove you off," said Sundar. "He-e-elp, I'm falling," he wailed, pretending to be a terrified Jeeti throwing up his arms in horror.

Jeeti pushed him toward the edge.

"Jump, shepherd boy," he said. "Or do you

forget how to swim?”

“Don’t worry,” said Jeeti’s brother. “If you sink, the monster fish will snap you up. No worry about drowning when you’re being chewed.”

“If the fish can stand the smell of sheep on you, that is,” said Jeeti. “Anyway, your head’s so thick, maybe the teeth won’t hurt.”

“Shut your mouths, you scrawny little weasels,” Sundar said. “I’m younger than you, and I’m already bigger. Runts. Your grandfather should have culled you from the flock.”

Jeeti slammed a fist into Sundar’s face, jarring the roots of his teeth. Sundar punched Jeeti’s chest, laughing when Jeeti landed on the rocks with a thump.

“Leave him be,” said Jeeti’s brother as Jeeti bared his teeth and raised his fist. “Wait and see if he has the guts to jump.”

The pool lay surrounded by cliffs, a dull eye gazing up at Sundar, daring him. He had to jump. He had to be brave in front of two thin-armed hollow-chested village boys.

Trying to ignore the jeers echoing around him, he pressed his nostrils closed with his hand, squeezed his eyes shut and leaped off the ledge.

His feet slammed into rock; pain shot through his body. The pain of a twisted ankle, not of a huge jaw crushing him. The water that lapped round his knees was shallow, not a bottomless pit. He collapsed on the pool bottom, scraping his thigh. In early spring in the Himalayas, the water was icy. He felt tears on his cheek.

The Gaadwari boys grinned down at him.

“You’re crying,” they called out. “You failed the test. Such a shame! Afraid of a little rock pool with nothing in it.”

“You’re not as clever as you think,” Sundar said. “You’ve made me hurt my foot. Help me up.”

Their laughter turned to frowns when he heaved himself over the ledge. Already the ankle was puffy and misshapen.

“We didn’t mean to hurt you,” Jeeti said. “It was an accident, right?”

“You did it on purpose,” said Sundar.

“It was an accident,” said Jeeti. “My grandfather’s the headman. I say it was an accident, so that’s what it was.”

The brothers gripped arms to make a chair for Sundar and started down the mountain, his foot jolting at every step.

He gritted his teeth to keep from whimpering and hid from the pain by re-living the excitement of the past few weeks. The yearly migration to the

mountain tops. First the melting snow and the fields misted over with green, then a frenzy of bleating and shouting and splashing as the shepherds drove the sheep through the gates and across the ford. Sundar and his cousins, their feet numb from the rushing water, scrambled with the flocks over turf and stone and riverbanks edged with chestnut trees.

The summer stretched ahead with no carting manure to barley fields, no beating paths through snow to milk cows and feed sheep, no chipping ice from roofs before they collapsed.

Just woolly backs rolling like a wave up the valley, veering off to bury lips in soft grass, or reach with delicate hoofs and searching noses for hanging leaves. Dogs loping ahead, their jaws split into smiles, their eyes bright. And the tumult of welcome in mountain villages with milling sheep and dogs and tumbling children.

Sundar's face was kissed, his shoulders squeezed until he felt bruised. The shepherds unrolled packs, traded wheat, metal pots and blankets for furs and roots and mountain salt. In the mornings they moved on, always upward, bellies full of hot food, ears full of the singing and drumming that had throbbed into the night.

Until they reached Gaadwar. In Gaadwar, when morning came, they stayed, bogged down with weeks of their journey still before them, waiting for the Gaadwaris to settle a murder and start the trading. Sundar felt like a sheep dog, straining to lunge ahead but yanked back by a leash.

He longed for the journey to continue. Past Gaadwar, where villages were scarce and pathways so narrow the sheep walked single file. Where Sundar flexed his feet to keep from falling on the rocks while his father Sham walked with ease above the sheerest cliffs, twisting wool with one hand, twirling his spinning stick with the other.

Then the summer quarters. In the winter he dreamed of them. Pastures sloping open to the sun. Huts and stunted trees hugging the earth under bright clouds and blue sky. Swathes of blossom tinting the valley purple, red and yellow. Sheep nosing the grass, guarded by dogs while Sundar and his cousins collected dye plants for the weavers in their winter village.

"Knowing plants – it's a gift," his father had said the summer before when he saw the large sack Sundar collected. "It's in your blood."

"What do you mean?" Sundar asked.

Sham had shrugged and turned away.

Now Sundar was ten, big enough for the highest pastures where the clouds touched the earth, and the boys played at dice and slept in stone shelters too low to stand in.

And where leopards roamed.

“You’re young yet to camp on the heights,” his mother had said. “Stay with us on the lower slopes where you’re safe.”

He was tempted to listen to his mother. He had seen a cow bloody on the floor, slaughtered by a leopard, or so Sham thought.

“When the leopard springs, he gives no warning,” his father said

But Sundar yearned for the high places, for the ache in his legs from climbing and the glare in his eyes. He needed to be there before he lost his nerve.

“Stop day-dreaming. We’re home,” said Jeeti as the brothers carried Sundar past Gaadwar’s stone-edged fields and scattered houses. The villagers were gathered in the yard by Jeeti’s house, crouched on the packed earth debating their duty. Word had been sent of a Gaadwari’s death, a Gaadwari who had left the village years before to

work his in-laws' fields. Murdered, it was said, in his wife's village. Leopard village.

Sundar's parents and their band of shepherds waited, crouched apart in the shadow of the spruce trees towering above the houses.

"Here's Sundar your son, shepherd-ji," said Jeeti. "He's hurt himself. We've carried him all the way back."

Sundar's father folded his hands and bowed his thanks. His mother brought cloths and salve and wrapped the injured ankle.

"Always in trouble," Nina said, but she was smiling. "Now sit until the talking's finished."

Jeeti's grandfather sat with the other elders on the verandah. He beckoned to Jeeti and his brother with a boney hand and patted their heads.

"They've insulted us, those Leopard people," a

villager called out, clutching a blanket to his chest. “Our clubs on their backs will teach them proper behaviour.”

“A delegation is needed,” said another, his stomach bare above his *dhoti*, a thin shawl over his shoulders. “A delegation to demand blood payment.”

“Let the family speak. It’s their son who’s gone,” called a woman. “What do they want?”

“Why can’t we just leave?” Sundar muttered to his mother as the discussion showed no sign of ending. “We’ll trade with them when we come back down in the fall. This is boring.”

“Learn to be patient, Sundar,” Nina said. “We promised them blankets. We need to present them properly. If we’re discourteous, they won’t forget. Rest your leg. Let them finish, then we’ll trade and be on our way.”

Sundar leaned against his mother. His world was reduced to the throbbing in his ankle. He groaned softly. His mother rubbed his arm, smoothed his forehead.

The deliberations around the verandah came to an abrupt end. Murmurs of approval rose from the villagers.

“It’s decided,” the headman said. “Chiru will do it.”

“Chiru will do it,” voices repeated to one another. “Chiru will speak for us in Leopard village. Make the Leopard people pay for robbing us of a son.”

The man called Chiru stood, brandishing a pointed knife, testing its sharpness with his thumb, thrusting the blade between his teeth.

“Chiru knows what to do,” someone called out. “A knife talks louder than words.”

“Talk is all Chiru will do,” said the headman. “Go to speak with them, not to knife them. They learn fighting from birth. We’re farmers here.”

The seated crowd muttered.

“No knives, I say. Learn what compensation the murderer will give,” the headman continued. “Or bring him back a captive. It’s our right.”

The crowd murmured in agreement.

“Take men with knives for the sake of honour, but use only words. It’s compensation we want, not more blood-letting.”

Chiru strode along the path to his house. Four men rose from the crowd and followed him.

“Now, Sham the shepherd,” said the headman, his voice muffled by blanket folds, “we’ll see what you have for us in your packs.”

“Blankets from the finest sheep in the

Himalayas" said Sundar's father as he and the other shepherds unrolled their wares. "This black stripe – you should recognise it, Jeeti. It comes from the sheep you were trying to ride yesterday."

The villagers laughed, but Jeeti did not. Sundar lifted his head to smirk, but fell back, defeated by pain. Sham spread the blankets for inspection.

"Woven especially for you," said Sham, rubbing an edge. "Black protects from harm."

The villagers gathered close, peering at the weave, hefting the weight in their hands. The headman tottered on his stick to where Sundar sat slumped against his mother. The word "broken" sounded clearly in their murmured conversation.

6 Village of the Leopard

In the morning the shepherds loaded their packs to continue up the mountain. Sundar waited on the headman's verandah, groggy from the sleeping herbs they had given him.

Sham approached with outstretched arms, Nina hurrying behind.

"You don't have to carry me, Pita-ji," Sundar said." I can hop on one foot if you hold my arm."

Sham patted his head.

“No need to move. You’ll stay here with Jeeti’s family. Your mother says the bone won’t heal on a long climb.”

“But I need to go, Pita-ji,” said Sundar.

“We’ll be back in the fall to pick you up,” said Sham.

“This is my year for the high pasture,” said Sundar.

“Next year,” said his father. “Maybe you weren’t born for sheep pastures, anyway.”

Sham said no more, but stooped and squeezed Sundar tight against his chest.

“You’ll be safe here,” said his mother. “In the heights you need two strong legs to walk the ridges.”

She kissed his cheeks and his head, grabbed up his hands and kissed them too.

“Behave, Sundar,” she said. “And the gods that brought you to us keep you safe.”

Sundar was numb as his family disappeared over the mountain, and the bleating, barking and shouting faded into the distance. Even the pain in his ankle felt dead.

“Hey, little baby, crying for your mother?” said Jeeti when he saw Sundar’s wet eyes. He pinched Sundar’s arm, digging in his nails.

Sundar seized Jeeti’s earlobe and twisted.

“You’re the one who’ll cry if I tell your grandfather how my ankle broke,” said Sundar.

For the rest of the day, he sat on Jeeti’s verandah, his foot supported on cushions.

And for many days after.

Sometimes Jeeti brought throwing pebbles and the two crouched together tossing for points. But

more often Jeeti was off running with the other boys and Sundar was left watching the kitchen work, listening to the adults chatter.

"If I had wool and a spindle, I could make yarn," he told Jeeti's mother, but Gaadwar village had none to spare.

He sorted dried peas to break his boredom, pounded *chapatti* dough, rocked Jeeti's baby nephew to sleep on his shoulder. Once he tried grinding spices between two stones.

"Not fine enough," said Jeeti's mother. "I gave your father a winter's worth of embroidered caps for those roots. They're not to be wasted."

One morning, the headman held Sundar's foot, turning it from side to side.

"Walk," he said.

Sundar limped off the verandah and along the

path. The headman watched closely.

“You’re fit for field work now,” he said.

With Jeeti and the other boys Sundar walked to the terraces, where wide steps of green barley climbed the mountainside.

“When you see a loose stone, pound it in,” said Jeeti. He pointed. “There where the earth’s spilling over.”

Sundar pushed at the terrace wall. A stone slipped.

“Not like that,” Jeeti said. “Use a hammer. Don’t you know anything, shepherd boy?”

“I know how to twist your arm,” said Sundar. “Like this.”

Women chopping at the weeds nearby clicked their tongues. Jeeti’s mother threw down her hoe to pull the boys apart.

“Angry words make bitter crops,” she said. “You must sing, fill the plants with sweetness.”

Throwing back her head, she seized the hands of the other women and burst into song.

Here is the river.

Here are the sun rays.

When will the grain

Be smooth in our hand?

Here is the blue sky.

Here are the green shoots.

When will chapatti

Steam on the hearth?

Sundar and Jeeti were helpless, caught in a whirl of women dancing out the words with beating feet,

pointing, dipping to the ground, twirling their arms as if they were making *chapattis*. The song ended. The women pinched the boys' cheeks, smiled into their eyes, and returned to the weeding.

"You're good boys," said Jeeti's mother. "You won't quarrel again."

Sundar and Jeeti averted their eyes from each other. There was no more fighting in the fields that morning or in the ones that followed. Just endless repairing of terrace walls, watching for the sun to signal time for midday food. In the afternoons Sundar roamed the mountainside with the other boys, bickering, wrestling, kicking stones.

One day, as they lounged under a tree with milk and *chapattis*, glad of the relief from the hot sun, they saw figures picking their way down the rocks by the stream.

"Chiru's back," cried Jeeti. "Let's see what he's brought from Leopard village."

They raced together down the slopes, boon companions in the excitement of Chiru's return. Others looked up from their work and fell in behind the men as they twisted along the path to Jeeti's house, bows over their shoulders, leather caps pressing their foreheads. Chiru's smile was brash, but his eyes were nervous, darting from side to side. Jeeti's grandfather awaited them. He shifted on his legs, flicked his shawl over his shoulder, and waved Chiru to the verandah floor beside him. Jeeti and Sundar were pushed against the steps by the press of villagers behind.

"What have they sent us?" asked the headman.

"Nothing," said Chiru. "The village of the Leopard has become our enemy."

"But they must pay something for Anu's death," said the headman.

"They pay in knives and clubs," said Chiru. "They're on their way here with battle cries in their

throats. We came fast to reach here first."

He drew his shawl tight. He was shivering though the air was mild.

"Speak openly, Chiru," said the headman. "What has ignited the Leopard people against us?"

"They say there was no murder. They say Anu cheated at dice, and was killed justly."

"Then Anu paid for his cheating and they have no cause for anger," said the headman.

"No, we were the ones with cause for anger," said Chiru. "They refused to hand over Anu's killer."

He raised his clenched fist.

The headman folded his hands and bowed.

"I understand," he said. "Your fist tells the tale. You took the killer yourself and knifed him," said

the headman. “Am I correct?”

“It was an honourable killing,” said Chiru. “We recited his misdeeds, thanked the gods, and sent the body to his family.”

“This isn’t good news,” said the headman. “Gaadwaris, prepare to fight. Post lookouts. Chiru, guard the children and mothers in your house. It’s the strongest. The rest gather here.”

The crowd erupted into shouts and waving arms. Then froze, heads cocked to one side.

A high wail floated from the firs behind Jeeti’s house. As Chiru shot to his feet, men poured round both corners, hemming the villagers against the verandah, their howl swelling like the river in flood. Faces painted in jagged white, lean bodies wound with skins, they leaned over the villagers, shook their spears, stamped their feet, all the time moaning their eerie cry. Several stood behind, arrows fitted to bows.

Jeeti's grandfather pushed himself up, leaning on his stick, grunting with the effort. Sundar stood beside Jeeti, rigid with fear, arms stiff at his sides.

Two warriors, flat noses in weathered faces, leaped onto the step, loomed like nightmares over Jeeti and Sundar, and whisked them off their feet into the line of keening, stamping Leopard people. Sundar's feet were thrust onto the ground. His ankle throbbed from the impact. He twisted to loosen the grip on his wrists, banged his head like a weapon on the hard stomach of the man who held him, kicked his shins.

"Stand still,'' Jeeti said, held fast by the other warrior.

Sundar realised the air was silent. The Leopard people had ended their strange chant. Sundar stopped struggling and looked beside him at Jeeti's straight legs, squared shoulders.

"Can't you behave?" Jeeti said, muttering

without turning his head. “We’ve sheltered you here. Don’t dishonour us. Act like a warrior. Show dignity.”

Sundar’s fear exploded into anger. He heard the headman speak from the verandah, a Leopard man reply, but his fury blotted out the meaning. He hated the word “behave.” “Behave” meant “Something bad is happening. Pretend you like it.”

“Behave” his mother said, so he had stayed behind in Gaadwar village to be teased by Jeeti and thrown around like a sack by Leopard men. He should have screamed and sobbed and hopped on one foot after his parents, and they would have taken him.

He heard his name pronounced and was startled into listening.

“Not ours to give,” the headman said. “His parents left him in our care. Allow us to fulfil our duty.”

“We honour his family by choosing him,” said the Leopard man beside me. The leader, Sundar thought, for a spray of brilliant green feathers waved from the side of his headband. “This Sundar we must have, and also your grandson. They’re old enough to labour well and young enough to be shaped. Two boys for the life of one man. That’s just.”

Jeeti’s mother stood by the doorway, her face expressionless. The headman nodded.

“Then take them,” he said. “Remember who you are, Jeeti of Gaadwar and Sundar the shepherd.”

Jeeti and Sundar were roped together by the hands then made to sit, guarded by a young warrior. The white-painted leader sat on the verandah and accepted a cup of goat’s milk from Jeeti’s mother.

“Because we’ve drunk together,” said the leader

to the headman, “we’ll leave Chiru with you, though he’s a murderer. We’ll take your boys, turn them into men for you and send them back.”

He smoothed his beard, smudging the white lines on his cheeks. The green feathers bobbed in his headdress. Jeeti’s grandfather stared hard at Sundar. Worried what Sundar’s parents would do when they learned their son was a captive? Or sending Sundar a message to behave?

Jeeti’s mother squashed both boys in an embrace.

“Seven times we’ll watch the sun journey north and south, seven times the snow will come, seven times we’ll sow the fields. Then you’ll return,” she said.

“Follow Panipat,” the leader told the two boys, pointing to the warrior beside them.

The Leopard people had arrived in stealth, but

they left in the open, striding along the river with their captives.

Sundar stumbled from his weak ankle, scrambling up and down slopes behind Panipat, his hands bound, still roped to Jeeti. His knees were soon bruised from pebbles, his arms and belly scratched by the undergrowth, his loin cloth dingy with bits of leaf and twig. The wrappings on his feet gave no protection as he crept on shelves of rock even narrower than he climbed every year with the sheep. Stones clattered from beneath his toes down sheer cliffs to the twisted pines below. When he hesitated, careful prods from spear butts pushed him forward.

The Leopard men seemed untouched, their blankets smooth on their shoulders, hair glossy and even around their faces. The leader's feather waved green and blue in the sunlight. Panipat stuck blue gentian flowers in his headband, replacing them when they wilted.

Jeeti slipped, the rope jerking Sundar off balance. He remembered threatening to throw Jeeti off a mountain ridge. What if his empty threat had given Jeeti ideas?

"If you push me over the edge, the rope will take us both," he muttered to Jeeti. "You know that, don't you? We'll go together."

"Did you just figure that out?" said Jeeti. He spoke in a monotone, as if his voice's rise and fall could tip him over.

On the second morning, the leader said "No need" when the men took the boys' wrists to bind them. Sundar swung his arms through the sparkling air, the warble of birds in his ears. For a moment he felt happy. Then anger rushed back, anger at his parents for leaving him behind, at the Gaadwari headman for giving him up, at the Leopard men for taking him, at Jeeti for being puny and know-it-all.

His eyes level with Panipat's thin ribs and

muscled shoulders, he planned for the moment when he could break away. In his mind he sorted through his possessions. Skin bindings on his feet, tattered shawl and loincloth grey with dirt, bag with a few dried chunks of barley chapatti and a water jar tied at his hip, a necklace of yellowing beads that he might be able to trade. That was all. Not enough to live, but he could think about that later. First he needed to escape.

At a bend in the path, the cliff folded into a fir-covered slope gentle enough for walking. Sundar seized his chance. He slammed his fist into Jeeti's shoulder and jumped off the path, sliding and tumbling through the undergrowth away from the shouts of his captors. He skidded to a stop in a rocky hollow, panting under the drooping branches of a spruce tree. Wait until dark, he thought, work his way behind Panipat and the Leopard people, then back to Jeeti's village where he could figure out the way to his family's summer camp.

Strong hands grasped his arms, pulled him to his feet.

“You’re a fool to run. A fool,” said Panipat. “You can’t survive in here alone. Bears, wild dogs, serpents. Do you want to be eaten?”

He clouted Sundar on the arm, shook him by the shoulder, clouted him again.

“Answer me,” said Panipat. “Do you want to be eaten?”

“Leopards?” asked Sundar, falling limp. “Are there leopards?”

Panipat gazed in silence at Sundar’s face. He cleared his throat.

“Many leopards,” said Panipat. “Did you not hear you’re going to the village of the Leopard? You’re surrounded by leopards. A boy alone in the mountains, every move watched by golden eyes.

Then suddenly, giant teeth snapping your neck, great claws on your chest."

His mother's cow, ripped and bloody skin, dead eye. Sundar remembered the bile that burned his throat when he found it. He crawled ahead of Panipat back up the slope.

"Rope them again," said the leader. "They're not to be trusted."

"It's your fault," Jeeti muttered to Sundar. "I did what they told me, but I'm in trouble because of you. I hate you."

He jerked the rope that tied them together. Sundar pretended to lose his footing and fell back against Jeeti, knocking him to the ground and sprawling on top of him. He raised himself on his bound hands to dig into Jeeti's stomach, making him wince.

"Your head isn't working if you think you can

beat me," he snarled at Jeeti as Panipat pulled them to their feet, shaking them.

"It's yours that's not working," said Jeeti. "You can't learn good manners."

Panipat raised his eyebrows and pulled on the rope, forcing them to follow along the track.

By day they plodded over cliffs and mountain streams beneath towering white peaks. At night they dozed surrounded by nameless rustles and shrieks. Sundar lost his urge to run off as he scanned the trees for lurking beasts.

They climbed a track to a cluster of wooden buildings balanced on the mountainside. The village of the Leopard. The houses leaned into each other, supported by timbers driven into the slope. Panipat led Jeeti and Sundar past wooden doors and ladders to the last house, where a solemn-eyed cow gazed at them from an enclosure beneath the raised floor. Panipat untied the boys and gestured

for them to climb the ladder, nudging them through the open doorway at the top.

The room was dim, the corners in black shadow, the smell of animal dung and straw from below wrinkling Sundar's nose. A woman crouched by a stone hearth, stirring with a long spoon. She seemed unsurprised by their arrival.

"Sit there," said Panipat to the boys. "Amma-ji will give you milk."

They squatted on the floor. Sundar's bare back scraped against the wall where the plaster had fallen off. Amma-ji pushed wooden bowls into the boys' hands.

"This is my grandmother," Panipat said. "Once she had a second grandson and I had a brother," he said. "Anu murdered him. So you're brought here to serve us. Finish your milk and come down. I'll take you to your mistress. She'll show you your duties."

“They’re in the top fields,” Amma-ji told Panipat. “The wall is down.”

“I’ll find them,” said Panipat as he lowered himself through the opening.

This is all Jeeti’s fault, thought Sundar. If he hadn’t made me break my ankle, I’d never have heard of the Leopard people.

7 Slavery

The milk was rich with cream. Sundar had last eaten early in the morning, but his throat was rigid and refused to swallow. He held the bowl in his hands and stared at the gaps in the wooden floor. He concentrated on not crying.

“Drink it,” said Amma-ji. “Good buffalo milk. Eat what you’re given or offend the gods.”

Her face was stern, her finger pointing like a threat from the shadows. Sundar gulped the milk. Jeeti did the same. The woman poured roasted

barley in their hands. Sundar swallowed, tightening his chest to keep from choking.

"Go now," the woman said.

Sundar heaved himself onto the ladder, holding the rungs for support. Amma-ji threw a ragged blanket over his shawl and his shoulders relaxed under the extra warmth. Jeeti's feet were curled above him. From habit, Sundar's fingers twitched, eager to knock Jeeti off, but the urge was overcome by his misery.

Panipat waited on the gravelly shelf at the ladder's base. He pressed the boys' shoulders, forcing them down, backs to the wall.

"Stick out your feet," he said, picking up a chunk of tree limb half the length of Sundar's leg. He passed strips of hide through holes in the wood and around Sundar's ankle, pulling the strips tight.

"I've put this on your good leg," he said. "The

other's still healing. Outside, you drag this wood with you wherever you go. You'll work more slowly for it but it'll keep you from running to the forest again. Don't unpick the knots. I'll be watching you."

He tied a log to Jeeti's foot as well.

"I know enough not to go off. I don't need the block of wood," Jeeti said.

"It's good that you know not to go off," said Panipat, looking at Sundar. "Have you seen a man mauled by a leopard? That's how our last slave died, or so we think. Wear the wood, Jeeti. In case Sundar here tries to run and take you with him."

Sundar opened his mouth but said nothing. His nostrils trembled with anger, more at himself than at Panipat. He was afraid his terror of the forest would never let him leave, and he was ashamed.

The chunks of wood dragged at their heels, forcing their legs to swing wide for balance.

Panipat led the boys beside the stream, past drooping birch trees and pines with massive needle clumps and cattle nibbling the thin grass of the forest floor. The huddle of houses behind disappeared, the forest pressed on their shoulders. They came to a stop at a fence of branches taller than Panipat.

Panipat untied the thongs of the gate, urging the boys through to the open air.

“This gate’s tied shut for a purpose,” said Panipat. “Without it the cows will use the barley fields for pasture.”

A looming mountain. Terraces, steep and cramped by Gaadwar’s standards, waving with golden grain.

More walls, more dirt, more rocks to hammer, thought Sundar

Moving shapes dotted the fields, swaying like

dancers. Old men grasped armfuls of standing grain, slicing through the stalks, tying the bundles with lengths of stem, the heavy seed heads drooping from the knots. The returned warriors were already moving into the fields, bending to cut.

Harvest time. Sundar's parents would be returning from the high pastures, passing through Gaadwar expecting to find him there. Would they come for him here, in the Leopard village? Impossible. How could a shepherd band confront a village of spears and arrows?

He felt a sob in his chest, and then laughed at the picture that popped into his head: his parents arriving in Gaadwar, scolding the headman for losing their son.

Panipat led the boys past the harvesters and the cone-shaped piles of barley sheaves, climbing up to terraces of grain still uncut.

"Do you think we're bullocks, making our legs

haul this wood?" Sundar said to Panipat.

Panipat grunted.

Jeeti spoke up. "Bullocks have it easier. At least carts have wheels."

Sundar glanced at him in surprise. It felt strange to have Jeeti agree with him.

They toiled up the slope in an endless world of terraces and grain, cut off from the sky by mountain peaks unless they craned their necks. At each new terrace, Sundar sat and lifted the wooden chunk over the edge. His legs cramped, his ankle ached.

They stopped at a jumble of crumbling gravel and sheer stone face where the terrace had collapsed into a lumpy mass of dirt and rock. Women and children crouched in the dirt, pushing and shaping the earth with wooden paddles, dragging rocks into place to hold the edge.

A woman crawled backward toward them, hauling an earth-caked tray. She stood up, stained and dishevelled, and folded her hands in greeting.

“Himavati, I’ve brought you slaves from Gaadwar. Let them serve you like the sons we don’t have until they’re men.”

She tipped her chin in agreement, silver hoops swinging at her ears. Her face darkened in a scowl.

“Good,” she said to Sundar. “You’re big and strong. This tray will be your responsibility.”

She swept her arm toward the mass of mud and stone.

“Dig up those rocks and pull them down below.”

She pointed to the terrace beneath where repairs were almost finished.

“You help him,” she said to Jeeti, rewinding the scarf around her head and stooping down to the

lower terrace.

Sundar saw the resentment in the set of Jeeti's jaw.

"Just because you look strong doesn't mean you are," he muttered, slapping the side of his foot against Sundar's ankle. Their brief friendship was ended.

Himavati glanced up as Sundar raised his fist.

"Why aren't you working?" she asked, and turned away.

For the rest of the day, the boys hauled stone, bruising knees, scraping fingers, sweating under the sun and shivering in the shadow of the mountains.

"The fields are nothing but rocks here," said Jeeti, flinging a stone onto the tray. "And that stuff the men are cutting - I can't believe it's barley, it's so thin. I hate it here."

“This is normal for you,” said Sundar. “You’re used to digging around in dirt all day. I’m the one who’s suffering. I’m a shepherd with no sheep.”

Sundar sat on his heels, thinking of his father twisting wool into thread as he walked, warbling on his flute when he sat. Of his mother and aunts laughing while they cooked, pounding in time with their hands and singing. Of striding upward on mountain tracks as eager as the sheep to reach summer grasses, as excited as the dogs by the scent of flowery meadows so high that with a step he could roll in the clouds, bound through the heavens. Or so it seemed.

In the heights, the mountains were full of promise, leading higher and higher. Not like here in the Leopard village where the mountains were walls pressing him down into dirt and stone.

When the sledge was full, the boys tugged together at the rawhide strap, hauling the stone

along the terrace's twisting edge. The load slid into their heels, jarring their ankles. They learned to move backwards, twisting their heads to check the way, stumbling when their log shackles tangled in the barley.

A young girl brought water, poured it from a fat-bellied jug into their cupped hands.

"Tomorrow bring your bowl," she said. "Rest a while now. Himavati said to tell you."

They sat on the terrace edge, one leg dangling, the other folded on the earth, chunk of wood in front like an extra body part. Around them in the shadow of the cliff, the others sat cross-legged, unfolding woolen shawls to cover their shoulders in the afternoon chill. Several women lay down full length and closed their eyes.

Down by the river, where the stepped fields began their climb and the barley gleamed gold in the light, the men still swayed, leaving shorn fields

and twisted piles of barley where they passed.

“These fields are open. Everyone can see everyone. We’ll find a better chance to escape in the village,” said Sundar, hiding his fear that he would never have the courage. “Unless my family comes to get me,” he added.

“You’re not talking sense,” said Jeeti. “They won’t come. It wouldn’t be proper. We were given fairly. We’re stuck here.”

“I’ll never be stuck here,” said Sundar. “Somehow I’ll get away.”

Hope flashed in Jeeti’s eyes, but then he shrugged, unconvinced.

Jeeti’s warning held true. They were stuck in the village of the Leopard. Day after day, Sundar put off his escape. Every morning they climbed down the ladder and stood while Panipat tied logs to their feet. When they were not hauling rocks to build up

collapsing walls, Himavati found other chores. They stamped the grain to thresh it, then turned stones to grind it. They carried wood or vegetables or new barley in baskets on their backs and sat in the shadowed room at the top of the ladder to stir porridge and peel tubers.

Work and sleep. In Leopard village there was little time for racing or wrestling or stone-tossing.

Winter came. They shovelled dirty straw and threw down fresh for the two cows stabled behind the ladder, then hauled the soiled straw to the fields, dragging their wooden shackles behind until the snow grew so deep that Panipat took pity and let them walk free

In summer, they carried river water to the terraces, in pots dangling from poles balanced on their shoulders. Sometimes they climbed the narrow ladder to the roof to spread herbs for curing in the sun. Once Sundar stole a jar Amma-ji had set

there, packed with dried apples and sealed with beeswax. He carried it down the ladders tied in the end of his loincloth, and buried it under the gravel while Panipat's attention was on Jeeti's shackle.

Jeeti noticed.

"For when we escape," Sundar told him.

"You're crazy," said Jeeti. "The gods have touched your head."

But Jeeti said nothing to Panipat.

Sundar added other jars to his cache under the gravel as time stretched to months and then years.

At night they slept on the floor, lulled by the glow from the hearth and the sounds of the dark. The movements of the cows rustled up through the floor boards, Amma-ji snored like a cart wheel on a gravel bed, Panipat and Himavati murmured to each other in voices too low for Sundar to

understand, but in moods he could feel, sometimes angry, sometimes sad, sometimes light-hearted, just as he remembered his parents talking in the night. When Himavati fell asleep, she gave orders as if she was awake: “Go! Be quiet! Come here!” Panipat’s breath popped out like the bubbles Sundar had blown long ago in the river shallows while his father and uncles bathed the sheep.

Sundar’s eyes blurred with tears.

“Hey, baby, are you crying again?” whispered Jeeti.

“Don’t you know anything?” Sundar said. “Hearth smoke makes my nose run.”

“Liar,” said Jeeti, punching his shoulder.

“Liar back to you,” said Sundar, but before he could punch, Himavati scolded from behind the curtain, threatening to beat both boys, and they fell silent.

Sundar's mind seethed with escape plans. He could lift the heavy bar across the door and steal down the ladder in the night, but how could he survive the screeches and howls of the dark? Or he could break away as Panipat tied on the wood slab and dash down to the river, but then where would he go?

Sometimes Panipat praised him, or a cow nuzzled him, or the village feasted and danced, blue pheasant feathers flashing in their headbands, and he was happy. He chanted and pounded his feet with everyone else when Panipat and the other warriors, faces striped with white paint, returned with livestock from their raids on distant villages. Once they led captives, two women and a boy, and Sundar and Jeeti, caught up in the excitement, cheered too. Then Sundar's voice faltered.

"We're forgetting who we are, Jeeti, mocking those people," he said. "We're slaves the same as they are."

He added to his cache of food in the gravel more from habit than from a plan to run. Sham and Nina and his life with the shepherds receded into a memory.

Then came the year of the great rains and the mudslides. His life changed again.

8 Mudslide

Rain poured down though it was the season for sun, for harvesting grain, digging roots, breathing in the fragrance of drying apricots spread on the roof. Water slid from the sky, swelling the river and turning the pathways into muddy streams. The cows lowed in their cramped room behind the ladder, longing for green shoots and open spaces. Sundar's loincloth and shawl were damp and dirty, his feet were cold, his nostrils clogged with the smell of mildew and smoke. In the grey rain of morning, villagers plodded along the track through

the forest to shore up waterlogged terraces and rescue stands of barley collapsing over the stones. At dusk, cold evening rain stinging their necks, they sloshed back home, almost too exhausted to haul themselves up the ladders to their doors.

Sundar clumped through the mud with the others, but by the third morning he was sick. His throat was swollen, his head heavy. After several hours of heaping up piles of mud that squeezed through his fingers like water, he fell back on his heels, his arms dangling.

“I want to lie down,” he said, and curled on his side in the mud.

Himavati took his wrist and felt his forehead.

“Who can tell in this downpour if he’s hot?” she said. “Take him to Amma-ji. He’ll be no use here.”

Jeeti and Panipat each grabbed an arm and walked him toward the river. When he sank to the

ground, Panipat heaved him over his shoulder, just as he had years before on Jeeti's verandah. Back to the village, up the ladder, into the room, where Amma-ji was spreading skirt and *dhoti* lengths to dry near the hearth.

"The boy needs care," said Panipat.

He laid Sundar by the fire.

"What there is to do I'll do," she said. "Sickness in this weather's not good. It clings like the damp."

Jeeti leaned close to Sundar's head.

"If you're not really sick, I'll find out, and then you'll be in trouble," he muttered.

Jeeti crawled through the entrance and down the ladder, his empty water jar banging on the rungs. "I'll be watching you," he said, as his head disappeared.

Sundar was washed, wrapped in blankets with

warm stones at his feet, forced to gulp a bitter drink, and left to sleep.

He woke to the sound of rain slapping the slate roof and Amma-ji massaging his arms with oil. He pushed away from his blankets.

“Sit up slowly,” she said, pressing him down. “You’ll be dizzy after two days of sleep.”

“I slept for two days?” Sundar asked.

“Your sleep and the prayers of the holy one kept you alive,” said Amma-ji.

Sundar turned his head and recognized the twisted ringlets and unkempt beard of the village holy man.

“The gods have cured you,” the priest said. “It wasn’t your time to die. Be grateful.”

Sundar folded his hands and bowed his head. Amma-ji touched her head to the floor, filling the

priest's lap with almonds. The priest raised his hand in blessing and disappeared down the ladder.

The sound of rain filled the room. Amma-ji spooned barley porridge into a bowl. Thunder rumbled in the mountains and her arm jerked, spilling porridge on her shawl.

"A little food and you'll get back your strength," she said.

The rumble rolled closer, dull behind the pounding of the rain. Perhaps not thunder. Wheels? Attackers? Impossible, when every step was at half-speed, sucked down by the mud. Amma-ji thrust the bowl at Sundar and listened, her head cocked to one side.

The rumbling swelled to a growl, and then to a roar. Amma-ji's mouth gaped in horror. Sundar held his breath. His ears throbbed.

A boom like a thousand lightning strikes

punched his skull.

The room was silent for an instant, then filled with the urgent bawling of the cattle penned in the room beneath.

“I’ll find out,” said Amma-ji. “You stay.”

Sundar, impatient at waiting for her to return, pulled himself up along the wall. He slumped back to the floor, dizzy and sick to his stomach.

Footsteps clumped on the ladder, too quick to be Amma-ji’s. Sundar lay propped against the wall, watching.

It was Jeeti who rose over the ladder and crouched panting inside the entrance. His body was tight, like a monkey poised to spring. His chest heaved.

“Buried,” he said. “All buried. Under the mountain. Mud, rocks, trees pouring down. Fields

gone. Forest gone."

The frantic bellowing of the animals below and the rain on the roof above blurred Jeeti's words.

"The forest's gone?" repeated Sundar.

"The mountain melted," said Jeeti. " Mudslide. They ran but it rolled right over them."

Jeeti pulled a knife from his waist, clutching it with a trembling hand.

"That's Panipat's knife," Sundar said. "You stole it? You'll get in trouble."

"I didn't steal it. Panipat gave it. He threw it to me so I could cut the rope. So I could run. But it didn't matter. The mud stopped before it reached me."

Sundar realised that Jeeti's leg was free. No log dragged at his ankle.

“Are you going to keep it?” Sundar asked.

“Maybe,” said Jeeti. “I’m telling you. They’re all buried. They’re gone. They’re dead.”

“Who’s dead?” asked Sundar, not understanding.

“Everyone,” said Jeeti. “Everyone there, in the fields. I was fetching water from the river. Or I guess I’d be buried too. So you can go now. That’s what I came to tell you. You can run away, just like you planned.”

They could hear Amma-ji murmuring to the cows, soothing them. Sundar crawled toward the door, reluctant to leave now that he had the chance.

“Hurry,” said Jeeti. “Go down the ladder.”

“There’s no point,” said Sundar. “Amma-ji will hear us. And if she doesn’t, Panipat will catch us.”

“I told you. He’s buried in the mud,” said Jeeti. “He wasn’t at first, but he ran to find Himavati and a rock knocked him down.”

Jeeti’s face twisted. Tears welled in his eyes. He pressed his hands against the floor and rocked his body back and forth, a moan rising from the bottom of his throat.

Sundar pulled himself to the ladder and looked down at the track. A man raced along it shouting, his naked shoulders pelted by the rain. An old man stumbled behind, a blanket over his head, thin legs splashed with mud. Other blanketed shapes followed, rushing headlong toward the fields where the crashing had sounded. Amma-ji ran from the stable beneath, her wails fading into the distance as she joined the small band of runners.

“Go,” said Jeeti.

Sundar crept down the ladder. His legs buckled when his feet touched the track. Dizzy, he hunched

his shoulders against the driving rain, longing for his dry blanket by the hearth, then was grateful as Jeeti threw the blanket over his back.

“Now what?” he asked Jeeti.

“You’re asking me? You’re the one with the plan. You’ve been talking about it since we came here.”

Sundar clouted him on the shoulder, angered by the tone of his words. Jeeti stumbled.

“That’s the last time I come running to help you,” he said, his jaw clenched.

The boys glared at each other, their breathing heavy, Sundar propping himself against the ladder.

“We can ford the river and walk where the cliffs aren’t so steep,” said Sundar at last. “We’ll be out of their reach before they think to look for us.”

“I told you, Sundar. There’s hardly anyone left

to notice," said Jeeti.

They splashed through the shallows at the river bend, rain dripping down their necks, water swirling to their armpits. The current lifted Sundar off his feet; he was too feeble to push against the force. Jeeti gripped his arm and pulled him to the bank on the other side, where he sagged back against a pine trunk, sheltered from the rain but shivering in his wet blanket.

"Wait here," said Jeeti. "We forgot the food jars. I'll go back."

Dried apple would taste good, Sundar thought, glad Jeeti was the one to slip and splash back over the river rocks.

The rain eased. The dull gray of the air evaporated in sunlight reflected from the river. Sundar watched Jeeti scramble out of the river and up the bank on hands and knees, then slog through mud toward the track, his legs sinking up to the

ankles. Sundar held his breath, certain a villager would burst out of a house or return from the fields to discover them.

Buried, Jeeti said. Sundar felt lost in loneliness. He almost wished for someone to appear on the track, to clamp a hand on Jeeti, to shout at Sundar lying sick and weak across the river and haul the two boys back into the ordinary life of the village.

But the village lay quiet except for Jeeti making his way to the corner of Panipat's house, bending over the spot where the jars were buried. The river's roar and the chirping of birds filled the air. Through the glare of the sun, Sundar watched Jeeti scrabble in the stones and dirt.

Then, above the rush of water, the cows from Panipat's house bawled in panic. Sundar stared across the river. The mountain behind the line of houses was moving. He screamed to Jeeti, a pine bough scraping his cheek as he strained forward.

"Jeeti, come back! Come back!" he shouted so loudly his throat ached, but the sound was lost in the moans of cattle and the sudden rumbling from the mountain. The mountainside heaved. A blanket of mud unfolded down the slope, shearing away the forest. Trees crashed as if felled by a monstrous axe, rocks and treetops churned in the mud like pieces of straw in a pan of plaster.

"Run, Jeeti, run!" Sundar shrieked, though there was no chance Jeeti heard him above the rumble of earth and rock and broken trees. Jeeti was intent on his task, crouched over the buried cache by the house, glancing over his shoulder toward the uproar as he tugged at a jar.

"Run, Jeeti!" cried Sundar, tottering to the edge of the river. The sky was bright above him, but the air across the river was dull with spray thrown up by toppling trees and rocks.

"Run!" Sundar screamed.

Trees crashed onto the upper row of houses, cows bellowed. Jeeti leaped to his feet. Sundar watched as the mud rolled over trees and shattered buildings, reared up over the houses in front, and buried them all.

Stone roofs, cows, pathways, food jar half out of its hole. All buried.

The mud surged over Jeeti as he lifted his leg to run, his arms above his head.

Jeeti, the cows, the houses were gone. There was only brown mud.

Sundar crawled back to his tree, hugged the trunk, and waited for his turn, for the mud to pour into the river and up the bank and over him.

But at the bottom of the slope, the huge mass slowed and stopped. The fury was spent, though its echo still shook the air. Then all was quiet except for the river's rush. A mist hovered over the great

brown gash on the mountainside.

There were no landmarks in the muddy waste to show him where Jeeti was buried. The cliff where Panipat's house had clung on stilts, the line of trees at the rear, the stony path to the river had vanished. Sundar set a foot in the river, felt the current's pull, and drew back. He was too weak to cross. He crawled to his tree and curled up by the trunk. Cold, wet, sick, he lay in the sun by the foaming river, not caring whether he slept or ate or disappeared into the earth.

9 Leopard

The chirp of a wagtail woke him in the early light. He raised his head to search for the bird and saw it in the grass near the river, black and white tail trembling, yellow head peering at Sundar. A final chirp, and the bird turned away to peck at the edge of a pool left by the rain.

Sundar struggled to sit, shivered, and felt again the horror of the day before. How wonderful to be a bird, to fly through the fresh morning air far above the hurt, to land on grass and gather insects in the sun.

From behind the tree, Sundar stared across the river. Five or six people moved at the edge of the mudslide. They prodded the earth with sticks, dug with bare hands, collecting broken boards, a bed leg, a segment of cart wheel.

Sundar sank back against the tree. His blanket was damp but snug against his shoulders, shielding his skin from the rough trunk. The buzzing in his head, the shivering in his stomach were gone.

And he was free. In spite of the horror, he thrilled with sudden excitement.

If he slipped into the forest behind the river, the tattered group sifting through the mud would have no idea he was alive. Four years of slavery had made him strong, strong enough to fight anything he had to, he thought, flexing his arms. Maybe even a leopard. He crept toward the trees.

He jerked back before he realised what he saw. A groan escaped his throat.

Two eyes stared from the forest undergrowth. Yellow muzzle, black nose, pointed ears. A wild dog. A *dhole*. *Dhole* packs could kill deer, even leopards, he had heard. Did they attack humans? This one seemed to be alone. And very young.

The dog sat still, front legs straight, yellow fur gleaming in the sun that penetrated the leaves. It turned its head, gazing sideways at Sundar. Sundar edged into the trees, not wanting to provoke the dog but eager to hide himself from the villagers across the river. The *dhole* bounded off.

Sundar walked. The sun rose high. Still he walked. The sun began its descent. Sundar's stride lengthened as his shakiness wore off. He followed the river, his fingers sticky from sap that oozed from the pines as he brushed by, his bare feet bruised by rock. His fever was gone, but he felt sick from hunger. He crawled down over broken boulders to drink from the river, longing for a fish baked over fire. But how to catch a fish in water

swirling so fast? And how to make a fire? Panipat's fire sticks were buried in mud, and the fire pots the shepherds carried a distant memory. He lobbed pebbles at water birds, hoping to stun one of them, but only startling them into flight. His neck ached from craning his head to check for crouching leopards.

The sun dimmed and rain drove down again, splashing into the river foam. He drew back into the trees, thrusting away his fear and his hunger, his mind fixed on the rhythm of his legs. The pines thinned to a small clearing. A pair of familiar yellow eyes gazed at him.

A *dhole,* the same dog as before. Sundar recognised the frill of white on its chest. Its head and shoulders were hunched low, its hind quarters raised. Something bloody was clamped between its paws. A dead rabbit. A limp ear, a glassy eye were untouched above the animal's mangled flesh.

Sundar's hunger swept back. His stomach burned with it. He was sickened by the shiny pink entrails but drawn to them at the same time. He raised his arm to throw a rock, then let it fall slack. There was no point in chasing off the dog if it carried away the rabbit too.

The dog lowered its snout, pulled with its teeth at the ragged hole in the belly of its prey. Sundar edged close, then in one motion stooped and snatched at the rabbit. The dog clamped its jaws on the body and tugged back, snarling.

I'll win this fight, thought Sundar. I'm bigger than a jungle puppy.

He pulled hard, braced for resistance, and crumpled to the ground. The dog had let go and slunk away among the tree trunks.

Sundar crammed the rabbit carcass against his face, pulled the skin away with his teeth, tugged and gnawed at the legs. When he kept his eyes

closed, the taste was fine. His stomach heaved. He tossed what remained in the direction the dog had gone. He left the shelter of the forest, held up his face, spread his arms, to let the rain wash away the bloodstains.

He crawled shivering into the undergrowth and pulled his blanket tight around him, his chin pressed into his knees. He pictured Jeeti lying under stone and broken houses. When you're dead, you don't feel cold and wet, he thought. How did Jeeti's eyes look now? Wide open, staring like the rabbit's? The cows' eyes, too, and Amma-ji's, deep in the mud with Jeeti. How did it feel to be buried? How would it feel if the little yellow *dhole* brought its whole pack to leap on him, disembowel him? Or a tiger or a leopard?

Sundar lifted his eyes to the mountainside thick with trees, to the snow-covered peaks. It could happen again, mud pouring down the mountain, toppling trees, filling his nose and mouth. He

settled against a trunk to sleep.

In the morning, birds shrilled and darted through the floating mist, monkeys screamed, squirrels scolded. Across the clearing a brown monkey stretched out on a tree branch like Panipat reclining on cushions for his morning milk. Another monkey squatted on the ground, her baby cuddled to her chest, her lips rounded in a question. “Why did you escape?” she seemed to ask.

It was years since Panipat and his fellow warriors had led the two captive boys across the mountains from Gaadwar to the Leopard village. Still Sundar had a memory of how they had come. If he made his way to Gaadwar, he could find his family from there, even if he had to wait for spring.

The river was the problem. His way lay north, up the mountains on the other side. This side was leading him south. Easy to ford at the Leopard village, the water now poured down the mountain

through a deep gorge, impassible, a roar of swirling foam broken by jagged rocks.

I can't go all the distance back to the Leopard village, he thought. Some of them are alive. They'll catch me for sure.

He climbed down to the river's edge, testing his footholds, clinging to the bank. He scooped up water, gulped it, gazing at the far shore. Could he jump across, stone to stone?

He leaned his arms on a rock half-submerged in the eddying water. He eased one foot to the slanted surface and shifted his weight. His foot slipped. He fell back to the shore, blood seeping from his scraped shin.

He continued walking, the river bend taking him further from Gaadwar, but further, too, from recapture. On his left was the forest edge, gloomy in the sun, bare pine trunks stretching up to clumps of needles that absorbed the light. On his right the

river tumbled, swirls of froth and heaving water. A branch crashed by. An image of his own body propelled over the rocks flashed before him and he shuddered.

He felt eyes on him, then recognised the little *dhole's* pointed face and white chest, head cocked to one side, black tail tucked behind.

"Are you following me, yellow dog?" asked Sundar.

The dog's pert face and the sound of a human voice, if only his own, lightened his mood.

The dark pines gave way to the rustling boughs of chestnut trees. Sundar stopped to rest in the undergrowth, head pressed against a trunk. He dreamed that the *dhole* crouched at his shoulder snapping rabbit bones with its teeth.

He awoke to a sunless forest, rain rustling through the leaves, the birds silent. Water slapped

from the foliage onto his bare back. Sharp cracks filled the air. Perhaps the *dhole*, splintering bone. Or a woodpecker. Or a leopard, lurking out of sight, ripping some helpless creature apart, claws gouging out chunks of flesh.

Sundar squeezed tight against the trunk, careful to make no movement. He rolled his eyes left and right, bent his neck back to search above. Leaves shivered near the top of an oak tree, a dark shape hanging in the branches behind. A black paw grasped a bough, a long black head pushed at the leaves. A crack, a snap, a large jaw buried in a cluster of leaves.

A bear feasting on acorns. Not a leopard, but a black bear. Gnawing shells at the moment, but what would it do when it saw a boy crouched by a tree?

The bear released the leaves and slid along the branch to the trunk. Haunches first, it clawed its

way down to the ground. It seemed almost human, testing its hold with its hind legs.

Sundar held his breath as the bear touched ground and swayed away along the river with delicate steps. It swung its head in Sundar's direction – tiny eyes, pale nose – but ignored him.

Sundar waited until it was out of sight, then continued his journey. The water rushed headlong, still curving away to the south.

Thirsty, he picked his way down the cliff to the water's edge, then groaned in dismay. Downriver, the gorge deepened, the cliff grew steeper, gashed with scars of bare rock where chunks had sheared off and tumbled into the water. Surely there could be no fording place in such wildness. He was stuck for good on the wrong side of the river.

A swathe of pine forest pushed to the cliff's edge. From the shadows behind the trunks a black shape emerged, stubby legs, long head, rounded

ears, white chest flashing as it walked. The bear again. Or a relative. But Sundar was sure it was the bear from the oak tree. With deliberate steps and swaying head, it picked a path down the cliff to the river. First dipping its head to drink, it stepped onto a rock in the speeding river, progressed to another, and then, arriving at a boulder blocking the way, balanced on its hind legs, stretching up, raking its claws on the stone to gain a hold. But the boulder was too high. The bear eased down, defeated, and climbed back to the top of the cliff the way it had come.

Sundar watched without fear, caught up in the bear's struggle to cross the river. It started down another opening in the rock, stopped short at a sheer drop, then retraced its steps, entering another gravelled opening which veered upward after a promising start and forced the animal back.

Undefeated, the bear entered another crevice and twisted down the cliff, its feet firm on the

crumbling stone. This time, the opening led to the jumble of rocks and foaming water on the shore. Without breaking its pace, the bear stepped into the swirling water and, thrusting its chest against the power of the current, planted its paws on the first rock. It pushed forward from rock to rock, testing for footing as the water rose around its legs.

Sundar shielded his eyes against the sun, stood to watch the bear's progress. Buffeted by the current, it felt its way over the rocks to the middle of the river, where the water reached its neck. It broke into a swim, paws like paddles, head and neck ruff all that showed above the rushing water. The river tugged, but the pointed head, the thick shoulders were steady in their progress to the far shore. Touching bottom, the bear waded again, then padded up the cliff and disappeared into the forest.

Sundar drew a deep breath, then slipped along the rocks to the crevice the bear had followed. He

crawled down to where the bear had stepped into the water, bracing himself against the flow.

“If the bear can do it, so can I,” he said out loud. “Just go”.

He thrust his legs forward, screaming to push down his fear, his momentum keeping his feet from slipping on the rocks. He gasped when his heel pressed on a sharp edge, his toes scraped on rock, his ankle twisted, but he thrust himself ahead, his eyes glued to the opposite shore.

The water deepened. He flailed his arms to keep his balance. The current yanked the blanket from his shoulders, his mouth gulped water. The river pushed him sideways. His world was reduced to his lonely battle against the current. He choked, gagged, flung out arms that sank uselessly beneath the grey surface, pumped legs in a bottomless depth.

Then he stubbed his toe against a stone.

In a burst of strength he staggered through shallows to the shore where he fell upright against the cliff. The rock was rough, but like a quilt stuffed with sheep's wool to his battered body.

That night, wet, exhausted and hungry, with leaves and dirt piled over him against the cold, he was content. The forest had become a friendly place where a bear found a path for him and a yellow dog brought him food. The shattered village, the panicking cows, the collapsing mountain were far away. Somewhere to the north of the setting sun were his parents and his old life.

They would be returning the sheep to winter quarters now, singing and laughing in the high passes. He would find his way to Gaadwar, tell the headman about Jeeti, then follow the mountain tracks down to his home.

For several days, he hiked away from the river, levering himself with a grey birch branch he found

wedged at the side of a stream, cracking fallen acorns with a rock for the bitter meat inside, smiling at the memory of the bear. Sooner or later, he was sure, he would come to the river fork flowing north past Gaadwar.

And in time he burst through pines to a great sweep of river, edged by yellowing grass and a mass of horse chestnuts. On a rock slicing out from the tangled grass, a clump of gentians clung, their flower bells vivid blue against the autumn greys and browns.

Sundar jerked to a stop under the pines. In the shadow of the rock was a *dhole*, its fur glinting golden where it was caught by the sun. It crouched over its kill, gazing up at Sundar. A marmot, Sundar thought.

"My *dhole*," Sundar said out loud. "How did you get here? Did you swim the river too?"

The *dhole* cocked its head to one side, watching

him with steady golden eyes. Was it offering him the marmot?

Sundar's eye was caught by movement. He glanced up. A rope dangled over the chestnut bough stretching above the *dhole*. A rope that twitched at the end, muscular, powerful.

Sundar scanned the branch, his heart beating fast. A leopard. Huge head mottled black and yellow like sun on tree bark, eyes fixed on the *dhole*, a jaw that could sever a dog's neck, limp paws that could become weapons in an instant.

The leopard whipped its tail, flattened its back, stiffened its paws to spring. The *dhole* stared at Sundar, oblivious, just like Jeeti before the mudslide.

"Go, *dhole*, go!" Sundar screamed, scraping his throat with the effort. He cracked his stick against the tree trunk. Not loud enough, he thought.

He pulled off his *dhoti* and flapped the long cloth in the air, stamped the ground, waved his arms, shouted “Run! Run!”

The *dhole* bounded down the bank to the river, howling in defiance. Sundar pulled at the grass, flung clods of earth and root toward the leopard.

The leopard sprang to the ground, its huge mouth gaping open. Sundar flapped and yelled and banged, caught in a frenzy beyond caring whether the leopard attacked or not.

The animal stared, tail twitching. Sundar shrieked, flung his arms and legs in a crazy dance.

The leopard slumped its shoulders and slunk into the trees.

Sundar waited, stick raised, stone poised to throw, but the clearing was silent. He slipped to the ground panting, his throat raw, alone with the marmot corpse.

So that's how it is to meet a leopard, he thought. I could have run from the Leopard village long ago instead of letting Panipat frighten me with leopard stories.

He felt hot tears in his eyes, then found himself curled on the ground, his body heaving with sobs. He cried for Jeeti and Panipat and Himavati and Amma-ji. And for the cows.

The *dhole* stole back from the river and hunched over the marmot, its golden eyes on Sundar. Sundar had saved its life. When Jeeti died, he could only watch, but the *dhole* he kept safe.

The tears came again, but this time they eased him.

BOOK THREE

LOCHAN

10 Red Majishtha

I was sure it was Sundar darting through the market. Almost full-grown, tall, broad-shouldered, blooming even though his ribs pushed through the dirty skin and his hair sprang around his head in a greasy tangle. It was his face that made me certain, high bones beside a hawk nose, hollow cheeks. Like his mother's. Like Dalia's.

Twelve years spent dreaming of his return, then I saw him in the market place, snatching *chapattis* from the vendor, slipping behind the stalls to escape the outcry. I knew it was Sundar, though the

pudgy legs and small boy's pot belly I remembered were gone.

Twelve years since Dalia had sent her child to the shepherds, brushing him off like a speck of dust on her skirt. Twelve years since I had trudged with Sundar up the mountainside and found Sham and Nina camped with their dogs and sheep in a lower pasture.

Sham had pretended to be indignant.

"So, Lochan, are we here in the mountains for Dalia's convenience?" he said, squatting by the fire with his brothers. He took Sundar on his lap, covered him with a corner of his blanket. "She expects us to care for her leavings?"

I said nothing. I knew he was hiding his happiness, pretending not to care about his wife's hopeful eyes, her hand on his elbow.

They traded news with me, gave me warm

goat's milk and a place to sleep by the fire, but I could tell they wanted me gone. The next day I embraced Sundar's sturdy body and left him.

I returned to the stone house above the splashing river. Dalia was gone, the hearth cold, her clothes chest empty. I sat on the hill above, watching the goat step from the slope onto the roof, chewing the grass sprouting from the slates. No new herbs to sort for Manas Moru, no blankets to air, no vegetables to peel and chop, no jars of water to carry to Dalia's washing room. No one to need me, until the shepherds came back to their winter quarters in Muni village and brought Sundar with them.

The neighbour climbed the path to bring me yogurt and *chapatti*.

"Come to us for your morning milk, Lochan," she said. "Dalia gave me the care of her cows when she left, and their milk is yours, as much as you want."

"As you wish, Auntie," I said.

I scrubbed the empty animal shed, mended the roof where the slates had separated, lopped leaves in the forest for the cows and wood for the hearth, carrying great loads across my shoulders down the mountainside. I sorted the old supply of herbs and straightened the jars on Manas Moru's shelves.

When I ran out of tasks, I wandered in the mountains. One spot I liked especially, a steep slope where birch trees clung, autumn leaves fluttering against grey branches. A special place, Manas Mohan had told me, where the tall *jatamansi* bloomed pink in summer. Every fall he took the roots to trade down river. I dug a sackful to spread in the house to dry.

The snow was early that year, floating down on grass still green, forming frills on the autumn cherry blossom at the forest edge. It disappeared with the mid-day sun, and the air smelled again of dry leaves

and earth.

I willed Sham to appear at the ford, head floating above the milling sheep, Sundar draped over his shoulder.

Hurry, I thought. Bring Sundar while the sun smiles.

But the shepherds splashing across the river were never Sham and Nina.

And when snow lay in thick folds over the valley and deer bounding down from the heights shouldered through it as if they were swimming, I had to admit what I had feared since I put Sundar in Sham's arms. Sham and Nina would never return to Muni village. So many other valleys and villages, so many barley crops to welcome shepherds and a winter's worth of sheep droppings. Sham and Nina would avoid Muni village, where their claims on Sundar might be questioned.

That winter I stayed alone. Auntie kept me in butter and *chapattis.* When the snows broke, Daleep the trader came up the river to Muni village, cap flat on his head, pots and bangles, thread and jars of oil piled on his bullock carts.

"You're from a great household, Daleep-ji," Auntie said. "Take Lochan with you. He'll be useful."

"Will he do what he's told?" asked Daleep, his moustache bobbing as he spoke. "My caravan's no place for a boy who whines when he can't keep up."

"He's a good quiet boy," said the neighbour. "Go with Daleep, Lochan. Be grateful he's willing to take you."

With lowered eyes I went, determined to match Daleep's long strides on the rocky paths, eating barley porridge and hard cheese when the drivers passed me a bowl, sleeping under carts. We

climbed the mountainside by plummeting streams, on paths slick with pine needles, jagged with stones, steadying the bullocks when their hooves slipped on gravel, holding the weight of the wheels on our shoulders when the way was steep and the carts slipped backwards. Past pines and rocky cliffs from settlement to settlement, where villagers grinned in delight as they hunkered down to bargain. And then in the fall back down through Muni village to Nadri town, loaded with furs and woolen caps and jars of honey.

Nadri town. Leather-hatted guards at the gate and a carved wooden lintel to pass beneath. Streets sloppy with early snow and mud churned by feet and hooves and cart wheels. No houses to be seen, only stone walls and gloomy entrances to hidden courtyards.

Through such a doorway we entered Daleep's courtyard. I stood there, clutching sagging bundles of fleece as the carters unloaded merchandise and

the bullocks switched their tails. A young servant, sweat glistening on his face, slipped a sack of grain onto his shoulder, then struggled to heave another on top. His father tugged at the load to balance it.

“My son,” the old man said, “those muscles of yours will be no use if you break your back. Who’ll serve me then in my old age?”

The young man tottered under his load through the warehouse door, glancing back at his father, eyes sparkling. The father looked at me and shrugged, grinning with pride.

But what of me? There was no one to worry if my load was heavy. No heart to be warmed by a sparkle in my eye.

Daleep’s white-haired father studied me and jerked his head in approval.

“Is it true? Are you a good boy?” he said. “The gods brought you here. Behave well and we’ll see

you're well fed."

He spent his days cross-legged on a carved stool, recounting tales of his past. Daleep's mother listened, fingers never resting as she kneaded dough, massaged baby limbs, wove baskets.

Daleep's brothers strode with their caravans into the mountains, then filled the house with laughter when they returned.

Daleep's wife Rita and her sisters-in-law cooked, chattered, and carried fruit and sweets to the *deodar* tree outside the gates. The town's heart was in the giant cedar's roots and branches, they told me. Honour the tree, sustain the town. Daleep's small daughter and her cousins ran and shouted in the courtyard, and, as the seasons passed, his three younger sons as well.

I slept by the hearth, chopped wood, carried water from the courtyard well, and travelled with Daleep when he set out with his carts.

News of Sundar trickled through the mountain passes. One of Daleep's brothers spoke of Sham the shepherd who wintered many valleys away. There was a son, he said. I kept my memories of Sundar deep and never spoke of him.

Every year I returned with Daleep to Muni village where I had lived with Manas Moru. In time there was a weaver in Manas Moru's house, her flat loom stretched on the slope above the roof on sunny days. From the riverbank we could hear the pounding of the loom shafts as she wove the coils of yarn into blankets.

"I told her she could have the house," Auntie said, old now and shrivelled like a grape dried in the sun. "But not before I brought the priests to drive out Dalia"s shadow with their chants."

In time, Daleep ended our long summer treks into the mountains and stationed us in Muni village, where we waited for the mountain people to come

to us. We made a storage house of the sheep pen abandoned by Sham and Nina, and living quarters n in the low house beside it. Herders fording the river on their way to summer pastures were glad to exchange wool for salt and pots and spices. We sent carts overflowing with bags of wool and yarn and blankets to the warehouses in Nadri town.

Once again I lived in Manas Moru's village, this time on the river instead of the mountainside. My footsteps often took me past the house with the grassy roof, the tree by the verandah where Manas had drunk buttermilk, the slope where Sundar had played.

Daleep's daughter Tej was six when Daleep moved us to Muni village, the same age that Sundar must have been by then, and I was sixteen, almost a man. I took Tej to the rocks where village children liked to skid down the slope.

She wrinkled her nose.

“That’s dangerous,” she said. “You could splinter a bone or crack your head. Then we’d have to nurse you.”

I felt foolish. A sixteen-year-old eager to slide on the hill and a child teaching caution.

“Tej,” I said, “you’re a little girl. Leave the worry to adults. Just play with your friends.”

But Tej was not a child who played. She pursed her mouth and narrowed her eyes as she considered my words, her head bent to one side. Tightening the woolen shawl around her shoulders, flicking her braid from where it was caught in the folds, she moved with the confidence of a woman, a contrast to her rounded cheeks and bulging eyes and thin child’s neck.

“Who’ll watch over my brothers while I jump on the hill?” she said.

“Look at this daughter of mine,” Daleep said.

“Like a little mother to her brothers.”

Tej carried the little one with his head pressed against her shoulder, his feet dangling beyond her knees; she rocked him to sleep; she fed him with her fingers. Her hands flew over the other two every morning, scrubbing, oiling, combing, tying them into their loincloths. They hid their eyes from her displeasure and watched for her smile of approval.

She reminded me of myself at her age.

With a difference. Tej never doubted her place in the world. I belonged nowhere.

But in Muni village I felt at home. Daleep taught me how to trade and came to rely on me. Sometimes, he left me in charge. Bullock carts and donkeys rumbled into the stone enclosure, and shepherds, villagers, tribespeople waited while I chose goods to add to the piles on our warehouse shelves.

I plunged my arms deep into sacks of fleece to probe for twigs and leaves, sorted palmfuls of polished stones, felt for rough spots on cedar boxes and combs, tugged at the weave of oily-fringed blankets.

"I was wise to take you on when I did," Daleep told me. "You know how I want things done. And your hands know how to seek out quality."

Bunama, the village weaver brought the finest blankets, sewn into jute cases. Daleep's wife Rita wanted one but Daleep discouraged it.

"Foolish to wear on our backs what we can turn to profit," he said. "In the south, I've heard, they'll pay gold for blankets so finely woven."

Tej nodded and smiled at her father, round cheeks bulging over her slender neck. "I'll take them for you, Pita-ji," she said. "I'll bring the gold for you."

Father and daughter, I thought. Wool from the same sheep.

Sometimes I roamed the mountains beyond the village, searching for herbs and watching for the weaver's granddaughter, who was a wanderer too. Crawling over the brow of a cliff one day, I came upon her scraping at the dirt beneath a vine hung with dark red berries.

She looked up, her shoulder hunched behind, her hand clenching the knife handle. Her hair coiled black and dense, flashing red where the sun struck it.

"May you dwell with the gods, granddaughter of Bunama," I said.

I was careful to treat her with courtesy. Daleep counted on her grandmother's blankets, and Bunama was easily offended when it came to her granddaughter.

“May you travel on their path,” she replied just as politely, but with the hint of a sneer on her lips.

She turned again to hacking at the earth.

“So, Ishwari, you’re not at the loom today?” I asked.

Many of Bunama’s fine blankets were woven by Ishwari. Bunama’s hands were often too swollen by damp and old age to work the wool.

“So, Lochan,” Ishwari replied, “you’re not counting lentils today? Does Daleep encourage you to wander when he’s not here to watch you?”

Her tongue was sharp.

“Her mouth’s as cruel as her body’s crooked,” Daleep liked to say, but never where it would be reported to Bunama.

Her scorn goaded me into dropping my careful courtesy.

“If you’re trying to dig that root, you’re not doing it properly,” I said. “It’s foolish not to ask for help when I’m right here beside you.”

She tugged at the length of red root she had unearthed, the effort hampered by her uneven shoulder and twisted back. Her body tipped to one side, almost toppling to the ground.

“The root’s grown under the rock, who knows how far,” I said.

“It’s no help to tell me what I already know,” she said.

I gripped the mountainside with my feet, grasped the root, and pulled. In a rush of pebbles and dirt, the rock released it. I stumbled, clutching the tangle of roots still embedded in the mountain to keep from tumbling down the slope.

“You’ve damaged it, just what I was trying not to do,” Ishwari said.

She stretched out a hand in mock resignation, one side of her skirt brushing the ground, the other tilted up, her yellow sash swinging from uneven hips.

“You’ve split it near the heart. The plant may die,” she said.

“That’s *majishtha*, red madder,” I said. “Give me your blade.”

Her mouth opened in surprise at my abrupt order, but she handed me the knife without protest. I cut some root pieces for her to slide into the sack at her feet and pushed the rest of the plant into the dirt, pricking my fingers on the hooked leaves.

“When you bury these stems they grow their own roots. They’ll make red dye for you in a few years.”

She looked at me in surprise. The movement

made her lose her balance and lurch to one side. I stretched out a hand to steady her, then dropped it to my side. Better to let her alone, I thought.

"You know about dyes?" she asked.

"Your grandmother's house," I said. "It was the herb gatherer's house. My master's house. He taught me about plants."

"It's my own business if I try to make dye," she said. "If you're as courteous as you pretend, you'll keep this to yourself."

"I'll keep your secret and give you one of mine," I said. "Come with me some day. I'll show you where the pink *jatamans*i grows. Manas Moru's hidden place. It smells so sweet it brings tears to the eye."

I saw hope and fear in her face.

"One day, if I have time," she said.

Slinging the sack over her shoulder, she crawled backward down the slope. On her hands and knees she moved with grace over the rocky ground.

You're at ease in the rough places, I thought. It's the smooth that make you awkward.

I walked off in the opposite direction. I knew she needed to rest from my company.

It was several days before I went in search of her again.

"Come for a walk to the weaver's house," I said to Tej one morning. "We'll check how many blankets she has for us."

Tej jumped up grinning from the guessing game she was playing with her brothers.

"Straighten my braid, Mata-ji," she said to her mother. "I'm going on Father's business with Lochan. You can make up riddles till I'm back, can't you?"

She skipped ahead of me on the path, chasing a marten into the forest until it slithered up a tree.

“Do you know my father’s bones ache?” she said. “I’m learning his work so he can rest by the fire.”

I felt sorry. She would be sent off somewhere as someone’s wife and it would be her cosseted little brothers who took over from Daleep.

It was a steep climb to Bunama’s house and I was sweating even though the autumn air was cool.

“I don’t like the weaver’s granddaughter,” said Tej. “She’s mean.”

“She’s mean? Are you sure?” I said.

“She hates children. She scolded my brother for jumping on the path.”

“Maybe she was nervous about tripping. It’s hard for her to walk,” I said.

“Why’s her back all bent?” asked Tej.

“The gods know the answer to that,” I said. “But they don’t tell us.”

“Mother knows why,” said Tej. “Ishwari’s parents were bad, most likely. She was sent to punish them.”

“Some people believe that,” I said.

“Father doesn’t. He told Mother to stop blaming everything on the gods.”

Bunama sat cross legged on the verandah, two floppy-eared goats munching nearby.

“Drink something,” she said. “There’s goat’s milk on the shelf under the cloth. Make allowance for an old woman and fetch it yourself.”

I filled three bowls in the kitchen where long ago I had served Dalia. The loom took up the floor of the main room, inside now that winter approached.

A roll of smooth blanket was attached to the front, grey-brown hanks of wool dangled from the frame. Loops of deep red yarn hung drying, draping the shelves and storage jars. A corner of the plastered floor was stained red where dye had dripped.

The rains were over, I thought. Why not hang the wool outside where there was better drying over the bushes?

Because Ishwari liked secrets, I answered myself. She worked by choice in shadow.

"Your mother's health is good?" Bunama asked Tej. "Your father? The little ones?"

"Do your hands give you trouble?" I asked her. "Are your winter preparations going well?"

"There are two blankets Daleep can have now," she said. "Two more he can have in the spring. My granddaughter will help."

“You’re alone today?” I said.

“Ishwari’s gone to my niece over the mountain. I encourage it. She helps out, and she has good company for a few days. This is a fine house for a weaver, but not a friendly place for my granddaughter. The neighbour’s the only one who welcomes her, and that’s because she has no choice. Her family’s from my grandfather’s village.”

Tej finished her milk, tipping back her head to drain the last drop.

“Two blankets in the spring is good, Grandmother-ji,” she said, “but three is better. Give us three blankets in the spring.”

Bunama composed her face before Tej could see her smile.

“Daleep’s daughter, we’ll give you many fine blankets,” she said. “Who knows? Maybe even in colours. My granddaughter has plans.”

“Lochan-ji,” said Tej as we walked back to Daleep’s house on the river, “you must be strict. When Bunama says two, you have to tell her three. That’s what merchants do.”

“What if Bunama can’t manage three?”

“Still you have to tell her,” said Tej.

11 Dreams

In the fall, the storehouse was busy. Shepherds crossed the river ford on their descent from the mountains, bringing wool from the autumn shearings and sacks of thread spun in the high pastures during the summer. Pedlars and traveling merchants rested with us on their way down the river to Nadri town.

Once a lumber merchant in a wide striped turban and a train of bullock carts stayed for a night. His carts held cedar logs, each tended by two men to guide the bullock and two more to balance

the log on the bumpy track. The household scurried to cook for so many, to pen the bullocks safe from wild animals, to sweep an out-building for a sleeping place. The merchant crossed his legs by the fire and spoke of Harappa, the great city to the southwest.

"Carpenters, metal-workers, brick-makers, carvers, whole colonies of them spread on the plains. The Harappans take all the cedar we can provide and fall on their knees ready to touch our feet for more," said the merchant, bundled in several blankets for he came from the sun-baked plains. "It's dangerous work, heavy loads, steep trails, bandits, floods. We lose men and carts every year. But believe me, the gold in Harappa makes up for it."

Not for their families, I thought.

"I always say," he continued, "there's no city built without skeletons in the foundations."

“I once knew a merchant from Harappa,” I said. “Prem of Harappa. Do you know of him?”

“Does this Prem have a son with a withered arm?” he asked.

“No,” I said, keeping my interest hidden. Better for Prem to stay unaware I was searching for him. “The one I know has no son.”

Not of his own, I thought. Only a son that was rightly Manas Moru’s.

The conversation turned to other things, but now I knew where Prem and Dalia were.

When the merchant continued downriver, I set out again for the weaver’s house, my shoulder weighed down with a sack of yarn. The wool was reason enough to visit Bunama, but it was really to see Ishwari that I laboured up the path. Bunama sat in front of the loom, the roll of brown and grey flecked blanket a little thicker than last time. She

slipped the shuttle between threads, pushed the weave tight, her swollen fingers awkward. Red wool still hung in twisted loops from the shelves.

“You’re working today,” I said. “Perhaps your hands are improved.”

“Improved or not, work goes on,” she said. “An old woman, a crippled girl. What choice is there? People are foolish who think there’s life without pain.”

“Do you need anything?” I asked.

“Set the yarn by the wall,” she said, gesturing toward a corner. “Ishwari will deal with it when she’s back.”

“You expect her soon?” I asked.

“She comes when she comes,” said Bunama.

Free for the day, I continued up the steep slope, scratching the goats’ ears as I passed above the

roof where they were tethered. When the sun was high, slicing down through the pine branches, I sat on a rock to rest. Shading my eyes with my arm, I found myself staring across a ravine to the cliff where I had pulled at the *majishtha* root. I tipped water down my throat, threw back my head to swallow, and re-tied the jar at my side without taking my eyes from the fading leaves, the red berries shrivelling to black. Winter was near, even though the rock I sat on was hot in the sun.

I should check the *majishtha,* I told myself, see whether the roots took hold where I planted them. And feel the presence of Ishwari, even though there was no sign of her.

A troupe of monkeys shrieked and darted across the clearing, then squatted along the branches of a fallen tree. Two of them swung on long arms to the highest branch and watched as I picked my way across the ravine. Were their wise faces pronouncing me foolish?

Animals, pheasants maybe, had clawed the earth where I had loosened it. I patted it back in place, my eyes on the *majishtha* plants in front of me but my mind on Ishwari crouching by the rock, eyes flashing. Why was I drawn to her, a girl who had little respect for me and inspired dislike in everyone but her grandmother? Maybe Daleep was right. Her crooked back had soured her.

I left the *majishtha* plant and crawled further up the cliff. The monkeys, losing interest in me, loped through the undergrowth into the trees. I gripped the cliff top and pulled myself onto a rocky ledge, recoiling from a deep crack splitting the surface at my knees. Behind me the broken cliff fell away to the ravine. Above me, the mountain loomed, patched with sparse pines and clumps of autumn brush. To the right, the rock shelf dipped to an angle filled with a tumble of gravel and broken stone. The split, too wide to step across where I stood, narrowed as until it disappeared in a level passage at the bottom.

My eye caught movement. I glanced around, wind brushing my face. Vultures circled high against the sky, clouds swirled higher still, leaves from a stunted birch tree drifted to the ground. Part way along the ledge, the crevice was hidden by a bank of dark *burans* leaves. Gloomy now, I thought, but beautiful in the spring when their red flowers grew thick against the grey rock. I looked close. A wisp of smoke floated over the branches. I stared and saw nothing, blinked and almost missed another thin blurring of the air.

A holy person, communing with the gods in the wilderness?

"I greet you, whoever you are," I called out. "If I disturb your meditations, forgive me."

No one rose from the bushes to answer my greeting.

Bandits? Herb gatherers? Who else could be in this barren place?

I moved down the ledge, feeling for footholds, leaning for support into the cliff that angled above. I skidded on loose gravel, my sandal flying off into the bushes that hid the smoke.

I pushed through the leaves and gasped. A head of shining hair and two thin shoulders wedged into the split rock, a staring face, black eyes wide with alarm.

“Ishwari,” I said.

I hesitated. Why was Ishwari caught in this rocky hole?

“What’s happening here? Who did this?” I asked.

She said nothing. Was she injured? I crouched to grasp her shoulders.

She spoke through gritted teeth. “No one’s ever found me here. How did you?”

It was not fear that widened her eyes, I realised. It was menace. She was warning me off, like a dog threatening an intruder.

A clay water jar stood on the ledge by her head, a pouch tied shut beside it. Nearby, a fire smouldered in a bed of stones. Ishwari's shoulders poked up around her neck, her armpits clamped over two branches laid from lip to lip of the rock. Her arms dangled into the opening, her body swallowed by the stone.

Some kind of rite? For good or for evil?

She lowered her head, relaxed her jaw.

"Ishwari, are you doing this by choice?" I asked. "Where are your cousins, your aunt?"

She twisted her head to look at me, struggled to speak, her throat strained by her strange position.

"My aunt is in her home, and in good health

when I left her. Now that you've had a look at me, leave, and if you have any respect for an old woman's peace of mind, don't tell my grandmother."

I scrabbled under the bushes for my fallen sandal, weighing what I should do. Ishwari's eyes were fierce, but surely it was unwise to leave her alone and half-buried in desolate rock.

"If I go without finding out what you're doing here, I'd be a fool," I said, "and if I go for fear of your anger, I'd be a coward. I'm neither. I'm staying until you explain."

"Then I'm finished here," said Ishwari. "I won't explain to anyone."

She unhooked an arm from the branch, leaned into the edge of the crevice to unhook the other, then lowered herself into the gap. I held out my hand to support her but she warned me back with a toss of her head and disappeared below the edge. I

heard her scraping along the bottom. As the passage grew shallower, her head appeared, then her shoulders, then her hands tugging at her blanket where it snagged on the stone. She emerged where the split rock flattened into gravel on the valley floor, belted her blanket tight around her waist and crawled back along the ledge to her fire.

She ignored me as she smothered the fire, gathered her things and moved away up the cliff.

Let her go, I thought. But when she reached the top and disappeared over the lip of the cliff I followed her. She slithered down the mountainside and limped along the track, the shiny coil of her hair jerking from side to side.

“I know what you’re doing. There’s no need to explain,” I said. “Does it really make your back straighter, hanging from sticks like that?”

She stopped to glare at me, hand on her twisted

hip, elbow flung out.

“It hurts, so it must be doing something,” she said, “and, to satisfy your curiosity, I spend a day on the rock whenever I go to my aunt’s. No one knows but you.”

“What about animals?” I asked.

“I have my fire sticks,” she said.

“If a flash flood came, with you stuck in there?” I asked.

“Would that be so bad?” she said.

I shook my head to clear it.

“You’d kill yourself?” I said. “You shouldn’t think like that.”

“Kill myself, never,” she said. “But if the gods sent a flood, why not? What the gods give, we accept, my grandmother says. She reminds me

every day. Every time she looks at me. I'd never call death to me, but why run away when he comes?"

At least Ishwari was walking and talking with me now, not lurching ahead in anger.

"Your grandmother relies on you," I said. "There's wool waiting for you right now to store away."

"Relies on me," she said, "but wishes I weren't there."

"She needs you for the weaving," I said. "Her hands are swollen."

"Yes, her hands hurt, and the whole village notices. 'How's the pain today, Bunama-ji?' they say. 'Try this ointment, Bunama. You've worked hard all your life. Let Ishwari do it.' And all the time my back aches so much I'm nothing but a big lump of pain."

I clicked my tongue in sympathy.

“You have a lot to bear,” I said.

Ishwari tipped her head from side to side.

“My grandmother needs me for what I can do. But she can’t stand to look at me.”

“She thinks of you with love,” I said. “I saw it on her face. And of course she likes to look at you,” I blurted out. “Anyone would, for the gleam of your hair.”

I lowered my face in embarrassment and so did she.

We climbed one last rise and saw the roofs of Muni village beneath us. Ishwari turned off on the track that led to the weaver’s house.

“Now you have two secrets,” she said. “The *majishtha* dye and what you saw today. It’s best if you just forget them.”

I understood. When people know our dreams they try to spoil them. Better to keep them unspoken.

12 *Jungli* Boy

When afternoons darkened into winter, Daleep and his family returned to Nadri town, leaving me to watch over the storehouse in Muni village. I was their servant, paid in the food I ate and the clothes I wore, but somehow more than a servant. They worried over me when I fell ill, and sought a bride for me as I neared the age to marry. I refused the prospective brides. My heart was full of Ishwari's face and memories of Dalia.

I passed the winter with Singh-papa, Daleep's head driver, still red-cheeked and supple-bodied

though his beard was streaked with grey and his teeth full of gaps. No family to go to, Daleep's trading house his life, he sat by the hearth wrapped in blankets, spinning wool from sacks piled against the wall. Was Singh-papa's life what my future held as well?

"Spin," Singh-papa told me. "Yarn will trade for more in town than fleece. I learned and so can you, if you apply yourself."

But the thread I turned off the spindle was lumpy, and broke when Singh-papa tugged at it.

"The spindle protests when it feels my touch," I said. "You spin and I'll mix ointments."

The year I found Sundar, the spring melt began early. Water surged from the mountainside, sweeping by the storehouse wall and the fields patched with ragged snow and brown earth. New leaves and ferny undergrowth softened the cliffs. I set out for Nadri town with a cartload of goods

collected during the winter. Singh-papa stayed in Muni village, replacing fallen stones in the outer wall and watching for the first of the migrating shepherds to reach the ford.

I picked my way along the track, shoving at the cart when it bogged down in the soggy earth, a stick in my hand to urge the bullock on and to warn off monkeys who darted out of the trees to pull at the sacks. The mountainside frothed with spring colour: orange hazel trunks, swathes of scarlet *burans*, pale spikes of chestnut, red-tipped *kakkar* branches. Magpies cawed, pigeons cooed, woodpeckers drummed, countless small birds chirped and trilled and whistled. I startled a pair of pheasants, who stumbled in panic across the slope, green and copper feathers glinting in the sun.

Nettles, their pointed leaves new and delicate, sprang beside the track. I bound my hands in sacking to protect them from the stings and plucked the nettle tops, my mouth watering at the

thought of green vegetable after the winter diet of dried beans. Once, by a fallen pine, I left the bullock standing and pushed through the forest to a stand of oak I knew where the branches were bearded with grey lichen. I gathered a sackful. Laid on wounds, lichen took away poison, and Daleep would be glad to have some in his warehouse.

The spring breeze numbed my cheek and I pulled my blanket close, secured it with my blanket pin. I remembered my excitement when Manas Moru showed me the little bronze bull on the pinhead. Would Ishwari like a blanket pin from town? Would she be gracious if I gave her one?

Three days later, standing in Nadri town market, I still wondered, fingering blanket pins at a knife seller's stall.

"Points as fine as these you'll not find easily, I promise you," the vendor said, pressing a sharp tip against her finger. "All the way from Harappa."

A burst of shouting pulled my eyes across the market. The vendor tried to keep my attention, grasping the edge of my blanket where it fell over my shoulder and sliding the pin through it.

"Here, Nephew, try it. Shiny and smooth. Nothing rough to spoil the wool."

I pulled away from her hand.

"Later, Auntie."

I strained my ears to make sense of the shouting.

"*Dhole* attack!" a voice cried. "Wild dog!"

I craned my neck to see past the crowd, my eyes squinting in the sinking sun. A yellow dog crouched on the pavement, shoulders tensed to spring, teeth bared in a snarl, pointed nose swinging in search of escape.

"Wild dog!" the shouts continued. "Who let it

past the gate? A child could be eaten. *Dhole* roaming the streets – not allowed."

A boy dashed from behind a food stall, a sack on his shoulder. He tossed a rope over the dog's neck and pelted through the gate, the dog streaking ahead. I glimpsed a filthy blanket belted under bony shoulders, a flash of legs, a dog's grinning mouth, a boy's face, all cheeks and nose, glancing back.

The guard at the gate drew back in surprise, his club and leather breast plate useless against the speeding boy. The food seller pounded after him, then faltered to a stop, outdistanced.

It was Sundar. Even in the evening gloom I had recognised his face, a boy's version of Dalia's great down-sweeping curve of nose, jutting cheek bones and the hollows beneath.

"The *jungli* boy. He's stolen before," the food vendor told me, trudging back to his stall. "Wild

boy, hiding in the jungle."

The guard fingered his club and shrugged his shoulders.

I slipped through the gate and walked to the edge of the trees. Prints in the mud showed where Sundar had entered the forest but it was late and I was no jungle tracker.

I went home to Daleep's family and sat with the men in the courtyard. Daleep's sons and nephews were wrestling under the overhang where the packed earth was dry. I winced as a head thwacked the ground.

"Lochan," said Daleep's father, his attention on the tangle of arms and legs and grunts of exertion, "boys need to do it. Stretches their limbs, makes them sound."

He peered out at me from his nest of blankets. I lowered my head over my bowl of hot milk to hide

my resentment. Who had ever cared whether my limbs grew strong? It was enough if my legs ran fast enough to do their errands.

But it was better that way. I would have hated wrestling.

Tej came into the courtyard, clapping her hands.

“Food is ready. Wash yourselves. ”

The boys looked up in protest. Tej stared back until they headed toward the bathing room.

In the morning I began my search, hoping Sundar’s hunger would bring him back to the town. I wandered the market stalls. Chattering farm families, barefoot fisher folk with baskets on their shoulders , a priest with shaved head, drivers with broad laughs and faces shiny from spending freely at wine stalls,

“Is business steady?” I asked the knife vendor,

passing her a string of shells in exchange for a blanket pin with a head shaped like a bird.

"It will be," she said, "when the boats bring new goods from Harappa. You're from Daleep's house, aren't you? Ask your master. He knows how much I sell. My knives come mostly from his trading house."

"Are you troubled much by thieves?" I asked, sitting on the edge of her platform to chat.

"Of course," she said. "Thieves and markets go together. The guards keep an eye out. But you're thinking of the wild one with the dog. He's a clever boy. No one knows how he gets past the wall. He comes and then he's gone almost before he's noticed."

I filled my water jar at the market well, bought two leaf-wrapped *chapattis* hot from the food stall's great curved griddle and passed through the gate. The guard eyed me as I turned left along the

outside of the wall.

"Going after the boy, are you? I've seen you watching for him," he said. "Carry a stick if you're headed that way. The jungle has its surprises."

I looked along the high wall slanting up the slope beside the town, then bending behind at the base of the mountains. Gentle mountains, levelling off as the Vipasa river entered the plains, not the tall craggy mountains of Muni village that blocked the view in every direction.

"I'll leave the jungle for another day," I said. "Today I'll circle the city, see the walls from outside."

"Checking for places the boy and his dog could break through, no doubt," said the guard. "Good luck to you. The stonemasons found nothing."

I crossed the sparse undergrowth to the trees, finding a stick to brandish as the guard had advised.

Somewhere there would be a clue to where Sundar passed into the city.

I walked along the wall, my eyes watering in the cool spring breeze. The guard and the gate faded into the distance, and I was alone between the wall and the forest. I trailed my hands on the stones. The wall was solid, the stones and mortar smooth as if they were all one piece.

I turned the corner. Here, there were signs of neglect. The cleared space between forest and wall was overgrown with brush, littered with broken branches and stones. The wall was jagged and crumbling in places, raw with new mortar in others, but only at the top, too high for Sundar and a dog.

I approached the entrance gate that passed from the forest into the town. I was in the shadow of the tall curved entry before the guards noticed me. They were crouched in the little room opening off the passage, warming their feet with a pot of

glowing coals.

“Hoi, merchant-ji, where did you come from?” one asked.

They saw my clean blanket and sandals and oiled hair and flattered me with “merchant-ji”, though I had no warehouse, no trades goods, no bullock cart, no family seal to call my own.

“How much further to the river?” I asked, for something to say.

“Not far, but the way is desolate, merchant-ji. Your plan is dangerous,” a guard said. “Better go back where it’s well-travelled. Walking in lonely places – you could be attacked. A tiger could leap out of the forest. Or the *jungli* boy.”

“My colleague is right,” said the other guard, “though in all the time I’ve watched here such a thing has never happened.”

"The sun will protect me if I reach the river before evening," I said. "Night is the time of danger. May the gods be pleased with you."

I stepped away. Maybe Sundar walked right past them into town, I thought, smiling at the image of the guards too absorbed in their game to notice Sundar loping by, the yellow dog prancing behind.

I sat by the wall and ate the barley *chapattis*, still soft but grown cold and tasteless. Here by the gate there were people. A line of women emerged from the trees, balancing bundles of split logs across their backs, calling back and forth as they crossed the scrubby waste and passed into the city. A boy and three cows ambled from the forest to the gate. Two women, their sashes swirled into graceful folds at their backs, walked from the gate and entered the forest with baskets swaying on their heads. Children chased a ball into the tangle of plants, then raced back, obedient to an angry shout from inside.

I left the gate and walked on into the afternoon. The light dimmed in the shadow of the forest. As the guards had warned, I was alone in the strip of wasteland except for birds and squirrels and monkeys. A perfect setting for Sundar to break into town, but how did he do it?

I came to the little river rushing to join the Vipasa and my solitude ended. Nadri town was like a rock wedged by the forest into the corner where the two rivers met. The riverbank was busy with people who watched my progress with darting eyes, hunched over cooking fires or slouching near shacks hung with drying fishnets. Sundar could not have passed unnoticed here.

Men, torsos bare in spite of the cool air, hefted sacks from a cart, holding them up to a man robed in fine wool who peered at the seals and then waved the men to a nearby boat. The boatman leaned into his bargepole to steady the flat-bottomed vessel as it rocked from the weight of the sacks. A simple man,

the boatman, with knotted shoulders and a rumpled blanket, but he must have walked in cities that for me were wondrous places in Singh-papa's tales. Painted columns soaring to carved ceilings, great curved arches, broad streets bricked close and even, where mud never squeezed between the toes.

I gazed along the surging water, then pulled my eyes back to the wall, where a mason perched near the top, smoothing new stonework. Further along, workers untied the scaffolding and handed down the pieces to the men below, who piled them by the wall. I watched until the dark hid their movements and thought of the new patches on the wall by the forest where no-one came.

The sky was red, the scene on the riverbank turning to black. Tomorrow I would follow the wall again. I was sure now I knew Sundar's way into the town. And if I found the way, I could find Sundar.

13 Old Acquaintances

In the morning, the same two guards at the north gate sprawled near the fire playing at stones. The air was cool; wisps of mist floated around my ankles.

I followed the curve of the wall to the loneliest stretch. Patches of clean rock and new mortar marked the masons' recent work. I had seen their routine the day before at the river gate. Workers untying scaffolding behind as masons crawled forward on slatted platforms, a pile of dismantled wood and rope lying ready at the base of the wall.

Nights were long and watchmen fell asleep.

I stepped off the track into a weedy hollow, a place where Sundar could have crept unseen through the scattered growth at the forest's edge. Building material was heavy. Sundar's cache of stolen material, if he had one, would be nearby. The ground cover was green and full-leaved, undisturbed except for animal scratchings. I peered under bushes, hitching my blanket away from the dirt, pebbles grinding into my knees. Birds shrieked warnings, then grew used to me, rustling and warbling in the trees. Sweat dripped from my eyes in the still air, insects stuck to my face. There was nothing to find.

I rested at the foot of a tree. Monkey squeals of alarm jerked me out of a doze. My head swiveled toward a movement further along the forest edge. A boy. A load of sticks. A yellow dog.

Sundar, the *jungli* boy, just as I had hoped.

Sundar, tall, square-shouldered, but so thin his ribs pushed out of his skin. Black hair in matted tufts, new beard shadowing his jaw, clothing a ragged animal skin hanging from his waist. Now that I had found him I was nervous.

He eased his load of sticks to the ground, unwound the ropes that bundled them. His eyes were watchful, his hands firm as he bound the sticks into a platform, added another level and another, leaning the structure into the wall, stamping on it to test its strength. The dog whimpered but was still while Sundar slung the animal over his back secured in a length of tattered cloth. I nerved myself to approach. Soon he would be over the wall and lost in the town.

He hoisted himself to the upper platform, agile in spite of the weight of the dog and the shaking of the rickety structure.

I strode from my hiding place.

“Sundar-ji, accept my salutations,” I called out, coughing from the phlegm in my throat.

Sundar swung his head. The platform teetered. He threw himself against the wall for balance, one foot dangling loose. The dog struggled. Sundar pulled the cloth tight, wincing as a claw dug into his arm.

“Sundar-ji,” I called. “Do you remember me? I’m Lochan.”

Sundar hunched his shoulders, eyes flashing like a cornered animal. Wall above, stranger below, he had no escape. The dog growled, ears flat.

“I’m Lochan, Sundar-ji. Your friend,” I said. “You’ve no need for the town. I’ve brought you food.”

His hand stretched to the dog hanging across his back.

"For you, and the dog too," I said.

I drew a bundle from my waist, folded back the leaf wrapping.

"*Chapatti*. Lots of *chapatti*. Lentils cooked in *ghee.* Walnuts, apricots. All for you."

The dog stopped growling, its eyes on the food.

"I'm Lochan," I said. "Do you remember me? I knew your parents. I served them well."

Sundar's mouth opened, but he said nothing

In a breath, he swung off the platform and raced into the trees.

I folded up the food away from insects and brushed pine needles off my blanket. It's not over yet, I thought. I can't see him, but he's watching me. The two of them are. His eyes and the dog's are on me. A person appearing from nowhere, calling his name. How could he not be curious?

Sundar's makeshift scaffolding stood lopsided against the wall. Fumbling at the ropes, I pulled the structure apart and hid the pieces in the undergrowth, then sat nearby to wait.

Clatter from the town floated over the wall, but on the forest side, for the whole afternoon, there was no one but me. The day cooled, white blossoms gleamed in the dim light. A flock of birds swirled across the sky, then vanished into the darkening forest. One bird called out, echoing the loneliness of dusk.

I shifted on the ground, settled into a new position. Sundar's face peered from the shadows.

"Sundar-ji, I greet you," I said, holding myself still, careful not to startle him.

"Who are you?" he said.

His voice was husky, a man's voice. It had trilled like Sham's flute when I left him with the shepherds.

“I’m Lochan,” I said, turning my head to face him.

The dog growled, his ruff pale in the leaf shadow.

“You moved my sticks,” said Sundar.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why?” said Sundar.

“To hide them. I thought that’s what you’d want,” I said.

“Of course,” he said, the impatience I remembered in Dalia flashing in his eyes. “But why you? All that trouble for what? I won’t be trapped, you know. Not by the food vendor’s stick, not by your smiles.”

“I’m Lochan, Sundar-ji,” I said. “I knew your family. You were young, too young to remember me, maybe.”

Sundar shrugged and said nothing, straightening

the deerskin waist cloth over his lap.

"Take this food. I brought it for you," I said.

I slid the packet from the fold of cloth at my hip and held it out. He avoided my eyes, but took the food in his hands, breaking off some *chapatti*, chewing, swallowing. Another mouthful, and thena third, this time tossing part to the dog, who snapped it up and watched for more.

"You know my parents?" he asked. "Then I have sad news for you. I regret to tell you they're dead."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "About your father I know. I was there. Your mother – I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Sundar sucked in his breath, his eyes wide.

"You were there?" he asked. "You saw the rockslide?"

"Rockslide?" I said.

“The rockslide where my parents died, and the sheep,” said Sundar. “You said you were there.”

My head rang with shock. How had I thought Sundar would remember Manas Moru and Dalia? The parents he knew were Sham and Nina.

“No, Sundar-ji. I saw no rockslide,” I said. “My thoughts misled me. But I did know your parents.”

Sundar lowered his head over the *chapatti* remnants.

“I didn’t see it either,” he said. “I saw a mudslide once, but not the rockslide that smashed my parents.”

“We have a lot to talk about, Sundar-ji,” I said. “I’ll come here tomorrow. Watch for me.”

I needed time to steady myself. The gods had tricked me. The Sundar they brought back to me was changed into someone else.

I hurried down the track to the gate, feeling my way along the wall where the shadow was deep. Sundar was at home in the night jungle, but I feared it.

14 A Boy with Three Mothers

“Sham and Nina were lost?” I asked Sundar the next day.

He and the dog had appeared soon after I settled against the trunk of a cedar tree. The dog eyed the food I passed to his companion.

“Father, mother, aunts, uncles, cousins, sheep, dogs,” Sundar said. “All lost. I’ve given everything to rocks and mud. Except for Peela here.”

He stroked the dog’s head.

“They’re all with the gods and I’ve been left behind,” he said.

He gazed at me through the vines, face framed in pale green blossoms, chin resting on his knees. His voice was listless, but at least he was speaking. He had a tale to tell, if he could bring himself to tell it. And I had a tale for him if he would hear it.

“Listen to me,” I said. “Long ago, twelve years ago, I carried a child when I was still a child myself to a shepherd’s camp in the mountains.”

Sundar’s eyes were on me. The dog flopped against his thigh, curled into a ball of lank fur.

“They called the leader Sham, and his wife was Nina.”

Sundar caught his breath, gripped the dog’s neck.

“The child was called Sundar.”

Sundar’s eyes flickered and went still.

“His name was Sundar - beautiful. It was his father who gave it to him. His father Manas Moru and his mother Dalia.

Sundar’s jaw clenched, his breathing thickened. He shook his fist. The dog growled.

“You’re the one?” he said. “The one who left me on the mountain alone, a meal for leopards? Even a child knows not to desert a baby.”

“I didn’t desert you. I took you all the way to the camp. I saw you held in Nina’s arms, her face brighten, her thumb stroke your cheek.”

Sundar flicked his hand to dismiss my words.

“They found me on the mountainside abandoned. They saved my life and took me for their son,” he said. “They’re the ones who named me.”

He hesitated.

“At least they never told me otherwise,” he said, his voice subdued.

I risked my life to take him to the shepherds, I thought. To be accused of leaving him to die?

I pushed down my anger. This was not the time, and Sundar’s words were not wrong. It was true I had abandoned him. I had done what Dalia wanted when my heart said no.

“Two mothers and two fathers you had,” I said. “Manas Moru and Dalia I knew well, Sham and Nina just a little. They died in a rockslide?”

“Last year. The year of the mud,” said Sundar, pressing the dog’s head. “The headman told me.”

“What headman? Sham was the head, wasn’t he?”

“The headman at Gaadwar village. I told them their grandson died in the mud at the Leopard

village. They told me the same of my family. Rocks and mud in a mountain pass. My uncle escaped to say what happened. The ledge where we used to walk isn't there now – covered with rocks. My uncle died too in the end. Everyone died that autumn."

"You're alive," I said.

"Because I wasn't there," he said.

He slammed his palms into the dirt, cleared his throat.

"Lochan-ji, you say you knew me when I was a baby. Did you think that child would grow to be a coward?"

"Your father was Manas Moru," I said. "The father who gave you life. No son of his can be a coward."

But as I said the words I doubted them. Maybe Manas had been a coward. Why else had he turned

his eyes from what was happening with Dalia?

"I'm a coward," said Sundar. "All those years, frightened of the forest, when all I had to do was leave. I could have been back with them, buried with them in the rock."

"Being alive doesn't make you a coward," I said, pleased with myself for gaining his trust. He was eager to talk.

"You say I had two mothers and two fathers," he said. 'Really, I had three. Himavati and Panipat were like parents too. They frightened me with leopards so I wouldn't run away, but they weren't unkind. The mud buried them. Panipat, Himavati, Amma-ji, the cows. And Jeeti. He always made me angry, but he saved my life and died. And then, for Sham and Nina, the same thing on another mountain. I'm the one who should have felt those rocks smashing and crushing my head. They died. The coward's left alive. Even the gods don't want me."

“You’ve starved in the forest ever since?” I asked.

“Not starved. There are traders, forest people. This dog. We managed, didn’t we, Peela?” he said, scratching the dog behind the ears. “This winter was better than last. I followed some shepherds to Nadri town.”

“The gods brought you to Nadri town, Sundar,” I said. “It’s by their hand we’ve met like this. There are things you need to do and I can help you.”

“Don’t concern yourself with me, Lochan-ji,” he said. “Leave me to the forest. It suits me.”

“Losing three mothers is hard,” I said. “But what if I tell you one mother is still in this world. At least I think she is.”

Sundar tipped his head, waiting for me to continue.

“I’ll tell you your mother’s tale, if you ask me, but

it's not a pretty tale."

Sundar unwrapped the food, put half in front of the dog.

"Truth is better than pretty tales," said Sundar. "Tell me of this mother."

"A mother and a father," I said. "Dalia and Manas Moru. A stone house on a mountainside with goats on the roof. Dalia who combed her hair and smoothed her velvet skin with pastes and perfumes. Manas Moru who gathered herbs and traded them in town. This town. Nadri town. It was for Dalia he traded. Lengths of cloth striped red, black and yellow. Coloured stones and chains of silver to hang from her ears, her forehead, her neck, shimmering like veils when she tossed her head. Leaves to dye her feet red and bells to hang around her ankles.

"I was a child. Dalia kept me close to hold the mirror, fold her blankets, chop and knead and stir. You were there, Sundar-ji, your cheeks carved high

like hers. You too she kept close, a toy to pat and oil and cuddle. Manas Moru, your father, laughed through his thick beard and made her a queen."

Sundar and his dog watched me, like clay images garlanded in bright green *shingli-mingli* vines twisting down from the cedar boughs.

"Do you remember?" I asked. "She sat just as you do now, toes curled like fingers, hand open on her knee like a flower. 'Bring milk for the child,' she'd say, and while she tipped the bowl for you to drink, she'd smile at me."

"She's alive?" Sundar asked.

"I think so," I said. "Far away but still alive. The gods have brought you to find her, just as I found you."

"Better to forget her and say I lost three mothers," said Sundar. "Find her today, lose her tomorrow. I have my dog to worry over. It's

enough."

"It's not to find a mother's love you must do this, Sundar-ji," I said. "It's to right the wrong she did your father."

"The wrong she did? To the one you call Manas Moru?" he asked. "What wrong? Took his gifts? A wife can take a husband's gifts without blame."

"She did great wrong, Sundar-ji, and I'll tell you how. It's because of her that Manas Moru is dead. Dalia murdered him. Or at least let it happen."

Sundar squared his jaw, thrust out his fist.

"My mother's not a murderer," he said through clenched teeth.

"It's your father she killed," I said. "Your father."

Sundar lowered his arm.

"She killed your father and snatched away your

birthright. You weren't meant to hide here in the forest. You should be walking the hills with Manas Moru. He'd have taught you everything. What roots to take, what roots to leave, what to steep and what to grind, what soothes, what awakens, what numbs. If only he'd brewed a tea for Dalia to cool her mind, you'd be measuring out cures in Nadri town, not stealing *chapattis*. She took that from you when she took your father's life."

"She stabbed him? Poisoned him?" Sundar asked. "Not my mother. She wouldn't."

"Sunder-ji, I thought that too," I said. "But it happened. Snakebite. It was the doing of the merchant Prem, and Dalia too."

Voices sounded down the track. Sundar and his dog slipped into the trees. A woman and a boy leading donkeys slung with baskets of fish plodded toward me. I threw back my head and poured water down my throat, just a traveler resting by the road.

The woman strained at her rope, pulling her reluctant animal, who brayed in protest. Behind them, the boy and the second donkey strode at a steady pace, then jerked to a stop to keep from overtaking the others.

The woman looked back at the boy's docile animal, while her own bucked and twisted, almost pulling her off her feet.

"Control your beast, my son," the woman said. "You're distracting mine."

She hauled on her rope. The donkey pulled backward, eyes defiant.

"Please take my advice, Auntie-ji," I called out. "Let the boy and his animal go first. Your beast will follow, not to be left behind, and your problem will be solved."

"I'm the mother. I lead," said the woman, tightening the blanket at her waist.

“As you say, Auntie,” I said.

The boy grinned sideways at me. His mother’s donkey stared straight ahead. Then, with no warning, it trotted forward. The woman stumbled to keep up. Mother, son, and animals disappeared over the rise, leaving the smell of fish in the air.

Sundar slipped back beside me, settled under the vine.

“Perhaps all mothers are troublesome,” he said. “Who is this Prem you spoke of, Lochan-ji?”

“Prem was a merchant come from the plains, face like a squashed weasel’s, smile like a snake’s, and a beard so thin his chin showed through. Then there was your father, tree trunks for thighs and a chest of rock. He lives still in your shoulders. And between the two of them, the gods know why, your mother chose Prem. Or so I believe.”

“I’ve changed my mind, Lochan-ji,” said Sundar.

“I don’t want to hear this story. Better not to know.”

“I’m almost at the end, Sundar-ji. Your father liked to entertain Prem, to tease him. ‘Look at you, wrapped up in blankets. You plains people don’t know what cold is,’ Manas Moru would say, laughing with his head thrown back, teeth flashing. Prem always smiled, but he didn’t like it. Even when they’re angry, merchants know how to smile.

“But your father thought a friendly face meant a friendly heart. He had a precious stone. A ruby, glowing as if the gods had pooled the red of all the worlds into one small pebble. And Manas Moru, wise in the way of plants but not of men, showed Prem the stone. I saw him show it, and I saw the glint reflected in Prem’s eye.

“Sundar-ji, that stone is yours, lifted from the rock by your father’s hand and stolen away to the plains by Prem. In Harappa Prem sits honoured for the wealth he stole from Manas Moru. I heard it

from a timber merchant. And beside him sits your mother and their son. Even while Manas Moru lived, Prem fathered a son for Dalia. Or so I think. They stole the ruby that's yours and you must steal it back. And they stole your father from you too. They must answer for his blood. I'll help you. I'll show you the way."

"The gods chose strangely in the mothers they gave me," said Sundar. "One lied to me, one kept me a slave, and one murdered my father. You were there, Lochan-ji?"

"I didn't see the murder. But the truth was there for any who looked. And I saw Dalia cast you off in favour of the new son."

"She cast me off?" said Sundar.

"They gave you to the shepherds and grew rich on a dead man's ruby," I said. "But I can give you back your past. Soon I'm leaving with Daleep's family for Muni village. They'll know you for the *jungli* boy

and his yellow dog so don't let them see you. But follow through the forest, and I'll show you the house you were born in and where your mother betrayed you."

My plan was deeper than that. Somehow I would take Sundar to Harappa to avenge his father's death. But it was not time yet to tell him.

BOOK FOUR

TEJ

15 Muni Village

Tej walked with her father and the carts of trade goods. She watched Lochan striding up and down the line, hair springing above his forehead like wings over his bushy eyebrows.

Her mother rode in one of the carts, complaining.

“It’s no use bringing more cushions, Lochan,” Rita said. “The gods are angry, who knows why, and they’re punishing me. They mean me to suffer this bumping and bruising all the way to Muni village.”

Her brothers ran ahead, weaving in and out of the trees.

“There’s a man in the forest. We’ve seen him twice. With a dog,” they announced.

“Stay on the path where I can see you,” said Rita. “I’m already tortured by the journey. I don’t want you taken by bandits or bitten by animals.”

“Don’t worry,” said Daleep. “One more night sleeping by the river and we’ll be safe in Muni village.”

Safe, certainly, but Tej preferred her grandparents’ house in Nadri town, where the rooms were polished and clean. Her grandmother saw to that. Not a stool out of line, not a wrinkle on a cushion when guests came to gossip and pick at dainty sweets on painted dishes.

True, in the village the verandah was filled with the sound of the river lapping its banks and the old

stone rooms were cool when the sun was hot. But Tej hated the floors tracked with dirt no matter how briskly she rubbed her brothers' feet, the rough spots on the walls where spiders lived, the chimney that dropped soot in the kitchen as fast as the servants cleaned it up. In the village, servants were few, and her mother was satisfied as long as food pots were full and bedding aired

Surely the gods preferred her grandmother's way of cleanliness and order.

Another evening meal dusted with grit from the track, another night lying under a cart beside her mother, and they arrived at the village. Singh-papa welcomed them back to the low stone house in the walled courtyard. Lochan said it had been a sheep pen once, but now it was a gathering place for traders and donkeys and bullock carts.

Tej's mother lingered on the verandah over herbed water and cakes while the boys played and

Tej joined her father and Singh-papa by the row of carts brought from Nadri town.

Two hunters arrived at the gate. Lochan crouched down with them to pick through their heap of hides, his eyes under their thick black brows half shut in concentration.

Singh-papa stood at attention by Tej's father, like a guard reporting for duty.

"Goods came in steadily all winter," he said. "Carved bowls and honey jars for every shelf in Harappa, furs and skins, embroidered caps for every head. I saved out a choice one for you. It's in the house."

Daleep raised his hands to his current cap, adjusting it on his forehead.

"Well done, old companion," he said. "And I've brought beads and blades to fill our storeroom here."

“I’ve set aside a roll of blankets as well, Daleep-ji,” said Singh-papa. “From the weaver’s granddaughter. They might not be what’s required. You’ll know what to do.”

Tej saw Lochan’s shoulders stiffen above the pile of hides. Vigilant as always when Ishwari was mentioned.

“Ishwari’s weaving?” said Daleep. “What’s wrong? She does fine work, finer even than Bunama’s. Rita boasts about it in Nadri town.”

“You must look and judge for yourself,” said Singh-papa. “The weave is fine, no doubt. But with the borders she’s made, who will wear them? That’s the question. And she wants twice the price. The gods gave her odd ideas to go with her crooked back.”

Inside, when he saw the blankets, Tej’s father agreed.

“Not what people expect,” he said.

Red and black, jagged, twisted, the pattern danced along the edges. Tej smoothed her hand over a corner, almost expecting the colours to move against her fingers. Disorderly, jumbled, the ladies of her grandmother’s circle would say. Not a proper blanket at all.

Why work so hard on blankets no one liked, Tej wondered. Ishwari was foolish, wasting her time. Or, thought Tej uneasily, did Ishwari know something Tej could not see? Tej did not understand, but Lochan did, she was sure, behind his droopy eyebrows.

“The work is superior,” said Tej’s mother, “but no one I know will want it.”

“I won’t disappoint Ishwari,” said Daleep. “I’ll take her blankets. But for the future I’ll have a word with Bunama.”

Lochan folded himself to the floor with the others. Tej's mother poured water for him.

"Daleep-ji, may I tell you my idea?" he said.

Daleep clasped his hands over his stomach, raised his eyebrows to signal that Lochan could speak.

"In Harappa there's wealth waiting to be spent," said Lochan, "and people who welcome change. I think Harappans will buy Ishwari's blankets. Why not go there ourselves to seek them out?"

Looking out for Ishwari as usual, thought Tej. A pity Ishwari's back was crooked.

"Leave the trade with Harappa to the river captains," said Tej's mother. "It's not our responsibility."

"Lochan-ji," said Daleep, "I already travel up the Vipasa and every little river that meets the Vipasa.

Why strain ourselves? We have more than enough to eat and we sleep warm every night. I've no wish to toil all the way to Harappa where the sun will bleach my eyes and burn my shoulders."

"The hardship should not be yours, Daleep-ji," said Lochan. "If you permit it, I could go. I have skill in bargaining, or so you've told me. Who knows what I could find in Harappa the traders haven't thought to bring?"

Daleep shrugged, tipped his head.

"Perhaps you're right," he said. "I'll think about it."

Tej saw her father was doubtful now, but in the end he would approve Lochan's plan, she was sure. And she had made up her mind the moment Lochan mentioned Harappa. Somehow she would go too. The daughter of Daleep's trading house, leading an expedition to Harappa.

Besides, she was curious. Why was Lochan interested in the big city? Not just to trade blankets, she was sure. She meant to find out.

"*Pita-ji*," she said, "could you please think about it soon? Lochan should leave right away if he's going."

Daleep's eyes flashed in anger, then softened.

"Leave it to me," he said, patting the top of her head.

They ate the evening meal on the verandah, scooping up rice and vegetables with their fingers, sucking in the sauce through their teeth. Tej noticed Lochan slip into the house.

"The jug's almost empty. I'll get more water," she said, jumping up to follow him, watching him take a leaf-wrapped bundle from the servant and slide it into a fold of his blanket.

“Are you finished eating?” she asked him as if she had seen nothing. “Aren’t you coming for Singh-papa’s story?”

On the verandah, Singh-papa sat back against the wall, one arm flung over his raised knee, the other held out to his audience. The watchmen squatted on the packed earth of the courtyard, Tej slid cushions behind her parents’ backs, the children hushed their squabbling and drew close to the warmth of the fire pot.

Singh-papa cleared his throat and launched into a tale of gods and battles. The listeners moaned in dismay as demon forces swept across the land, then sighed with relief when the evil was crushed between the jaws of a tiger.

“Excuse me, Singh-papa-ji,” said a watchman as Singh-papa ended the tale with a flourish of his hand. “I don’t understand. The tiger leaps across the village with one thrust of its paw, slurps up the

demon army with his tongue, and then succumbs to his wounds, his body pierced by so many arrows his golden fur is hidden."

"That is so," said Singh-papa.

"Then," said the watchman," the goddess raises her hand and the tiger revives with a shake of his great head and a mighty roar, striking terror in the hearts of the few demons alive to hear."

"As I have said," said Singh-papa.

"But why, Singh-papa, does the goddess delay so long?"

"You must ask the goddess," said Singh-papa. "But one thing I do know, watchman-ji. That's how we like it. We like things to be difficult. That's what interests us."

"Excuse me, Singh-papa, but maybe the goddess had no choice," said Tej. "Her armies had generals,

right?”

“As I told you,” said Singh-papa.

“Those generals, they must have been stumbling over each other to impress her. ‘I want to lead the first charge.’ ‘No, it’s my turn.’ ‘No, it’s mine.’ The goddess probably had to stop their quarreling before she could see to the tiger.”

“Like your brothers, you mean?” said Lochan.

“Tej, you may be right,” said Singh-papa. “We each take what we want from a tale. Now, if you request it, there’s another story I can tell you.”

“Tell it!” the watchmen called out.

“Then listen,” said Singh-papa. “Children quarrel, it’s true. Generals quarrel. Watchmen quarrel. Do you know the gods quarrel too? I’ll explain. Once a demon stole the belt of immortality…”

Lochan rose silently, lit a torch from the fire, and

slipped out the gate.

Tej eased away after Lochan, the group around the fire pot too immersed in Singh-papa's words to notice. She had heard the tale before and knew the gods stopped quarreling long enough to trick the demon into giving back the belt. The story had no interest for her tonight. Her heart thumped with excitement at the thought of learning Lochan's secret.

She edged through the shadows, past pine trunks, the river's rush, the squeaks and chirps of the nighttime forest, guided by Lochan's torch bobbing ahead. She dropped to her hands and knees where the track hung out over the water's edge. The light disappeared, until, feeling her way around a rocky curve, she stumbled from the blackness into a circle of light cast by the torch.

She ducked behind a bush. Lochan sat on a rock, the torch stuck into a crevice beside him. One

moment he was alone, the next there was a man crouching beside him. A boy really, with ragged hair and skin garments, and a dog whose eyes reflected the torchlight.

Tej was unsurprised. This was the secret Lochan had carried from Nadri town, the dog her brothers had glimpsed, the stranger in the forest. The dog growled, pointing its nose in her direction. She stood, knowing Lochan was about to discover her. The boy leaped into the trees as she walked toward the rock.

"You followed me," said Lochan.

"Just let me know what's going on," she said. 'I won't tell anyone."

"Tej," said Lochan, the packet of food in his hand. "You can't let anything brew without adding your own herbs to the pot, can you? Do you mean it? You won't tell anyone?"

"I mean it. I mean everything I say."

"Come back, Sundar, and eat," Lochan said over his shoulder. "Tej is like a sister to me. If she says she's a friend, she is."

Sundar stepped out of the trees, poised to run.

"Be gentle, Tej," said Lochan. "I was going to ask for your help anyway. This is Sundar, born in the house where the weaver lives now. Since then he's suffered a lot. If your father sends me to Harappa, Sundar can help. It'll save Daleep the trouble of sparing someone else."

"So why keep it secret?" asked Tej.

"Your father's careful in the workers he picks," Lochan said. "If he sees him, he'll know he's the market thief from Nadri town."

"He's a thief? Are you being wise, Lochan?' said Tej. "And what do you mean, born in the weaver's house?"

“Exactly that,” said Lochan. “Born in the weaver’s house. Before it became the weaver’s house.”

Sundar scratched the dog’s neck and peered into the darkness outside the torchlight.

“If Sundar’s going to Harappa,” said Tej, “why did he follow us here from Nadri town? We’re in the opposite direction. Why are you so interested in him anyway?”

“I need to keep him close to me. I mustn’t lose him again,” said Lochan. “Listen, Tej-ji. I’ll tell you everything as a brother tells a sister, but my words must stay right here by this rock.”

“People keep secrets to hide something wrong. What harm are you hiding?” asked Tej.

“No harm. There are things Sundar must do, and the only harm will be if he’s kept from doing them,” said Lochan. “It’s for his duty to his father, dead for twelve years, that I keep him near me and take him

to Harappa."

Sundar's head was bent over the dog, as if the conversation had nothing to do with him.

"If it's Sundar's tale, why are you telling it, Lochan?" asked Tej. "Can't he speak for himself?"

Sundar flung back his head.

"You don't address me, sister of Lochan, so how can I answer you?" said Sundar. "I have no hearth of my own but I have my honour."

Tej felt her face burn in embarrassment, grateful the dark was too thick for the others to notice. It was rude to talk about the boy as if he had no ears, even if he was dirty and a thief.

"Excuse my discourtesy, Sundar-ji," she said.

Sundar acknowledged her apology with a tip of his chin.

“This journey to Harappa. Why do you want it?” she asked.

“Lochan-ji has taught me what I must do,” Sundar said. “He can tell it better than I can.”

“Sit, Tej, and I’ll tell you,” said Lochan. “I’ll tell you of Sundar and his father and his mother.”

She would hear another tale tonight after all, Tej thought. First Singh-papa’s and now Lochan’s. Singh-papa’s was make-believe. Lochan’s would be real.

“Sundar’s father was Manas Moru,” said Lochan, “and the weaver’s house on the mountainside was his long before the weaver knew of it. I lived there too. Sundar’s mother was Dalia. She was beautiful, Tej. She shimmered like the dawn, silver and gold falling from her ears and forehead, hair as black as tree trunks new-washed by the mist. She leaned on cushions Manas Moru bought for her and held her baby Sundar in her lap. I wish you could have seen

her, Tej."

"What happened to her?" asked Tej, not sad in the least to have missed her.

"Prem happened to her," said Lochan. "Prem, Manas Moru's friend. Prem came from Harappa and Dalia had a new child, and who the father was, who can say for sure? This new child wasn't bright as the moon like Sundar, but sickly, with one arm half the size of the other."

"Did the sickly child live?" asked Tej.

"I've heard from a trader that he did," said Lochan. "Prem raised him by stealing from Sundar what should have been his. Manas Moru had a ruby, a stone he had great hopes for, not knowing it carried the seeds of his death. He showed it to Prem, red like the blood welling in a wound. Prem brought a viper to poison Manas, and then ran to Harappa with Dalia and the ruby and the baby. And I was forgotten. Dalia cast me off and sent Sundar to the shepherds."

Sundar slammed his palm against the ground. Lochan bowed his head and crossed his arms on his chest, waiting for Tej's response.

"These people you hate, they're in Harappa still?" asked Tej.

"Not hate," said Lochan. "But Prem and Dalia must answer for their misdeeds and the wealth from your father's ruby must return to Sundar."

"So you tell my father you're traveling to Harappa to find a buyer for Ishwari's blankets," said Tej, "when really it's to find Dalia and Prem. You're hiding the truth from my father, Lochan."

"I've given your father the reason he needs," said Lochan.

"Don't worry. I won't stop you," said Tej. "In fact, I'll go with you."

"Are you joking, Tej? Where did that idea come

from?" asked Lochan. "Impossible. Your father won't allow it. In his wisdom, he'll never let you go."

"Lochan, listen to me," said Tej. "Listen to me, for your whole plan depends on me now. This is what I want to do. I'll tell my father you need me on the trip. You'll say I'm the one who knows how to keep proper records. If you don't, I'll tell him your secret. I'll tell your secret and you and Sundar will never get to Harappa."

"You don't know what you're saying," said Lochan. "The journey to Harappa's rough and dangerous. Weeks on the Vipasa, then in a cart across the plain to Harappa. He'll never let you go."

"I've just explained, "Tej said. "If you tell Pita-ji you need my help, he'll agree. And you do need my help. I know my father's business better than anyone. You agree I can come, don't you, Sundar?" she added as an afterthought.

Sundar shrugged.

"If it's what you want, I don't mind," said Lochan, spreading his arms in resignation. "Why not? You can convince Daleep to hire Sundar as a driver."

"Do you know how to be a driver, Sundar?" said Tej. "Probably. Your dog listens to you. Most likely bullocks and donkeys will too."

"And sheep," said Sundar.

"We'll take you to the weaver, Sundar," said Lochan. "If the villagers think you're from Bunama's village over the mountain, don't deny it. A clean loincloth and a few days chopping wood for Bunama, and you'll be rid of your thieving past."

"Yes, let him go to the weaver's house," said Tej. "He's needed there. Bunama's too old to manage and her granddaughter's half crazy."

She watched for Lochan to react. He squeezed his eyebrows together but said nothing.

“I’ll bring clothes from the chest at home,” she said. “Mata-ji won’t miss the old ones. Excuse me, Sundar-ji, but the weaver will never take you dressed in skins as you are.”

“Then that’s our plan. Tomorrow, Sundar, we’ll take you to Ishwari and Bunama,” said Lochan. “They don’t smile in that house, but they’ll treat you well.”

16 Plans

On her way to the weaver's house with more clothing for Sundar, Tej muttered to herself. Where the track turned up the mountainside she stopped for a moment, her eye caught by a rock half submerged in the river. Her mind teemed with images of Ishwari.

I don't like her, she thought, and she doesn't like me. She doesn't like anybody, just looks through people as if they're nothing. Lochan likes her, and I don't know why.

The river wrinkled, then split around the grey rock.

Like the weaver's granddaughter, thought Tej. Ishwari's a slab of stone in the river, just sitting there until everyone feels sorry for her and she gets her own way. "I weave as I see," she says, making her eyes sad and hunching her back even more. "I weave as I weave. It's nothing to me if my ugly patterns make the eyes dizzy. I'm a rock and here I sit. Step over me or go around, but I don't move for anyone. It's not my affair if Daleep can't sell my blankets as long as he pays me for them," she says.

Doesn't Lochan see how selfish she is?

Then there's this Sundar Lochan's so taken with, Tej thought. If Ishwari's a rock in the river, Sundar's a leaf on the surface, tossed here and there, waiting to be bumped in whatever direction he's pushed. "Lochan tells me what to do," he says. Can't he think for himself? He's a leaf, floating where others take him.

And what is Lochan? He's a little boy skulking on

the river bank, digging with a stick in the water, sending leaves and mud whirling while his own feet stay dry.

The gods be praised, I'm not a rock and I'm not a leaf and I'm not a little boy playing with mud, thought Tej. I'm a river, pouring down the mountain, making my own way. I'm the only one with any sense.

She continued up the mountainside.

Sundar was beside the weaver's verandah, smoothing the earth with a broom.

Lochan and Bunama were propped on cushions, Ishwari crouched over her loom on the other side of the room.

"Pour Daleep's daughter some water, Ishwari," said Bunama. "And more for Lochan. Today he has time to sit with an old woman because he brought a boy and a dog to do what he usually does for us."

"You'll not have Sundar long, Bunama. We're leaving soon and Singh-papa will need him for the donkeys."

"He'll be better off journeying," said Bunama. "He's not settling here. Sleeps out in the dirt with his dog. About Ishwari's blankets I'm not so certain. Even if you find some fine Harappan ladies to take them, who's to say Ishwari can weave enough to please? There's only one of her. I'm not much use any more. It's a long journey you're taking for a crippled girl's blankets."

The clacking of the loom stopped abruptly. Bunama's words echoed in the silence. Ishwari's arms dropped to her lap.

Ishwari cleared her throat.

"When you take my blankets to Harappa, Lochan-ji," she said, "I should be there to explain their worth."

"Nonsense," said Bunama. "Idle thoughts will get you nowhere. It's here you need to be, Ishwari, weaving the blankets we're talking about. Harappa's hot, but if they're foolish enough to buy what's useless to them, so be it."

"But I'm needed there," said Ishwari, her voice low, turning back to her loom. "No one else explains the weaving properly."

Ishwari's head seemed too heavy for her thin shoulders, even heavier because of the glossy twist of hair curled at her neck.

What a show-off, thought Tej. She's older than I am, but look at her eyes, pleading like a little girl begging for honey.

"The gods didn't mean you for journeying, Ishwari, or they would have given you a straight back," said Bunama. "They made you crooked to teach you patience."

Tej felt a twinge of sympathy for Ishwari. And then a sudden excitement at Ishwari's wish to go to Harappa. A female companion to put her parents' objections to rest.

"Excuse me, Bunama," Tej said. "It will be a great service to my father if you allow Ishwari to come to Harappa. I'm needed to keep the accounts and carry his tiger seal, and he'll be grateful to have a woman with me."

Lochan widened his eyes, then smirked and shrugged his shoulders. Ishwari's mouth fell open, her eyes darting from Tej to Lochan to her grandmother.

"Where Daleep and Rita send their daughter is their own business," said Bunama. "But what help could Ishwari be? She can't keep up with you."

"We'll be on a boat for most of the trip," Tej said. "And my father can send a servant to help you while she's gone."

“You say your father needs her?” said Bunama.

“Yes,” said Tej. “My father will be grateful if Ishwari comes as my companion.”

“I’ll not stand in Daleep’s way,” said Bunama. “Although I’ll find it quiet here without the rattle of her loom.”

“Only a few months, and then she’d be back,” Lochan said.

“Then go, if Daleep wishes it,’ said Bunama. “Watch over her well, Lochan-ji. Even a misshapen girl is unsafe from the ruffians traveling the river. And she’s all that the gods have left me in this world.”

Tej watched Lochan look toward the loom. Ishwari bent her head to avoid his eyes, then stared at his back when he turned away.

Lochan and Tej walked down the track together.

"So Daleep and Rita are letting you go?" Lochan asked.

"They will, when they hear Ishwari's going," said Tej.

"You're turning into a plains dweller even before you get there," said Lochan, "growing plots as twisted as tamarack trees. A half-lie to Bunama, a half-lie to your father. First thing you know, you'll be sitting in a back alley in Harappa market swindling us poor mountain innocents of our gold."

"Your joke isn't funny," said Tej. "I need to go to Harappa and I'm making it happen. Your plans are just as twisted."

In her head she saw a great train of bullock carts rolling from Harappa to Muni village, cart after cart of embroidered silks, jewelled chests, pottery wrapped in straw, and herself borne along in a palanquin painted blue and red and gold, the bearers in fine *dhoti*s and golden armbands. A

merchant, wealthy beyond her parents' dreams.

"Your eyes are far away," said Lochan, breaking her reverie. 'What are you thinking?"

"Planning our journey," said Tej.

"Plan quickly," said Lochan. "If Daleep permits it, we'll leave in three days."

17 Donkey Train

Three days later Daleep and Rita and Bunama saw the expedition off on the first stretch of the journey, a donkey train down the Vipasa to Nadri town.

“Go with the gods,” said Bunama.

“Come back safely,” said Rita. “Before this year’s snow, if you can.”

“Anyone can carry blankets and cedar bowls and carnelian beads,” said Daleep. “That’s not why I’m

sending you. Observe. Learn."

He gestured to the pouch hanging at her waist.

"It's your family's future you're carrying along with that tiger seal, Tej. See for yourself what golden Harappa can provide," he said. "Lochan's right. Why let others benefit when we can do it ourselves."

He handed her a knife, the three-pointed sheath and handle chased in silver swirls.

"Your great-grandfather's knife," said Daleep. "Who knows? It might keep you safe. It was hammered long before in a place more distant than Harappa. Ancient stone, worked in Sindhapur far to the west, where the streets are steeped in magic from across the sea. So is this knife, my grandfather said."

Sundar stretched out his hand as if to touch it, his eyes wide with awe.

“Don’t bare the blade unless you mean to use it,” said Daleep. “Once unsheathed, it must cut. That’s its magic.”

Sundar lowered his head, embarrassed. Tej placed the knife in her pack.

A guard strode bare-legged at the front of the caravan, bow held before him, leather cap clamped on his head. The cart lumbered behind, the horns of the bullocks woven with red ribbons. Sundar led the animals, a Sundar tall and serious in new sandals and blanket, a red striped sash twisted around his waist, and hair still ragged but combed smooth under a flat black and white cap. Peela pranced beside.

Ishwari sat in the cart, cushioned by sacks of wool all sealed with Daleep’s tiger stamp, her heavy hair gleaming in the morning sun. Tej trudged behind, away from the huge wheels and the twigs and pebbles thrown up by their turning, ahead of the drivers and the thrusting noses and kicking hooves

of the pack donkeys.

Singh-papa followed, planting his staff in the path with each step, his long streaky beard lengthening his thin face. Another guard walked at the rear, his eyes sweeping the landscape from side to side. Lochan dashed up and down the line tightening straps, instructing the drivers, consulting with the guards.

Singh-papa began one of his stories to amuse the drivers.

“A god once descended to this world to walk among ordinary people,” he said. “He joined a donkey caravan just like ours and at first no one recognised him. But a daughter-in-law of the merchant family saw light glowing round his head and touched his feet, knowing him for what he was.

“‘What good is bowing if you do nothing else?’ asked the god.

“So she took the choicest foods from their sacks and with her own hands prepared a feast and carried the tray to the god.

“‘Why have you prepared this for me and ignored the hungry people following your caravan? Don’t you know that what you give willingly to others fills my stomach as well?’

“So the next day the woman prepared a new feast and with her own hand served the band of beggars following behind. Then she touched her head to the ground at the feet of the god.

“‘Is this how you treat a god, leaving me unattended all day while you run after the others? Is this the way to show your devotion?’ asked the god.

“‘I’m doomed to unhappiness,’ cried the woman. ‘I do whatever you ask and still you aren’t satisfied.’

“‘You begin to understand at last,’ said the god.

“You can never please me. If my stomach’s empty, I ask one thing, if full I ask another. Why try to live by my story? Look inside and find your own. That’s where happiness lies.’”

The drivers murmured their thanks, then walked in bewildered silence.

“A good story, well told,” said Lochan to Singh-papa. “But not accurate, I think. People should do what they’re told. The gods prefer it that way.”

“If we all do what we’re told, then who’s left to do the telling?” asked Singh-papa. “Have you considered that?”

Lochan wrinkled his forehead, his eyebrows bobbing.

“I know what you’re thinking, Lochan,” said Tej. “You’ll do the telling, right? It’s the rest of us who must do what we’re told.”

She climbed into the cart to sit with Ishwari.

“Singh-papa has so many stories, he should have a cart of his own to carry them,” she said.

There was no answering smile on Ishwari’s face. Tej’s stomach clenched. She hates me, Tej thought, fingering the pouch that held her father’s carved seal. But who cares. I’ll make her my friend before we reach Harappa.

Ishwari shifted her legs, poked at the cushion jammed between her back and the sacks of wool.

“Does your back hurt?” asked Tej.

“No more than I’m used to and less than when I weave,” said Ishwari.

“If you want, I’ll get a blanket from the donkey pack. Or anything else you need,” said Tej.

Ishwari shrugged.

“What I need I’ll get myself,” she said. “My back’s crooked, but I’m not sick, you know.”

“When we board the boat in Nadri town, the journey will be smoother,” said Tej.

Ishwari stared at the trees, her face without expression.

Talking with her was like combing tangled hair. Patiently, patiently rub in oil, draw the comb, loosen the snags.

“My father says your weaving is beautiful. I’m sure we’ll find good customers in Harappa,” Tej said.

Ishwari’s nostrils flared.

“What others think of my blankets, I don’t care,” she said. “It’s what I think, and maybe my grandmother. Others don’t know how to judge.”

“You don’t care about your blankets?” came Sundar’s voice.

Tej realised he had fallen back close to the cart, rope slack in his hand, the bullocks following the guard on their own. His face was firm with health after the good food in Bunama's house.

"I care about the blankets. But not about the people," said Ishwari.

"So why are you coming to Harappa then?" asked Tej. "You said you wanted to."

"I have my reasons," said Ishwari.

Next day Ishwari walked for a while, jerking over the uneven ground, crawling at the steep places, throwing off Tej's offers of help when she stumbled exhausted from matching the pace of the others.

She's showing me she doesn't need me, Tej thought.

The summer sun grew hot. The drivers bared their shoulders and teased Lochan, who dressed like

a merchant from the town, his blanket cinched tight around his midriff and over his shoulders.

A shower turned to a heavy rain that soaked them through. When the air cleared, Singh-papa loosened the hair knotted on top of his head to spring loose and grey over his shoulders, and draped his drenched blanket on the end of his staff, flapping it in the air to dry as he walked.

“You look like a monstrous bat bleached in the sun,” said Lochan. “It’s good. You’ll frighten off attackers.”

“And you, Lochan, look like a *raja*’s brother-in-law,” said Singh-papa, “gliding through palace halls with perfumed hair and nose so high you might trip over your feet.”

The drivers laughed. One darted beside Lochan and pretended to hold a royal umbrella above his head. Another climbed on a bullock, whistling through his fingers and calling out, “Make way.

Make way. The prince approaches." Sundar's dog ran in circles, yipping with excitement until Sundar picked him up and set him in the cart. The dog strained against Ishwari's arms and then settled against her. The guards grinned, their eyes scanning the forest. One turned away from the caravan and headed up along a stream. In the evening everyone had a sliver of roast duck.

Our journey is going well, thought Tej.

18 Disappearance

In the valley at Nadri town, the summer heat was thick. The travelers stayed with Tej's grandparents, resting in the shaded courtyard, while a boat was arranged to carry them down the Vipasa.

"My son has plans for you," Tej's grandfather said to Lochan. "Listen and learn. Harappans like to talk. Pay attention to what they don't tell you. Knowledge they keep to themselves is valuable."

And I have plans for myself, thought Tej.

Singh-papa, Lochan and one of Tej's uncles spent a day at the docks choosing a boat for the journey down the Vipasa.

"Our river will carry you west and south," her uncle explained. "After two weeks you'll come to Kauri town. That's where you unload the trades goods onto a bullock cart. You'll have to hire one there. Stay in the guesthouse there for a night, then walk north for a day to the Iravati river and Harappa. I've never made the trip, but the captain will give you good advice."

Her grandmother organised supplies.

"Too coarse," she said when a servant brought cloth from the warehouse. "Fetch the fine rolls. Our family travels like princes, not beggars."

She tore off lengths and piled them in a basket for the washer folk on the river.

"To wear in Harappa," she said, when the freshly

dyed cloths were delivered to their courtyard two days later. “Only cotton’s worn there. You’re feeling hot here but this is nothing to what you’ll feel in Harappa.”

The servant rolled the cloths into a pack, red, yellow, brown, white, starched and smooth, smelling of sun and new dye.

“Skirts for you, skirts for Ishwari,” her grandmother said, “*dhotis* for the men, shawls and sashes for everyone. Pleat them evenly when you wear them, and match them properly. Even the bangles. Such things matter in Harappa.”

“Yes, Grandmother-ji,” said Tej.

“Tej, I make you responsible,” her grandmother said. “Keep everyone looking respectable.”

“And you, overseer-ji,” she said, turning to Singh-papa. “The sack with the triple seal is dried fish. *Mahaseer* fish. Harappans will push each other aside

to serve you when they hear there's Nadri town *mahaseer* in your packs."

"I have rock salt as well," said Singh-papa through his grey beard and moustache. "I've made up pouches."

"Excuse me, Grandmother of Tej," said Sundar. "You must know Harappa well. Is there a merchant there with a beautiful wife and a boy with a withered arm?"

Tej's grandmother jerked back in surprise.

"That's a strange question from a boy who seldom speaks," she said. "I've never been to Harappa. When would I have found the time? I don't have to go there to know about it. I'm an educated woman."

Sundar's face fell.

"But why do you ask about these people?" she asked.

Sundar opened his mouth but Tej broke in before he could speak.

“Just a story we heard on the road,” she said.

Singh-papa stared in surprise, and Ishwari’s sullen face lit up with curiosity, but the moment passed into a discussion of what food to take on the journey.

“None,” said Lochan. “There’s a cook on the boat. He’ll stow what we need.”

“I don’t trust these boat cooks,” Tej’s grandmother said. “Do they say the proper prayers and make offerings to the *deodar* tree? Food’s the gift of the gods. It turns to poison in our throats if we’re not grateful.”

“Forgive me,” said Lochan. “This cook is well-thought of. Traders eat his food all the time and return safely.”

“Not in this family,” said her grandmother. “Singh-papa will prepare the food on the boat and in Harappa too, once you reach there. He’ll have time with no bullocks to care for. He knows cooking. I taught him myself when he first came to our family.”

Singh-papa bowed, his grey topknot bobbing, his face set.

Tej cringed. She admired her grandmother’s knack for taking charge, but not her habit of offending people.

The servants added jars of *ghee* and lentils, sacks of flour, pots of spices, far more than the travelers would need, to the pile that would be loaded at the docks.

“Your grandmother’s word is law,” Lochan muttered to Tej, “but only the gods understand why we’re taking spices to Harappa the traders brought from there in the first place.”

Tej pursed her mouth, wrinkled her nose.

Ishwari snickered. “Nothing in this world makes sense,” she said. “We’re born. We die. Where’s the sense in that? We weave blankets. People wipe their noses on them.”

“You love weaving,” said Lochan, “even though you complain.”

Good, thought Tej. At least Lochan caught her out that time.

Sundar threw pieces of *chapatti* to the dog.

In the morning, Tej walked with the others through the mist to the pebbly shore. A boat pulled away from the wharf into the current, its blurred shape resolving into sacks, jars, sprawling men and a donkey. On its way to Harappa, just like us, thought Tej.

Tej’s uncle led them to the biggest of the boats

rocking in the water, flat, wide, the curve of the prow high above their heads. A boatman, all muscle except for the *dhoti* round his hips and a thin dangling moustache, held the boat steady with the steering pole. The captain greeted them on the wharf.

"Your passengers, as arranged," said Tej's uncle, holding up a leather pouch, jingling the stones inside.

The captain thrust the pouch behind his sash.

"The rest when they arrive safe in Harappa," said her uncle.

Singh-papa pointed at the cart piled with goods, and before the sun was full in the sky, their things had been stowed on the boat, Lochan, Ishwari and Tej settled on the high seat above the sloping front, Singh-papa, Sundar and the dog wedged in with the cargo and crew, and the cart and drivers sent back home through the gate.

A worker lifted the rope from the mooring stake and leaped aboard as the boatman poled the boat away from the wharf, pulling it round into the current.

“Go with the gods,”’ Tej’s uncle called as they moved down the river.

At first the dog whined and trembled, head and tail stiff. Then he curled at Sundar’s side, one eye half-open. Tej sat sweating under the shawl she draped over her head against the sun. She was crammed beside Ishwari on the hard bench, her bones aching, her muscles cramped, her eyes throbbing from the river glare even though she had outlined them with black kohl to dull the reflection.

The first night they camped on grass and dry earth by a thick growth of thorn bush. The mountain slopes were gentle beyond the river, not like the stark cliffs of Muni village where her feet trembled at the edge of crevices and skidded backwards on

the steep paths. Here, the river was smooth beneath bird calls and the hum of insects.

Singh-papa and Lochan dug a hole and started a cooking fire. Sundar walked up from the river, the dog trotting beside him, a pole with a water pot at either end balanced over his shoulders.

‘‘Keep that dog on a leading rope or you’ll lose him,” said Singh-papa, his eye on his sliding fire sticks and the dry leaves beginning to curl and smoke in the pit.

“Excuse me, Singh-papa-ji, but he knows the jungle,” said Sundar.

Lochan pulled out food packets from the rolls of supplies.

“Not those, Lochan. The black beans”’ said Singh-papa. “They’re tastier. Ishwari, you have weaver’s fingers. Untie this fastening.”

He pulled at the string around the pouch of cumin seed.

“I’ll get my knife, Singh-papa,” said Tej. “It’ll slice through the knots in an instant.”

“Don’t even think of that, Tej,” said Singh-papa. “Remember your father’s words. That knife’s for matters of life and death. Find the spice mixture, Lochan. And move that pot, Sundar, before it boils over.”

The river boat cook grinned as he squatted over his own fire. The aroma of frying spices and baking *chapatti* drifted from his spot by the river. Tej’s nostrils flared as she edged closer to the fragrance, away from the smell of burnt fat surrounding Singh-papa.

“Grandmother told us he could cook,” Tej said to Ishwari. “What would she say if she saw him now?”

Ishwari shrugged, her face without expression.

Food steamed in the evening air as the boat captain and his men ate, wiping the plate with chunks of *chapatti*, smacking their lips. Their pot and cooking rack were scoured and wrapped away, a leftover *chapatti* thrown to the dog, while Singh-papa's diners were still struggling to eat half-cooked beans and scorched rice. Tej swallowed what she could, her throat cramping in protest. In the dark of the evening, she scrabbled with her fingers in the dirt to bury the rest of her portion.

Later, to ease hunger pangs, she doled out pieces of dried mango from her traveling pouch.

"To celebrate our first day's good travel," she said, in case Singh-papa's feelings were hurt.

The boat captain waved her away as she offered some to him.

"No, no. Keep it for yourself," he said in a low voice. You'll sleep hungry without it."

The next evening, she sat beside Ishwari on a log watching Singh-papa mutter over his cooking fire. The boat's cook set a plate of steaming gourd and *chapatti* glistening with *ghee* on the ground in front of them.

"To ease your stomach while you wait," he said with a smile, swatting at the mosquitoes hovering over his bare shoulders.

Tej divided the food, filling a plate for Lochan and Sundar, one for Ishwari and herself and one which she carried to Singh-papa.

"Enjoy this while our supper stews," she said.

"The boat crew is kind," Singh-papa said. "I'll send them lentils in return."

The cook appeared beside them with a fresh stack of *chapatti* and the pot of vegetables. Singh-papa ladled out his lentils. Lochan and Sundar held up their hands in refusal. The boat crew took

mouthfuls from courtesy. Ishwari ate without comment, scooping up the cook's savoury gourd and Singh-papa's tasteless lentils with the same steady disinterest.

"My stomach's full of *chapatti*," said Tej. "I can't eat any more."

Singh-papa stared, then shook his head.

"The cook has a fine touch. I'm out of practice," he said. "Leave the lentils for the crows. Then they won't be wasted. But not till morning. Who knows what would be drawn in the night to so much food."

"Leopards, tigers, spotted deer, *dhole* like Peela," said Sundar.

Faces lit by the fire turned toward him, surprised by the sound of his voice, he spoke so seldom.

"Bears, maybe," Sundar continued. "Are there bears here on the plains?"

“Elephants and rhinos, more likely,” said Singh-papa.

The next evening, Singh-papa made no attempt to cook.

“Put that over there,” he told a crew member who was carrying jars and sacks from the boat. The cook nodded his thanks as Singh-papa’s supplies were set by his fire.

“There’s good *ghee* in there. Don’t waste it,” said Singh-papa.

That evening every scrap of food was devoured, except for the handful Singh-papa placed on a leaf for the crows.

“Why bother, when the crows have the whole forest to choose from?” asked Tej.

“Leave it and let the crows decide,” said Singh-papa. “Hungry crow, broken wheel. Feed a crow,

wheel turns like silk."

"Sundar's dog most likely slinks off and takes it," said Tej. "What will the crows say to that?"

"Where is Peela anyway? He's usually right here when we're eating," said Ishwari.

"Peela! Peela!" called Sundar, but no dog appeared.

"Peela, where are you?" Ishwari cried.

By sleeping time, there was still no Peela. Sundar headed toward the trees.

"Don't go looking for the dog in the forest," said Lochan. "You know better than anyone how dangerous it is."

Peela might be hurt," said Ishwari.

"True," said Singh-papa, "but Sundar won't be any help to him from the jaws of a tiger."

“Sleep,” said Tej. “He might be here when you wake up.”

But at dawn when Tej looked across the fire there was no Peela curled against Sundar’s blanketed form. Sad, she thought, but it’s only a dog, after all.

She said nothing. She knew the others would say her heart was cold.

“I won’t leave without Peela,” said Sundar, his eyes wild, as the others climbed on the boat.

“You must,” said Lochan. “Remember your work in Harappa.”

Sundar stared at the forest, then hung his head and crawled onto the boat.

19 Rhinoceros

Sundar hunched down in the boat, shrugging Lochan's hand from his shoulder. Ishwari's eyes were as downcast as his.

"He'll find you again," said Tej. "Dogs always do. And don't be angry at us. It's not our fault your dog's gone."

"It's your own doing if your dog's been eaten," said Singh-papa. "I warned you to leash it."

"He's after a female," said the cook. "I saw *dhole*

near the camp two nights ago."

Sundar looked up, hope flashing in his eyes, then slumped back.

"Leave Sundar in peace," said Lochan. "He's feeling all his losses now, not only the dog. I know his story."

Tej climbed to the plank bench beside Ishwari and the boatman poled away from the reedy bank. She gazed at the endless forest until her eyes fell out of focus and she sat in a half-slumber until they made camp.

They devoured another of the cook's meals, bulrush shoots pulled from the tangled growth by the river and a mound of steaming rice. The river crew spread a cloth and threw dice, piling up shells in the light of the fire, their voices rising in excitement. Singh-papa watched with longing, then turned away, waving his hand as if pushing aside temptation.

"No gambling for us," he said. "Lochan's guarding our wealth. Keep it well, Lochan, for the guest houses and cook shops of Harappa won't be cheap."

Lochan tipped his chin in agreement.

"But then again, Lochan, perhaps a few shells?" Singh-papa asked. "For just a small wager?"

"Better not," said Lochan. "Silver, shells, *mahaseer,* salt, we'll need it all in Harappa."

Tej was irritated, re-living her disappointment when Daleep gave the pouches of cowrie shells and silver to Lochan for safe-keeping instead of to her.

"When we get to Harappa, we'll waste no time," said Lochan. "We'll find a stall in the bazaar for Tej and Ishwari, and you'll watch over them, Singh-papa-ji. Sundar and I'll move around, find out what we can."

“Naturally,” said Tej. “Sundar and Lochan can wander as they wish while the rest of us do the work.”

“That’s not what I meant, Tej,” said Lochan.

“How should we know what you meant?” said Ishwari. “You’re keeping it all a secret. Do you think I haven’t noticed, Lochan? You pushing Sundar like a ewe nudges her lamb? ‘Remember your work in Harappa,’ you told him. What work is this?”

Sundar clenched his fist and interrupted the exchange.

“You call me a lamb, Ishwari, because you don’t know what I am,” he said, life returning to his voice for the first time since Peela had disappeared. “I’m not a lamb. I’m a bull, I tell you. A raging bull, raging for the honour of my father. You’ll hear my hooves thundering by, you’ll feel the wind on your face, you’ll see me drive my horns through a great evil. An evil cloud that clings to a murderer. My father’s murderer.”

Four faces stared at him open-mouthed, startled by his outburst.

“It’s not a bloodbath you want, Sundar,” said Lochan after a moment. “Not goring him to death. Just forcing him to admit the truth.”

“What’s all this about?” asked Ishwari. “So it’s not for my blankets you’re floating down the Vipasa to Harappa. What’s this great evil Sundar’s talking about?”

“Remember, Lochan-ji, that your duty is to Tej’s father, not tracking down evil,” cautioned Singh-papa, but his back was stiff with curiosity.

“We might as well tell them, Lochan,” said Tej. “It’s obvious they know most of it anyway.”

Lochan looked down, his drooping eyebrows hiding his eyes, his thin wrists hugging his folded blanket to him like a cushion.

“Sundar has suffered a lot,” he said, “at the hand of his mother and stepfather. He needs to face them in Harappa.”

“Lochan said you were a boy with no family, Sundar. How do you have a mother in Harappa?” asked Ishwari.

Her words died away, her eyes widened

“Oh,” she said, “I think I understand. I know this story, Sundar. I realise who you are. You’re the boy cast out from his house long ago and given to the shepherds, aren’t you?”

She turned to Lochan, her breathing heavy. She thrust out her hand, palm upward.

“Why did you lie, Lochan? Bringing Sundar to us like a gift, an escaped slave, you said, who could help us for a few days. Was it amusing, tricking my grandmother with stories?”

Her voice was shrill.

Lochan's mouth quivered but no words came.

What a fuss over nothing she's making, thought Tej. Upsetting Lochan. Sundar chopped wood for her, she used it for fuel. What difference does it make where Sundar came from?

"He didn't lie, Ishwari," said Tej. "What he told you was true. He wasn't deceiving your grandmother. He's a runaway slave and a boy who has no family."

"My mother's alive, Lochan told me," said Sundar, "and she and her husband Prem killed my father Manas Moru and ran off to Harappa with my father's ruby."

"We don't know for sure about the killing," said Lochan.

Ishwari's face was heavy with anger.

“So Bunama’s house is really Sundar’s, and you let us make a servant of him?”

She gestured toward Sundar, who avoided her eyes and rolled a pebble in the dirt at his knee.

“It’s not Sundar’s house,” said Tej. “The village gave it to your grandmother. Or my father did, which is the same thing.”

Ishwari glared at Tej.

“Did you know about this?” she asked.

“Lochan, Sundar and I know,” Tej said. “No one else.”

“Has it been amusing, keeping secrets from me, laughing behind my back?” asked Ishwari.

“It wasn’t like that, Ishwari,” said Tej. “I found out by chance.”

“You’re not to be trusted, Tej. Smiling at me,

getting me this, getting me that, and all the time gloating over your secrets."

Tej jerked back as if Ishwari had struck her. She felt her eyes swell, straining out of her forehead.

"Ishwari-ji, those are strong words," said Lochan. "Tej is a young girl finding her way. You're older and wiser. Speak as an elder."

Ishwari was silent. The crackling of the fire, insect hums, the click of dice, grew loud in Tej's ears.

Singh-papa's voice floated out of the dark.

"You've quarreled, but now it's finished. Young people have disagreements," he said. "It's natural. Don't worry about it."

"Excuse me, Singh-papa," said Tej, "but I want to say one thing to Ishwari. If you don't like secrets, Ishwari, then what do you have to say about the secret you're hugging to yourself?"

Ishwari sank into her cushion, her face panicked.

“A secret?” asked Lochan. “Now it’s you, Tej, who’s being discourteous. There might be things Ishwari doesn’t wish to tell.”

“What secret?” asked Ishwari, recovering her composure.

“Your reasons,” said Tej. “You said you have reasons for coming to Harappa. What reasons? You should tell us if you hate secrets so much.”

Ishwari glanced at Lochan and then back at Tej.

“Would my reasons make any sense to you? Can you understand the life of someone like me?” asked Ishwari. “The days run smooth for you. A worry one day is gone the next. Your legs are straight, your shoulders even. The gods didn’t give you a back that aches when you sit and aches when you stand. The gods didn’t give you a grandmother who wonders whenever she looks at you what misdeed she’s

paying for with a crook-back for a granddaughter. Why should I tell you what will only be a curiosity to you?”

Tej hung her head.

“I didn’t mean to pry,” she said. “You pushed me into it, angry at me for no reason.”

“Ishwari-ji, is that your secret?” asked Sundar. “Your back? We know about it already.”

“My back’s no secret, Sundar,” said Ishwari. “It’s my hopes that I keep hidden, my foolish hopes. But there’s no point hiding them now, with Tej tugging at them like Peela at a duck carcass. So I’ll toss them out to you. I’m looking for healing. Can you believe that? I’m looking for a cure.”

Her voice broke. She swallowed, then continued.

“Harappa’s a big city. It must have many healers. They’ll know things Muni village has never heard of.

Perhaps my back will interest them. Perhaps they've treated others. So now you know my secret."

She turned her head to stare into the fire.

"Isn't it good that you told us?" said Tej. "Now we can help you find these doctors. It's best to put truth where all can see it."

Singh-papa straightened his back, arranged his shawl over his shoulders. The others settled, knowing a story was coming.

"Truth may be best, Tej," he said, "but where is this truth to be found? It's not always easy to know. Truth is like pebbles on the shore of the Vipasa. We pick them up. Each nestles full and perfect in our palm. Is one pebble more a pebble than the others? Is one person's truth truer than another's? I'll tell you a story of Muni village itself if you wish."

"Tell it, Singh-papa," Lochan said.

“There was a holy man,” said Singh-papa, “who meditated on the banks of the Vipasa, above the ford by the whirlpool. A red-eyed demon swooped upon him, with a mouthful of pointed teeth gaping from ear to ear. The holy man sent his one hundred sons, each as beloved as the next, and they fought the demon and killed him. But that demon jumped up again, and became two, then the two became four, and the four eight, and soon they outnumbered the courageous sons and slaughtered them one and all.

“The holy man said nothing but walked to the stony bank where the river crashed into the mist and thunder, and water whirled like the eye of a god. In he stepped and a villager, seeing the body battered on the rocks, called out ‘Help! Help! Our holy man is in danger. Save him! Save him!’

“The villagers ran to help, calling all the time ‘Save him! Save him!’ They joined themselves in a chain and heaved his body onto the shore.

When he came to his senses and choked up all that he had swallowed, the villagers said, 'Hail great holy man, we saved your life. We called out to each other and came to your aid.'

"They waited for him to praise them, but the holy man scolded them instead, and cursed them for forcing him back to his pain.

"'You interfered in what you didn't understand,' he said. 'You thought you knew the truth of what should happen, but all you knew was what you wanted. You dragged me out when you should have let me be.

"'So I curse you,' said the holy man. 'I curse you never to recognise the truth. You'll see sweet smiles where intent is evil and thorns where petals blossom, hear doves coo when crows cackle, taste bitterness when love's offered freely.'

"The villagers moaned and touched the river-spattered rocks at his feet.

"'Great sage!' they cried, 'we beg you, don't hide us from truth. We were selfish. We thought only of what we wanted. But you, our beloved sage, you did the same. You cared not that our greatest joy is in serving you. You tore yourself away with no concern for us. You too trifled in lives you didn't understand. So please, take away the curse.'

"And the holy man, knowing there was truth in their plea, relented.

"'A curse uttered cannot be recalled,' he said, 'but I'll grant a boon to ease the pain. For a time you'll stay tangled in lies that spin like the whirlpool. But one day, like a fish leaping free of the net, truth will soar high against the sky and you will see it. One day, but not yet.'

"So there you have it," said Singh-papa. "A tale of our village. Muni village. The truth swims deep. Did Lochan and Tej hide truth from Ishwari? Did Ishwari keep her plans secret? We are certain they

did. When they did this, did they please the gods or anger them? The truth of that we can't know. You'll never find the truth of others. We can't even find it in ourselves."

"The truth is, Singh-papa," said Ishwari, "that if my back was straight and my walking graceful, Lochan would be more careful how he dealt with me."

Lochan threw back his shoulders.

"You're mistaken, Ishwari. I'm careful with every word I say to you. Everyone here is. If you don't mind my saying so, you're the one who needs to be careful.

"'Your blankets are well woven,' we say. You frown and sniff and turn away. No one likes that."

Ishwari stared, her face rigid.

Good, thought Tej. Lochan is teaching Ishwari

what she needs to learn.

“Spread the blankets, Sundar,” said Singh-papa. “The boatmen have already set their watchman and fallen asleep.”

In the morning, no one mentioned their disagreements of the evening. The journey down the river continued, tedious, with no end in sight.

Until the rhinoceros came.

20 Return

Tej sat beside Ishwari on the plank seat. On the bank, a cart loaded with fodder rolled beside the reeds, the bullock plodding, the carter waving.

“Go faster, grandfather,” their boatman called out with a grin. “The leaves are wilting. Your cows will starve to death before you get to them.”

“Hurry, my boy,” the carter shouted back, “before the weeds grow thick and clog the steering pole.”

Even Sundar came out of his sadness for a moment and laughed, but Ishwari stayed aloof, her

face drawn and sweating in the heat.

Lochan made her see sense last night, Tej thought. I'll keep trying. Soon she'll be grateful for my kindness.

Mosquitoes buzzed up from the reeds, avoiding slapping hands and nipping through thin cotton shawls. "Use the mustard oil," said Tej, handing the stoppered jar to Ishwari. "It'll keep them away."

"You should rest," she told Ishwari after their evening dip in the river, as they unwound their dripping garments in the shade of a mango tree. She handed Ishwari fresh clothes from her grandmother's supply, feeling at peace with the world. Water lapped at her feet, the mango leaves were edged in gold from the setting sun, ducks flew black against the sky.

"I'll scrub the clothes for both of us, and spread them to dry," she said.

“Tej, you’re like a mosquito, buzzing, jabbing. I brush you away from one place, you flit to another. Don’t trouble. I’ll wash my things myself,” said Ishwari. “But I’m grateful for your offer,” she added, her voice softening.

Tej slapped her washing on a rock, wrung it into long ropes of yellow and brown, spread it on a bush.

At least Ishwari thanked me, she thought. By Harappa we’ll be walking arm and arm in the marketplace.

“Two days more to the docking,” said the captain one morning. “Before the monsoon or not, I can’t say.”

He pointed. Black rain clouds hovered in the distance. Above the boat, the sun shone bright and the wind blew hot, flapping shawls and the embroidered panels of the sun shade, burning Tej’s eyes, cracking her lips, scouring her face with grit. But when the wind fell silent, her skin stewed in

sweat and dust and the welts of insect bites, and she longed for its return.

"Will it be cooler when the rains come?" she asked. "Summer on the plains is like a punishment. I can't keep clean. My clothes are soggy as soon as I put them on."

"Now you appreciate our mountains," said Singh-papa. "You had to leave your home to know."

Reeds lined the river, jungle spread into the distance. Deer watched them from the shadows of the trees, monkeys shrieked, flocks of birds burst into the air. A roar like a conch shell blown by a priest echoed from the jungle depths.

"Elephants," said the captain. "Here on the plains when the gods are angry they send elephants to charge through the forests, ripping up trees with their huge trunks, tossing aside their enemies."

Once the captain showed them a gharial's long snout thrust out from a stand of reeds.

"He's waiting to snap up a fish," he said. We're safe from his sharp teeth. It's his sister the crocodile you need to watch for."

The trees receded from the riverbank, leaving wide stretches of stones and parched grass. Something moved in the distance at the edge of the trees. Tej shaded her eyes against the late afternoon sun, straining to see past the sparse tree trunks.

"I think it's a rhinoceros," she breathed. "Way over there. It must be huge."

"A rhinoceros," said Ishwari, leaning into Tej to see where she was pointing. "I'd like to see a rhinoceros."

The boat drew closer, the boatman's shoulders almost motionless in the gentle current. Tej held

her breath, willing the large shape to emerge from the tangle of leaves and branches. She could make out a long head nosing along the ground, a large brown body.

"You can't tell from here," said the captain, "but if he comes near you'll see – shoulder plates, breast plates, a sword pointing off his snout. King of the plain."

Tej could see it now, outlined against trees, massive shoulders, snout, solid belly.

"Not a king at all," she said. "A queen. There's a baby beside her."

A tiny shape separated from the animal's bulk and lagged behind its mother. The boatman wedged the pole in the river bottom, holding the boat still while passengers and crew watched the pair munch grass.

"Come closer, rhinoceros," pleaded Ishwari,

“please come closer.”

“You don’t want her too close,” said the captain. “A rhinoceros can kill.”

“We’re safe enough on the boat. I just want to see her,” said Ishwari.

Lochan swung his eyes from the rhinoceros to Ishwari.

“Why are you watching me?” she asked.

“Your eyes are shining,” said Lochan.

The rhinoceros raised her head. The baby did the same. A deer bounded out from the jungle, a pack of *dhole* streaking behind, an explosion of long legs and excited yips. The rhinoceros grunted and the dogs pulled back, drawing up before her snarling. The deer fled back into the trees.

The rhinoceros began to move. The dogs leaped away, legs flashing along the grass.

“They’re running for the river,” said the boatman, poling away from the shore.

“She’s a mountain,” said Tej. “How can she move so fast?”

“Wait for a moment,” said Sundar. He gestured to the boatman to hold still. “Just for a moment. Let me check those *dhole.”*

The dogs leaped ahead, tails waving, heads skimming like arrows toward the river.

“They’ll not escape,” said the boatman. “She’s going to charge.”

In a sudden spurt the rhinoceros bounded forward, her thin head tiny against the girth of her shoulders. She rolled across the plain, monstrous, grunting. Higher and higher she loomed over the speeding dogs. Her baby galloped behind, grunting and heaving, a miniature image of its mother.

“Too dangerous here,” said the captain, motioning to the boatman to pull away.

The dogs crunched across the gravel, splashed through the shallows and plunged into the river, swimming upstream away from their pursuer. The rhinoceros thundered along the bank in front of the boat, her wheezing loud in Tej’s ears.

“Now we see her clearly,” said Singh-papa. “Armour indeed. Great folds of skin like boiled leather. Those dogs won’t survive. She has a baby to protect.”

Without breaking stride, the rhinoceros turned where the shore leveled off, trampled through the reeds into the river. She pushed after the dogs, her chest thrusting through the water. The baby followed.

“There’s Peela!”” cried Sundar. “I knew it. Peela, and he’ll be gored by the rhino!”

In a breath, he threw off his shawl and scrambled up the sloping side of the boat. Lochan grabbed at him, but he kicked him off with his foot.

“Forgive me, Lochan-ji,” he said and dropped into the water. His arms sliced through the current to the shallows, where he staggered to the bank, flailing his arms, beating his chest.

‘Hoi, rhinoceros! Hoi, you hill of baggy skin!” he shouted. “Come to me. I’m waiting for you.”

He stamped his feet, grunting in imitation of the wheezing animal.

“Rhinoceros, I am Sundar. Come to me. Leopards run from me. Bears run from me. But you are big, rhinoceros. No need to be afraid. Chase me. I’m worthy of you.”

He darted away, turned to taunt, darted away again, his body twisting in a zigzag war dance.

The rhinoceros spun in the water, waded back up into the reeds. Her tiny eyes peered at the creature bellowing and prancing on the bank.

“Sundar, come back,” shrieked Tej, almost losing her balance as she twisted on the bench. Ishwari caught her skirt to steady her.

“Hoi, rhinoceros!” Sundar called, dancing and waving between shouts. “Those dogs are puny. Not fit for you. Come to me. I’m waiting for you. Split my ribs with your spiked nose.”

“Sundar, come back!” Tej called again.

“Leave him be,” said Ishwari.

The rhinoceros mounted the bank, bunched her muscles ready to charge. Tej held her breath.

At the last moment, Sundar splashed into the water, pushed toward the boat. The animal held back, watching. The dogs, far down the river,

leaped onto the shore and disappeared into the forest.

Lochan and the captain heaved Sundar over the edge of the boat as it swung into the current and moved downstream.

“Peela was with them. I’m sure of it,” gasped Sundar.

“How could you know that?” asked Tej. “It was foolish to risk your life.”

“I’m sure,” said Sundar. “Peela was there.”

“If that’s so, then he’s where he should be,” said Singh-papa. “Dogs run in packs. It’s their nature.”

“I’m sorry I kicked you, Lochan-ji, but I had to help Peela.”

“If the rhinoceros tossed you broken to the ground, how would you search out Prem and Dalia?” asked Lochan. “Don’t forget why you’re

traveling to Harappa."

"For once let him forget," said Ishwari. "Should the boy not be praised for his courage? It's a magnificent and brave thing you did, Sundar, to turn the rhinoceros from the dogs. I feel blessed to have seen it. Ignore these others."

Tej said no more. If Sundar wanted to kill himself over a dog, that was his affair. And it was no surprise that Ishwari supported his strangeness. She was half-wild herself.

"Our last night on the river bank," said the captain the next evening. "Tomorrow we sleep at Kauri town. Then we part and it's over the plain to Harappa for you. You'll need an animal or two to bear your goods that last stretch."

"A day's journey over land?" asked Tej.

"Two at most, daughter of Daleep," said the captain. "You're a trader's daughter who likes to

cut a fine trade, are you not?”

Tej pursed her mouth, puzzled by his question.

“You’ll need all your skill in Kauri town,” the captain said. “It’s grown wealthy trading broken-down bullocks to unsuspecting travelers. I tell you this because your father honours me with his business. I don’t want to see you cheated.”

“Your advice is welcome,” said Lochan before Tej could reply. “Singh-papa knows bullocks and Tej has the skill to haggle over every fragment of cowrie shell. We’ll find a strong bullock.”

Tej smiled at Lochan’s praise. She fell into her daydream, her triumphant return to Muni village laden with riches.

Her musings were broken by a flurry of movement.

“Here, boy. Here, boy,” said a voice soft and

compelling by the fire.

Tej brought herself back to the campsite on the Vipasa, focused her eyes. Sundar knelt facing the forest, his arm stretched out toward the gloomy line of trees.

“Here, boy. Come on, Peela,” he coaxed, wagging his fingers.

The group at the fire was stiff, expectant. Lochan coughed, pressing fingers against his mouth to muffle the sound. Ishwari glanced at him, thrust up her hand for silence.

A crouched shadow moved through the bush, head down, tail up.

“Peela,” said Sundar.

He crept toward the dog, who waited, tail quivering, eyes caught by Sundar’s.

“Peela,” he said, snatching the dog into his arms.

“I knew it was you. You’ve been following us all along.”

He clutched the dog close. Peela squirmed, arched his head back to sniff Sundar’s neck.

“Peela, we missed you,” said Ishwari, scratching his ears.

“You won’t like it, Peela,” said Sundar, “but now you’ll stay on a leash.”

“I’ll get the rope. I kept it in the pack,” said Tej.

I’m holding this expedition together, she thought.

21 Knife

As the captain had promised, by evening the next day the boat was moored at Kauri town, a dusty place of narrow alleys and bullock carts jumbled along the riverbank. Disembarking, the travelers ate *chapatti* at a roadside stall and slept in a dingy rest house crammed in beside a band of puppeteers on their way to Harappa.

In the morning, the captain disappeared upriver, grateful for the purse of silver Lochan passed to him, his boat loaded with baskets of green mangoes. Tej, Singh-papa and Lochan went in

search of a bullock cart to carry them north to Harappa while Sundar and Ishwari watched over their trading goods.

“It wasn’t well-planned, to put Harappa so far from the Vipasa,” said Tej. “In Nadri town traders step from their boats right into my grandfather’s warehouses. This Harappa is a bother. Load the boat in Nadri town, unload at Kauri, load the cart at Kauri, unload at Harappa. Don’t they want our business?”

“There are more people to please than those of us who live on the Vipasa, Tej,” Lochan said, “as the people on the Iravati north of here will tell you. They’re the ones who can step from their boats into Harappa’s warehouses. When we get to Harappa you’ll see the Iravati for yourself, flowing by the walls of the city.”

Tej turned away, embarrassed.

As they walked toward the riverbank, a young

boy pushed in front of them, pointing at a bullock tethered to a stake in the ground.

“You’re offering us this animal?” said Singh-papa, running his hands over the animal’s hoof. “He needs care, not a yoke around the neck. His hoof’s infected. Give him rest and good grass, bind the wound with salve, and he’ll live to pull a cart another day”

“Yes, grandfather-ji,” said the boy by the cart, rubbing one foot with the other, his eyes seeking out a more compliant customer.

“You’re not moving,’ said Singh-papa, shaking his finger at the boy. “Do as I say. Take that animal home to rest.”

Singh-papa scowled until the boy slumped in defeat and pulled the limping bullock into a dark alley.

“Here,” said Lochan, slipping shells into the

boy's hand. "To keep your master happy."

Tej clicked her tongue.

"Soft heart, leaky purse," she said. "That boy needs to learn how to care for his animal, not how to trick gullible people into paying him for nothing."

An old man, wound in blankets in spite of the heat, watched her. His gnarled hand gestured toward a row of carts beside him.

"One of my carts will suit you well, merchant-ji," he said. "A few strings of shells, and you'll have a cart to carry your goods, and this boy to drive them."

A boy in a loin cloth, skin bared to the hot sun, bowed and folded his hands.

Tej folded her hands in response, hiding her anticipation. She flicked her blanket over her shoulder. She too was wrapped in wool in spite of

the heat, but not because her blood was thin from old age. Let them think she was a rough mountain girl, too ignorant to wear cotton in the heat or drive a good bargain.

"Two strings of shells we'll give you gladly," said Tej. "Such a strong bullock – such broad shoulders."

"No, daughter," said the old man. "Six strings at least."

"Six strings is a high price," said Tej. "I need to consult my companions."

"Of course. Of course. Take your time," said the man, pulling at his moustache to hide his satisfaction.

Tej knew he thought the gods had blessed him and sent him a fool for a customer.

She walked with Lochan and Singh-papa and the

dog across the dusty ground to the river bank.

“Remember our arrangement, everyone,” she said, when she was sure the cart man was out of hearing. “Let me handle this. Don’t look surprised at anything I say.”

“It’s all in your hands, Tej-ji,” said Lochan. “You talk. We’ll watch.”

Back at the carts Tej stood with folded hands.

“That’s settled then,” she said to the old man. “My friends have made me realise. A fine cart like this - in Harappa we’ll earn back our six strings and more when we hire it out complete with a boy.”

Shock flashed on the man’s face.

“No, no, daughter. Forgive me, but you’ve misunderstood. The cart carries your goods to Harappa and then returns. You don’t want to trouble yourself with a cart in Harappa. No place to

store it, to stable the bullock. It's part of our service. We take the carts off our clients' hands once they're in Harappa."

"No, no, grandfather," said Tej. "Don't worry about it. We're happy to keep it. Better to shelter beneath it than make a guest house rich when the rains come. Give him six strings, Lochan-ji. The bullock cart is more than worth it."

Tej's voice was high so it would carry. Heads were raised. Travelers and carters edged close to listen.

Lochan extended both arms, cowrie shells dangling from his fingers. The eyes of the cart owner gleamed. He stretched out his hand, then hesitated.

"You do understand, daughter," he said. "Once you're safe in Harappa the cart returns."

"No, I think you haven't understood me,

grandfather," said Tej. "And perhaps you don't realise that six strings is a sumptuous price. My father once paid that for six carts with woven sides and axles strong enough for mountain paths. Your cart is dainty and the boy very young, but we'll manage with them. And you can grow fat with your six strings."

"I can't allow it," said the cart owner. "You're nice people. You're my friends. I tell you frankly, this boy will be your ruin if I don't take him off your hands. String after string of shells, handfuls of silver just to feed him. Give me six strings. Go to Harappa. Send the cart back when you arrive. No cart, no boy to worry you afterward."

"This boy who eats," said Tej. "He's reliable? I suppose he is, since you're willing to spend on him."

The boy stiffened in anger, then slouched back against the cart at a look from his master.

“I have no cause for complaint,” said the old man.

“I’m sure you rely on him. We’d be heartless to tear him away from you. Singh-papa will drive for us and your boy will stay with you. A boy of such worth – three strings at least, maybe four, to hire him until the winter rains.”

The boy threw back his shoulders.

“So take away his cost, and I calculate two strings for the cart and bullock alone,” said Tej. “You keep the boy, and the cart is ours to do with as we please.”

“No, you take the boy,” said the man. “I insist. Six strings. And since I think only of your welfare, he’ll travel with his own food. Less burden for you.”

“Grandfather,” said Tej, “you’re an old man. Why am I troubling you for a cart when there are so

many others to choose from? I'll leave you to rest and I'll inquire from that family over there."

She adjusted her blanket and turned away, tipping her head for Singh-papa and Lochan to follow.

"No need to hurry," said the man. "Three strings and the cart is yours. The value is greater, but three strings, in honour of your shrewdness."

Tej shrugged, her smile serene.

"Two strings," she said. "And a packet of *mahaseer* fish, for friendship's sake. But only because I respect your age. Two strings alone for anyone else."

The old man stared at her, then spread out his arms to the grinning crowd.

"Agreed," he said, "with my blessing. I bow to your skill. An innocent face hides many things."

Tej looked back at her companions, tossing her head in victory.

“I told you I was good at this,” she murmured.

“Well done,” said Lochan, “but try not to look so pleased with yourself.”

“Follow the track straight north,” said the old man. “You’ll be in Harappa tonight.”

Their passage across the plain was steady, but the great gate had been barred when they arrived at the city. They spent the night on the beaten earth, slumped against the cartwheels, turning down offers of blankets and shelter in the low windowless huts that cluttered the plain near the entrance.

In the morning, stiff and gritty, they joined the line at the gates, craning their necks to find the top of the wall. The creaking of wheels, the scuffing of sandals on the pavement floated through the mist

as they shuffled ahead.

A robed official, smelling of starched cotton and flowery oil, probed the jars and sacks on their cart, peered into their faces.

“This is an honest city,” he said. “Give good value and you’ll do well.”

He waved his hand toward the clerk beside him, who held out an open pouch for the toll, and nodded in approval when Lochan dropped in a silver piece.

“From Nadri town, you say?” asked the official, his finger pressed to the side of his nose. “I don’t see any *mahaseer* fish in your cart.”

“I have some in my pouch,” said Lochan, placing a packet in the official’s open hand.

They passed through the gate into a street teeming with activity. Squeaking carts, shoulders

sweating under bundles of firewood and bulging sacks, swirled between walls that hid the sun and trapped the heat.

“They call it ‘Harappa the golden’ said Ishwari, balanced on top of the loaded cart, “but where’s the gold? I see high walls and people, but not much gold, unless you count arm bands and ear studs.”

“The bricks gleam like gold in the sun,” said Singh-papa. “That’s what the name means.”

“Gilding on pillars and bangles on wrists are not the only gold,” said Lochan. “Harappa’s golden if we make it so. A scribe at my knee marking down my wishes, clerks touching my feet and scurrying off with messages, a servant pouring water for me as I sit cross-legged under a fig tree - that’s the gold I’m seeking in Harappa. A cup may be clay, but it glows like gold when it’s offered with respect.”

Tej was indignant.

“My father brought you into our house and gave you servants to command. Aren’t you grateful?” she asked.

“Next to my memory of Manas Moru, your father stands highest,” said Lochan. “But sometimes a bullock wants a cart of his own to haul.”

Tej was alarmed. Lochan on his own? It mustn’t happen. Lochan’s place was in Daleep’s trading company, helping her.

“Whatever you hope to find in Harappa,” said Singh-papa, “be alert. You’re not the only ones looking for riches here. There’ll be rogues of all descriptions.”

They followed the crowd through the high-walled streets into the bazaar, a jumble of narrow lanes, haggling vendors and customers.

“Somewhere there’ll be cloth sellers,” said

Lochan. “We’ll set up by them.”

He and Singh-papa disappeared into the rows of stalls and shops. Tej and the others waited with the bullock and Peela where the crowd was thin.

“What will you take for the dog?” asked a man in a grubby shawl, prodding Peela with his walking stick.

The dog yowled and lunged. Sundar pulled back on the leash.

“He’s not for trading,” said Sundar.

Ishwari gave a sudden shout.

“Give that back!” she cried.

Tej swung round. Ishwari was lowering herself over the cart edge, pointing to the end of the alley.

“A tiny girl. She grabbed the packet right out of my hand. The dried fruit.”

The man with the stick walked away.

“Dirty little thief!” said Tej.

“I was dirty too, when I slept in the forest,” said Sundar. “And I stole to eat.”

Tej’s mouth gaped in surprise. Her eyes grew thoughtful.

“If she asked, I would have given her something,” said Ishwari.

“They were working together,” said Sundar. “Just the way Peela and I used to do. The man drew us away. The girl stole.”

“If they need it, let them enjoy it,” said Ishwari.

“I don’t see how they can, knowing they stole it,” said Tej. “Enjoy it, I mean.”

Lochan and Singh-papa returned and led them to a gap where they could wedge the cart. On one

side a boy sold embroidered cushions; on the other feathers and braided cords dangled from a wooden frame. Ishwari spread her blankets across the cart bed and Singh-papa used side-poles and one of the blankets to tie together a canopy.

"That should bring customers," said Singh-papa. "They'll see the red border and come running from curiosity."

"With Singh-papa and the dog, you and Tej will be safe," said Lochan to Ishwari. "Sundar and I'll find a place for us in a guest house and then look for news of Dalia."

The two went off, and Tej waited with Ishwari and Singh-papa by the blankets.

"Blankets," Singh-papa called out to passers-by. "Blankets from the Himalayas. Finest sheep, finest weaving."

Tej shook out a blanket to show it off.

Customers stopped, attracted by the bright blanket canopy just as Singh-papa had expected. But they came to stare, not to buy.

“Fine weaving,” said one woman, cheeks reddened, eyelids blackened with cosmetics. “You’re the weaver?” she asked Ishwari. “We don’t like these mountain designs here. Look around the other stalls and learn how we do things in Harappa. Then I'll buy your work.”

Ishwari’s nostrils flared.

“Your words are wise, Auntie,” Tej said before Ishwari could retort. ‘We’re grateful for your advice.”

“It wasn’t to sell blankets I came to Harappa anyway,” Ishwari told Tej when the woman had left. “Tomorrow Lochan and Sundar will mind the blankets, and you can come with me to find a healer.”

But when Lochan and Sundar returned to help them dismantle the display and lead the bullock to the rest house, they brought a change of plans.

"Prem and Dalia aren't in Harappa," said Lochan. "They're remembered here, but they left long ago, gone to set up trade in Sindhapur. Sindhapur's a month away, I'm told. We can leave tomorrow. Sundar and I have been to the Iravati docks and hired a boat to take us downriver. We've sold the cart to a merchant at the guest house – if the bullock is sound when he sees it, he said."

Sindhapur, thought Tej. The things I'll find in Sindhapur! My father's eyes will be round with wonder when I bring him things from Sindhapur.

Ishwari's reaction was different.

"Lochan, this is ridiculous," she said. "I'm not ready to leave Harappa. I came here to find a healer, not to leave as soon as I got here. And as far as Daleep knows, you came to find markets. He

gave no permission to travel for weeks to Sindhapur, to take his daughter into who knows what kind of danger. Forget about Sindhapur."

"It's near the western ocean," said Singh-papa, "where the water tastes of salt."

"If we leave tomorrow," said Lochan, "we'll be well on our way before the rains come, the captain says. West on the Iravati to the great Sindhu, southwest down the Sindhu to Sindhapur. People go there all the time from Harappa, he says."

"No one goes there from Muni village," said Ishwari. "Why should we? So Sundar can scold a stepfather and a mother he doesn't even remember? You're filling Sundar's head with nonsense."

"Ishwari-ji, I must go to Sindhapur," said Sundar, "but I can go alone. The rest of you sell the blankets and return to Muni village. I must go to Sindhapur, Ishwari, because Prem wears my

father's ruby on his hand. They remember it here in Harappa. It's my duty to deal with Prem."

Sindhapur. Where my knife is from, thought Tej.

"Ishwari," she said, "there's magic in Sindhapur. My knife has magic, my father believes. Maybe the healers have too."

Ishwari opened her eyes wide, and then looked away, fingering a loose tendril of her hair.

"Tej," said Lochan, "Let Ishwari decide without going on about magic."

"A month, you said?" Ishwari asked. "I suppose that's not so long."

"Tej, keep your knife close at hand if we're traveling to Sindhapur," said Singh-papa. "It'll be dangerous."

Sindhapur, where the whole world came to trade, thought Tej. Who in Muni village or Nadri

town could measure up if she went to Sindhapur? A merchant queen she would be, the fragrance of distant shores hovering above her like a queen's umbrella.

In the guest house that night, she delved in her pack for her great-grandfather's knife, pleased at the picture she would make, striding into the unknown, a weapon tucked into her sash.

The knife was gone. Slipped out of the pack unnoticed somewhere on the journey? It was days since she had checked it.

Or stolen? Sundar was a thief. Was he still stealing? Or Ishwari or Lochan or even Singh-papa? Or someone in the boat crew?

Her father would be disappointed in her. More important, was it a bad omen that it had disappeared? But omens meant little, she reminded herself, compared to hard work and good sense.

She said nothing to her companions about losing the knife, embarrassed for people to find out she had been careless.

BOOK FIVE

LOCHAN

22 Village

Was I wise to set off for several more months of traveling? So reckless, I hardly recognised myself. But I was sure Daleep would approve of our trip to Sindhapur when he learned of it. Harappa was a disappointment. But Ishwari's blankets with their strange patterns could be a success in Sindhapur where ships arrived every day loaded with goods and foreigners, and people were used to the unusual.

Once again we saw our goods loaded onto a boat, this time moored at the docks by Harappa's

north gate. This new captain's eyes were sly, his smile was a smirk as he picked his teeth with a straw, but the silver agreed upon would not be his until we reached Sindhapur, so we would be safe on our journey down the Iravati and the Sindhu.

"You should have asked me," Tej told me. "I could have found a better boat. There are feathers and I think dried blood caught in the cracks. Don't even go near those cushions on the bench, Ishwari. Sit on the bare wood."

She lowered her voice.

"And the crew that comes with it. I don't trust them."

"If your great-grandfather's knife is magic as you say, we have nothing to fear," Ishwari told Tej, her eyes scornful.

Tej sucked in her breath, looked away.

“But Tej is right, Lochan,” said Ishwari. “This boat is a poor bargain."

Her voice was sharp, but her eyes sent me a different message. My eyes spoke to her, too, but I was held back by thoughts of Daleep. Daleep and Rita, who had taken me into their household, and who treated me almost like a son. The kind of wife they had in mind for me was not Ishwari.

It was weeks now since we had left Muni village, but the conversation the evening before our departure still rang in my mind.

“A message from Mother-in-law,” Rita said. “She’s found another suitable girl.”

“It’s time to make up your mind,” Daleep said. “Don’t spend another winter in a cold bed.”

“Listen to Daleep,” Singh-papa contributed, “or you’ll end up like me, a lonely old man.”

"It's Ishwari he wants. See his eyes, getting angry?" Tej teased. "Angry because I hit on the truth. It's Ishwari."

"A good girl, Ishwari, but not for a wife," Daleep said. "A wife should be a willow, dancing in the breeze, bending, swaying, light-footed, graceful."

Rita swelled up from her cushions in anger, arms heavy across her ample body.

"Just in the beginning," Daleep added quickly. "A wife should be willowy in the beginning, until her beauty expands."

We laughed as Rita rolled her eyes.

"So, Lochan, shall I tell my mother to proceed with this girl in Nadri town?" Daleep asked.

"Leave it for now," I said, as I always did. "There are years left to marry."

"You're twenty-five and wasting time," said

Daleep. “There are men of thirty years with grandsons,” said Daleep.

There was no point telling Daleep of my hopes for Ishwari, nor telling Bunima, either.

“When I’ve left this earth, she’ll have her weaving,” her grandmother said. “She has no chance of marrying, nor would I let her if she did. The gods don’t mean her for a wife.”

But it was Ishwari I wanted, whether I could have her or no.

And now I wanted her to come with us to Sindhapur. But at the same time, I wanted her to return to Muni village. The distance to Sindhapur was too great. Travel had already shadowed her eyes and hollowed her cheeks.

“You don’t have to come to Sindhapur,” I said. “Consult the doctors here, then Singh-papa can take you back to Muni village. Sundar and Tej and

I'll go on our own."

"I can look after myself," snapped Ishwari. "Did I ask for special treatment?"

"No," I said, irritated by her surliness, "but you expect it."

The others watched, waiting for her reaction, but she looked away and said nothing.

Having an audience gave me courage to speak my mind.

"If we offer help, you're angry. If we don't offer, you're angry."

I stared at her until she met my eyes. Sundar toyed with Peela's ears and Singh-papa pushed at the jars on the boat though they were already stacked securely. Tej lifted her head to speak, but remained silent when I held up my hand. The next move was up to Ishwari.

"We're wasting time," said Ishwari. "If we're going to Sindhapur, let's go before the rains come to swamp us. But I still say the plan is foolish."

The journey was tedious, the crew surly, our skin burning from hot wind and insects. The cool promised by the black clouds in the distance drew us on, though we were nervous about the rush of water the rains would bring. Mornings at least were fresh, when the reeds at the river's edge glowed green and the sun's burn and the cries of water birds were softened by the mist.

Ishwari shifted between the splintery plank bench hanging high over the prow and the curved bottom of the boat. I avoided asking if she was comfortable. The second day she untied a pack of her trading blankets and took two to pad the bench.

"We can still sell them later," she said. "The wear will take the stiffness out."

The river stretched ahead. There was no light-hearted sharing of meals or dice-playing with this new crew. At the end of the day they set out tasteless porridge and tough chapattis, ignoring Singh-papa's offers to help, muttering among themselves.

"Do you think, Captain-ji, we'll reach Sindhapur before the rains?" asked Tej.

The captain shrugged, a straw hanging from the corner of his mouth.

"Will it be safe on the river if the rains pound down?" asked Ishwari.

"Let the captain worry about that," I said. 'It's his job."

The captain's teeth clamped tight around the straw, his lips curled into a sneer that made me uneasy.

We stopped for a day at the village where the Iravati curved into the wide Sindhu.

“A new journey begins here,” Singh-papa said. “Offer gratitude to the Iravati for carrying us this far and call on the Sindhu to bear us safely all the way to Sindhapur.”

Tej slipped a garland of flowers into the water, where it lay crumpled on the surface for a moment and then, caught by the current, swept out of view.

“Can we buy a few things in the village that taste good?” said Ishwari. “Eating has been a chore since we left Harappa.”

I fished in the packs for my supply of shells, careful to hide what I did from the crew. Tej and I traded at a sweets stall for sesame candy and chunks of brown *jaggary* sprinkled with nuts. The treats were costly in spite of Tej’s bargaining skill.

“The merchants are greedy here,” she said.

“What will they be like in Sindhapur?”

“I never turn down a sweet,” said the captain when we offered some to him.

He and his fellows grinned at each other, secretive and sly. Each day I trusted them less. They knew the river well, and needed to see us safe to Sindhapur if they wanted their pay. But I would be glad to be finished with them.

The gods give us what we ask for, but not always in the form we expect. We were rid of the river men sooner than I expected.

The Sindhu, though still wide, was shrunken in the heat, its rocky edges exposed and sunbaked, the undergrowth shrivelled where the forest thinned. The clouds lurking in the distance moved closer, covering the sky, turning the water heavy and brown. Rain fell in short bursts, then cleared.

“The rains are late,” said Singh-papa, “and thin.

When the gods withhold the floods, the plains don't eat."

Then one day the rain poured down without stopping. The water smacked us to the floor of the boat, pounded our ears, dissolved trees and river into a blur. I pressed with the others under the framework where our trades goods were protected, waiting for the water's force to ease, but instead it grew stronger.

The captain gestured, and crew members slammed steering poles into the riverbed, steering the boat to the bank.

"Jump out before we're swamped," shouted the captain above the thudding of the rain.

"Our goods!" cried Tej.

"We'll get them off. We're used to this. Just let us moor the boat first," said the captain. "Run fast. Get above the water line. The river might flood."

I grabbed Ishwari's shoulder and we hobbled toward the trees. The others followed, bent under the driving rain, Peela pulling ahead on his rope. We knew about floods. They could come in an instant, blotting out everything in their path. We huddled at the edge of the forest, peering through the gushing water at the dim shapes of the boat and the crew.

"What's taking them so long?" asked Tej. "I can't see through the rain."

"By all the gods!" said Singh-papa. "They're leaving! They've deceived us."

He pointed to the shore.

"They're pulling away," he said. "They're no better than pirates. They've stranded us here and stolen our goods."

I strained my eyes through the veil of water. It was true. The gap between the boat and the shore

was widening.

“Come back!” shouted Tej. “You have our stuff. My father’s seal. Come back!”

She ran toward the river, waving her arms. Her shawl slipped from her shoulders and dragged in the muddy grass. She tripped and fell full length, her face slamming into the ground, her hands clawing the mud, her hair clinging water-logged to her back.

“They can’t do this,” she sobbed as she pulled herself up.

The rest of us stood dazed, the rain bouncing off our ankles in muddy spatters.

“I knew they were plotting, but I didn’t expect this,” I said, springing back as Tej rushed toward me, her eyes flashing. “I still have the silver I was to pay them in Sindhapur.”

“It’s your fault, Lochan,” said Tej. “You were too trusting. You stuck me by a bullock cart hawking blankets when I should have been making arrangements.”

“Forget about fault,” said Ishwari. “Things always go wrong. You’ve a lot to learn if you don’t know that.”

“All our goods gone,” said Tej. “Our food, blankets, the tiger seal. My father expected Lochan to keep us safe.”

“There’s food in the forest,” said Sundar. “Don’t worry about starving.”

“Your father’s suffered worse than this, Tej-ji. “He knows the dangers. Praise the gods that we’re not lost in a mountain blizzard,” said Singh-papa.

“That’s not the point,” cried Tej, beating the air with her fist. “The point is they’ve robbed and cheated us.”

“Tej,” said Ishwari, “flinging your arms and weeping doesn’t help. Give us an idea of what to do, or be silent.”

Tej lifted her chin, her mouth pursed, her cheeks sucked in, and stared at us, one by one. We huddled under a tree, the air filled with the rush of water. Ishwari and Sundar leaned against the trunk, the dog at their feet. Singh-papa prowled the clearing by our tree, beating the undergrowth with a stick.

“We might not be the only creatures sheltering here,” he said.

Tej sniffed.

“You want my idea, Ishwari. Here it is,” she said. “We start walking.”

I caught Ishwari’s eye and raised my eyebrow. Ishwari smiled and shrugged. Tej was herself again.

“Singh-papa has a stick. We all should find one,” I said.

“And Tej has her knife,” said Ishwari. “Magic or not it can surely cut.”

Tej looked away.

“There’s no knife,” she said in a low voice. “It’s been gone since before Harappa.”

Her tone lifted.

“But I have nuts and raisins tied in my sash. We’ll have something to eat, at least.”

“I have my two blankets,” said Ishwari. “If the rain ever stops, we can dry them.”

“I have my water pot,” said Sundar. He lifted it on the cord at his waist.

“There are shells in my pouch,” I said, “and the silver. We can trade if we find anyone to trade

with. We'll walk downriver, but keep to the trees in case the pirates come back for their payment. We should come to a village soon. We haven't passed one for days.

We set out through the trees, pacing ourselves to Ishwari's uneven gait. The rain stopped and the sun beat down through the thick air.

"At least in the rain it was cooler," said Ishwari. "Now it's like breathing steam."

"The plains in rainy season," said Tej. "It's what to expect."

She bloomed with confidence once more. Now that we were moving and Ishwari's complaining habit had returned, life felt normal again.

We pushed through heat into the afternoon. The air grew heavier as the sun curved downward, and no cooler. Ishwari sank to the ground.

“Go ahead and find a village. I’ll follow later,” she said.

We all sat, glad of the excuse, and poured water down our throats from Sundar’s water pot.

The way became marshy. Singh-papa led us to higher ground. The land, brown and dry only that morning, was tinged with life, turning green as we watched. Black clouds formed again in the sky, but no rain fell to cool the sweat in our eyes.

I dragged my hand across the scarred trunk of a date palm, the roughness pleasant on my sweaty fingers. Far above my head, dark fruit clustered in a great plume of leaves. I set my foot on the spreading base.

“Sundar,” I said, “maybe you can wriggle up to the dates if I support you.”

“There’s another palm over there, not so tall,” said Ishwari. “Try it instead.”

"No need," said Singh-papa, pointing ahead with his stick. "There's a path here, through the trees. If it leads to a village, there'll be dates already harvested and more besides."

The forest path was gloomy, the sun's glare dulled by leaves. The fall of our feet and the occasional bird or monkey screech broke the heavy silence. Sundar halted, held up his hand, bent his head toward a thumping deep in the forest.

Drummers swung into view through the trees, beating on both ends of the drums hanging from their necks, feet slapping in rhythm in the mud. A funeral procession, for behind them hovered a bier supported on the shoulders of four men in white *dhoti*s, the cloth-wound body almost buried under mounds of flowers.

We slipped off the path, bowed and folded our hands as they passed. Sundar held tight to the leash, clamped his hands around Peela's jaw to

keep the dog from barking. Behind the drums, the bier, the jostling crowd of mourners, the shouts guiding the bearers over the rough ground, came two men and a woman. The woman, plump and smooth-skinned, her hair loose and dusty, her shawl crumpled, threw up her arms, stumbled to a stop.

"My dear one is gone. The gods have taken her," she cried, her head flung back.

The two young men stood beside her, arms dangling, faces helpless.

"It was her time," said another woman. "Let her go in peace. Don't hold her back."

The grieving woman moved forward, her eyes locking on ours for an instant. The procession disappeared toward the river, her keening clear above the drums.

We continued on the path, passing from the

gloom into a field surrounded by a fence that sagged toward the rutted earth. At the far corner, a man steered a plough behind two bullocks, his arms spread wide on the handles. We picked our way toward him along the fence, stepping where patches of weeds kept our feet from sinking into the mud.

The man left the plough and walked to the wild olive shrub by the fence, wiping his dripping face and chest with the cloth from his head, knocking yellow blossoms to the ground as he lifted a clay jug from the undergrowth.

"Do you need water?" he asked.

"Is the village close?" I asked.

"Over the rise," he said, "but there's no-one there to greet you. You must have met them, sending the old grandmother on her way."

"We saw," I said. "May the gods receive her. And may the village find peace. It's a great loss, to lose

the wisdom of an elder."

"For the old woman, her end was welcome," said the man, wiping his face again. "And I tell you frankly, we had little knowledge of her in the village. She was Seema's concern, and it's Seema who mourns her."

He slid the jar back under the leaves, hit the flanks of the bullocks, and grasped the handles of the plough. The great humped animals plodded off, folds of skin flapping beneath their jaws.

"Now if you permit I'll finish my work," he said, "before the rain returns to make the earth soggy. Rest by the trees till they come."

We flopped to the ground. I drowsed against a tree trunk, relieved to leave our fate to the gods. The boat crew's treachery, our hopelessness as we crouched in the rain watching our wealth disappear, seemed part of the distant past. All the mattered now was sleep.

23 Welcome

I awoke to a hard nudge from Tej and the sound of voices.

“I should never have doubted the gods,” a woman said. “They’ve brought my Didi back to me. It was your duty, my sons, to remind me to trust in them.”

The woman from the funeral procession looked down at us. Seema, the ploughman had said.

“At last you’ve reached your home,” she said,

looking at Ishwari. “I’ve kept my house ready for you.”

Ishwari’s mouth opened and closed. I sat up straight.

“Your kindness is welcome, but you’ve mistaken us for others,” I said. “We’re traders, traveling for the house of Daleep. Some food and a rest in the shade and, if the gods see fit, a carter going to Sindhapur is what we ask.”

Seema shrugged her shoulders, tipped her chin.

“For the rest of you, go or stay. It’s up to you,” she said. “But for this poor bent woman the gods have brought to my threshold, I take her into my heart. It’s my duty to care for her. ”

“She’s our friend and travels with us,” said Sundar, pushing himself in front of Ishwari, urging Peela close.

The woman ignored him.

“Come with me, poor girl,” she said, knotting her tangled hair at the nape of her neck, holding out her hand to Ishwari. “I’ll call you Didi, just like the old one. The gods take away one Didi and bring me another. Help her up, my sons. Be careful of her back. Is it very painful, Didi?”

The sons moved toward Ishwari. I sprang to my feet, spreading my arms to block them. Sundar raised his fists, flexed his knees.

“Keep back, Ishwari,” he said.

“Wait, Sundar,” said Ishwari. “At least let me find out what this is about.”

‘Ishwari,” I said. “You’re Ishwari, not Didi. Something’s not right here.”

“Come, Didi,” said the woman. “The servant has food ready. Bring your friends if you wish. They’ll

see how high you are in my heart."

The sons pulled at Ishwari's arms. Ishwari shook them off.

"Leave me free," she said.

The sons stared at their mother, still gripping Ishwari's arms.

Peela growled. Sundar cried out, drew his arm to strike, but I held him back, thrusting myself in front of his fist. Tej threw herself down, locking her arms around Ishwari's waist, digging her heels into the dirt.

"I've got you, Ishwari," she said. "Hold on to me."

Singh-papa thumped his walking staff on the ground.

"Be still, all of you!" he shouted, swinging the stick in an arc before him. "Calm yourselves," he

said in a quieter voice, as hands were lowered and the pulling and pushing stopped.

Across the field, the ploughman guided his bullocks, paying us no attention. Returning mourners appeared on the path, jostling, pressing close. The woman's strange behaviour filled the welcoming smiles with menace. Had we happened on a bandit village? Alien, far from mountain streams and familiar things, how could we know what customs the people of this hot flat land might have?

"We must go," said Tej. "We're expected at the river. My father's boat will come soon."

The sons rolled their eyes, seeing this for the lie it was.

"Eat first," said Seema. "A father, if there is a father, won't forgive us if we send you to him hungry."

Singh-papa watched me, waiting for my answer. Tej waited too, hands on her hips, head thrust back. Sundar played with Peela's leash.

Ishwari clutched her arms across her chest.

"I'll go with Seema," she said. "You go on to Sindhapur."

My mind turned bleak. Sindhapur had no appeal without Ishwari.

"You insist, and so we'll eat with you," I said to Seema. "And then we'll leave. All of us."

Seema was strange, but not evil, I thought.

The village was large, its buildings scattered across the landscape. Walls were smooth plaster, windows barred, and verandahs shaded by over-hanging thatch. Cows wandered in the muddy street. A goat was tethered to a verandah post.

Seema's house was larger than the others. A

mango tree hung with yellow fruit reached above the roof, the stone platform that circled the trunk gloomy under the thick leaves.

Seema clapped her hands and called out, “Oil in the little jar – bring it.”

We waited in silence. A servant glided through the entrance, steadying a rounded jar on her palm.

“This is almost the last,” said the servant.

“Never mind,” said Seema. “The seeds have been sent to the mill. Soon they’ll send us more oil than we know what to do with.”

Seema took the pot and beckoned to Ishwari.

“Come, Didi,” she said. “Enter and give this house your blessing.”

One of the brothers steered Ishwari by the shoulder up the step and across the verandah.

Ishwari hesitated, then hitched up her patterned blanket and strode through the opening, rocking on uneven legs. The rest of us clustered at the door looking in, like devotees attending a sage.

Seema clapped again. The servant brought a red cloth, spread it on a *charpoy* by the wall, arranged cushions at the back.

"Sit, Didi," said Seema.

The brothers pressed Ishwari onto the seat. The servant set down a basin of water steaming with the fragrance of *jatamansi* plants and mountain leaves. She rinsed the caked mud from Ishwari's feet and rubbed them with oil from the jar. I remembered digging *jatamansi* with Ishwari by a mountain stream, rocks digging into my knees, the fragrance of the roots lingering on my hands.

Ishwari caught my eye. She remembered too.

A servant sent the rest of us to the side of the

house, where we sluiced the mud off our feet with water dipped from a bucket.

"What's happening here?" asked Tej. "How does Seema know Ishwari?"

"Ishwari's never seen her before, I'm sure," I whispered.

It was best to keep our speech to ourselves. There was strangeness in the heavy air, as thick as the moisture clinging to our skin.

"Seema serves the gods by serving Ishwari," Singh-papa's voice boomed out as we climbed back on the verandah. Singh-papa was too honest to be secretive.

"Old man, you're correct," said Seema, looking up from the *charpoy* where she sat beside Ishwari. A transformed Ishwari, with fresh clothes, oiled hair and a golden nose-ring. Her blankets, grubby and familiar, were folded over her lap, out of place in

the midst of her finery.

"Sit and eat," said Seema. "Then I'll tell you why I love the gods."

The servant set lamps in the wall niches, brought palm leaf plates of rice and lentils and melting ghee. Ishwari's plate was bronze, and Seema watched while she ate, adding more food with her own hand until Ishwari spread her fingers in protest. Filled with food and rinsed clean with water brought by the servant, we sat cross-legged, waiting for Seema's story.

"I'll tell you a tale of the gods and their power that will give you long life just to hear it," said Seema.

Her bangles clattered as she extended her arm toward the two young men sitting at her feet, the fall of hair on their forehead, the drape of their *dhoti*s identical.

“These sons of mine,” she said. “You see them here, strong-shouldered, bright-eyed like two hawks on one tree branch. But it was not always so.”

The sons tipped their heads, murmured in agreement.

“When these boys were born – in that room there, through the bead curtain – I had no idea the midwife was a demon, not a woman. Two children were born. I saw them both bathed and wrapped. But when she carried them to their father, there was only one.

“‘We have a fine child to care for us in our old age,’ my husband said.

“‘But there were two,’ I said.

“‘The other is no more,’ the demon said. ‘Don’t upset yourself. Be content with one child.’

“But I was a mother, and I knew the child was still alive. And later, my servant woman – the same who brought our meal and is a grandmother now – told me what she suspected. The demon midwife had hidden my second son in the cowshed and carried him away at the end of the day.

“I searched for him, I asked everywhere, but no gossip in the market place, no traveler on the Sindhu, no forest dweller had news of a demon who stole away children. So while I watched one child grow plump and sturdy-footed, I yearned for one other in my heart.

“One day the goddess, who is a mother too, heard my prayers and sent a beggar-woman to sit at our gate. I went to her with *chapattis* and vegetables and a clay pot of yogurt seeping with moisture, and my little boy trotting behind with a jug of water.

“‘A fine boy you have,’ she said. ‘But is one boy

sufficient? I can tell you of another boy, face broad as the moon just like this one. Deep in the forest, in the charcoal burners' village.'

"So to the charcoal burners I went. And deep in the forest, just as the woman had told me, I found my son. His beauty was hidden behind his blackened face, but I knew him. The charcoal burners wept, but didn't deny the truth. So I had my son back, and if they used the gold I gave to steal another child, it wasn't my affair. When I brought the found son and the old son together to my husband, he saw two moon faces, two heads of hair smoothed on two foreheads, two sashes twisted over round child bellies, and he knew the found one for his second son. Twins, as you see them today. Their father went to the gods long ago, and now these two boys are my strength."

The boys folded their hands and bowed to their mother and the rest of us.

“In gratitude to the goddess,” said Seema, “I took the old beggar woman into this house, dressed her in silk, sat her on cushions and fed her rice and roasted fowl and pastries dipped in honey till she passed to the next life.

“‘Serve another helpless soul,’ Didi told me as she died, and so my servant brought me another Didi, blinded from the fire that killed her family. Now my second Didi’s breath has left her body and my third Didi has come.”

She patted Ishwari’s hand.

“The goddess has sent you,” she said, “with your twisted back. By her wish I’ll care for you until your life ends or mine does.”

Ishwari placed her palms together and smiled. I waited for her to refuse, to protest that her back was hers to manage, as she always told us, but she said nothing.

“Seema-ji,” I said, “your offer is gracious but we’re on our way to Sindhapur. Even with our goods stolen, we have business there, and Ishwari still has two of her blankets to trade.”

“You’re the one set on Sindhapur,” said Ishwari. “If Seema-ji wishes it, I’m happy to stay here.”

I hardly recognised her. She was wiping me out of her future with no hesitation. I turned away.

“We’ll take your blankets and sell them for you, Ishwari,” said Sundar.

Ishwari pulled a blanket close around her, the red and black figures vivid in spite of the rain and spattered mud.

“You don’t need those blankets here, my new Didi,” said Seema. “I’ll keep you in silk and cotton so fine it floats in the air. And rainbow colours that glow like light, much better than that garish red.”

Good, I thought. Ishwari won't allow that. She can't bear it when her weaving's not respected.

But Ishwari let Seema's words pass unchallenged. She stood, shook out the blankets, re-folded them and set them in Tej's lap.

"Take them," she said. "I've no use for them anymore."

"Ishwari, what are you doing?" I asked. "Your blankets – you worked hard on them. And we're looking for a healer for your back in Sindhapur. Why are you forgetting?"

"That's in the past," she said. "I have a life with Seema now."

The self-satisfied smile on Seema's face brought bile to my mouth.

"Consider carefully, Ishwari-ji," said Singh-papa. "The rain, the heat, those godforsaken thieving river

men, perhaps they've upset you, pushed you to this."

"Singh-papa, I have considered carefully. I'll stay with Seema. The rest of you go where you wish. It's not my concern anymore."

"Ishwari, please," I said. "You and I - the two of us - aren't we just waiting for your grandmother's permission? And Daleep's?"

"You never told me so, Lochan," she said. "And it doesn't matter now."

"You knew my hope," I said. "What words did we need?"

"I knew you were prepared to take me in spite of my back," said Ishwari. "Seema wants me here because of my back. Not in spite of. Because of. I like that. No more hiding what I am."

Tej snickered, then put a hand to her mouth, embarrassed.

“You’re the one who thinks about your hump all the time,” she said. “We don’t.”

“We’ll leave now,” I said, eager to put the separation behind me. When a tooth throbbed, one quick tug was best.

“Yes,” said Seema.” You’ve a long way to go, and I’ve no cart to spare for you.”

She made no offer of a place by the hearth for the night. She wanted us away from Ishwari. The servant gave us a bundle of food, placing her fingers on her lips as she slipped in a set of fire sticks.

“This is a mistake,” I said to Ishwari.

“Don’t part in anger,” said Singh-papa. “Ishwari-ji, with your permission we’ll continue our journey. Keep us in your heart.”

“Ishwari, it’s strange to see you under a roof

without a loom," Tej said.

Ishwari caressed Peela's head when Sundar nudged him close.

"There's only sky here," he said. "No mountains to watch over you. But easier for you to walk."

I felt empty as we walked along the track back to the river and found an open spot to build a fire for the night. I had thought my journey was for Sundar and setting things right with Dalia. Now I understood it was Ishwari who shaped my days.

For several mornings, we rose cramped and sore from the ground and plodded through mud and rain and sometimes sun. At night we slept under trees, keeping watch by turns, though Singh-papa stayed awake more than his share.

"A rest is as good as a nap for me," he said. "I'm too old to need much sleep."

Peela strained at his leash, ears flicking toward the shrieks and rustlings in the jungle. Deer gazed from the gloom, an occasional snake coiled across the track. Sometimes boats swept by, voices carrying across the water. We waved and let them pass, cautious of unknown river men after our recent experience.

We turned along a track so deep in water we needed sticks to propel ourselves forward, and found another village, fields clumped with wet earth, wooden houses, thatched roofs. A woman twirled her spinning stick on a low verandah, stretching a lump of cotton into thread.

“We’re travelers, hungry from the road,” I said. “We’ll trade our labour for food, if there’s work to do.”

“First sit and rest,” she said, lifting a cloth from a jug behind her, pouring water into our cupped hands.

We slurped what we could before it splashed to the ground.

“No help needed here,” she said, “but follow the track for a time and you’ll find the grinding mill. They could use a strong back or two. We’re all waiting for our oil”

Her mention of backs reminded me of Ishwari.

For half a day more we slogged on, peering ahead for the village the woman had promised. The air dripped with rain, then steamed when the sun broke through. My toes were bruised from hidden roots, my head ached from hunger and from clamping my teeth against the midges that clogged the air.

We found the village just as the sky clouded over again. I approached the row of houses with visions of hot food and shelter, but the sullen faces of the children watching were as desolate as the soggy fields and grey sky.

24 Pots for Weapons

An empty track by a sluggish stream, a cluster of children on a verandah step, a crow cawing in the trees behind the houses. The children stared, their breathing loud in the silence.

No one approached us.

“Hoi, *bachu,* bring your father,” I called to the biggest boy, who was rolling a stone from foot to foot with muddy toes.

We stepped closer. Peela strained at his leash.

"*Dhole*! *Dhole*!" the boy cried, raising a rock in his hand.

His companions splashed through the puddles, pelting us with stones and handfuls of mud. Something grazed my cheek. I tasted earth at the side of my mouth.

"Leave. Go away. No strangers wanted here," the boy shouted.

Sundar backed off, hauling a snarling Peela by the rope.

"Go away! Go away!" the children chanted.

A small girl with sagging skirt appeared at the blue-framed door of another house, the biggest house, set apart from the others.

"Ma! Ma!" she cried.

A woman looked out through the door, her eyes staring like her child's. Several boys were in the

shadow behind her.

“Show respect to visitors!” she called to the children in the lane, who jeered as they ran away, hooting and waving their arms.

“You’ll find no fathers here, and no decent welcome except in my house, where we know what’s proper,” she said. “Fatherless sons and sonless grandfathers, that’s all this village has. But I’ll give you what welcome I can. I’m called Ghani-ma”

We sat on the step. The little girl and her brothers cowered against the wall, eying Peela who stood alert, panting through his open mouth. Sundar rubbed the dog’s ears.

“He’s a protector dog, and he’s on a leash,” said Sundar. “He won’t hurt you.”

“A few weeks ago we would have been glad of him, and more like him,” said Ghani-ma. “Bandits

came out of the forest, drove away our cattle. Our men went after them and never came back."

"Killed?" asked Tej.

"My husband was. I saw him buried myself. The others – I believe they're running now with the bandits. They're all *dacoits* together. It was planned."

"What do you mean?" asked Tej.

"One day, an arrow twanged from nowhere into the dirt right beside that step," said Ghani-ma. "It was a message to our house. Leave or die. And sure enough, a few days later my husband was pierced by another arrow as he walked on the track. I wasn't surprised. They've always hated us. Ever since the city gave my grandfather-in-law the oil mill to run."

"It was all *dacoits* before then, I suppose," said Singh-papa

"Correct," said Ghani-ma. "All bandits. This was a village of bandits, and they were a terror to the countryside. Then Sindhapur city stretched out its arm and scattered them, sent my husband's grandfather to watch over the wheat and mustard fields and operate the oil press. And our family's done its duty, our mill's sought out by the entire district. But now the *dacoits* have grown bold again, slinking from the forest to rob us of our wheat. And murder my husband."

"But whose mill was it to begin with?" asked Tej. "Wasn't it theirs?"

Ghani-ma's face stiffened. I thrust my chin out at Tej, warning her to be silent.

"*Dacoits* are *dacoits*," said Ghani-ma, shrugging. "It's best to finish them off so honest mill owners can sleep at night. My neighbours, they're creatures of the dark. During the day, the women are alone, crying that *dacoits* have murdered their

husbands and left them widows. But I see their children's bellies fat with *ghee*, I smell roasting meat, and at night I see the shadows of their men steal across the verandahs. The upright man, the father of eyes. children, they killed. The others thieve and kill with the *dacoits*."

Further up the track, two of the boys who had flung stones at us raced out of a house. Their cheeks were round, their hair shiny, while Ghani-ma's children stared from sunken eyes. I thought the woman spoke the truth.

"Our bullocks are stolen, but the mustard seeds still sit, waiting for grinding. The village gloats to see us brought low, when before they touched our feet for favour. Soon I'll take the children to my parents' village, though how they'll feed us I don't know. Then the bandits can have it all."

"We can help you if you have a little food to give us strength," I said.

“Rice and beans,” she said. “No milk without a cow. No fruit. The jungle’s full of fruit, but full of these ruffians, too. Still I can fill your stomachs. And if you can turn the grinding stone in place of the bullocks, that’s all to the good.”

She brought us lentils and rice, portioned on a platter into four neat piles, and a mound in the dirt for Peela. After the meal, her children trailing behind, she took us across the muddy yard to a thatched building painted white and blue like the house. Unknotting the rope that held the door shut, she led us into a room pungent with mustard, the packed-earth floor dry and cool.

In the dull light creeping through the barred window, I made out the huge mortar, a hollowed tree trunk high as my hips and wide enough for a half-grown child to lie across. The pestle, a thin tree trunk twice my height, leaned from inside the hollow, fastened to a sledge piled with slabs of rock. The sledge poles lay on the floor, empty of

the sinewy bullock shoulders they were designed for.

Ghani-ma hefted a sack, poured the contents into the depths of the mortar and along the rim. Mustard seeds, streaming from the bag like black syrup. She tightened the knot that joined the pestle to the sledge.

She looked at Tej.

“The men will pull, I’ll pour, if you could kindly sit with my boy on the sledge,” she said.

The oldest boy helped Tej settle against the stone, then crouched down beside her.

“The weight is good,” said Ghani-ma. “The pestle will grind well.”

Singh-papa stood between the poles like one of the missing bullocks, the yoke padded with his shawl across his chest. Sundar and I roped ourselves

to the sides. We thrust our bodies ahead. but the sledge sat solid as if glued to the floor. We strained our shoulders, dug our feet into the dirt, and finally the sledge slid forward, pulling the pestle upright. We pressed on, our progress jerky but smoothing as we went, until the sledge had completed a circle around the mortar. The tall pestle spun, crunching the seeds.

After a few turns, Ghani-ma raised her hand.

“Stop!” she called.

I sagged in relief, exhausted and dizzy from walking in circles. She sprinkled water over the seeds.

“Another round,” she said.

We pulled, then stopped, pulled, then stopped again. She dug at the mass of seeds with a pointed stick. Sundar slipped from his bindings to help her, but I wilted to the floor, head pounding, chest bruised.

“You shouldn’t be doing this, Singh-papa,” I

panted during one of the pauses. “This is work for foolish young men.”

“Leave me to decide,” he said, flexing his shoulders.

The rain stopped. Rays of afternoon sun crept through the window bars. Outside the open door, village children and some of their mothers gathered, peering into the gloom of the mill room. Peela lunged at the first few, held inside by the rope Sundar tied to the wall, then spent the rest of the afternoon curled on a pile of empty sacks, his throat rumbling.

We pushed on. My world was reduced to the path circling under my feet, a cloak of sweat, a burning where the rope caught my chest.

As dusk approached, Ghani-ma dipped a cloth a final time into the mortar and squeezed the last of the oil into a basin. Four fat oil jars, filled and stoppered, and several sacks of oil cake stood by

the wall.

I averted my eyes from the bags of seed still waiting for the grinder.

“We’ll eat now,” said Ghani-ma. “The bathing place is in the back.”

We filed out of the hut. Ghani-ma knotted the door shut.

“Play your games here by the door,” she told two of her boys, “in case someone wants to try these knots. I’ll bring you food.”

Our audience broke up and straggled down the track as we disappeared into the house. I washed, but had to wrap on the shawl and *dhoti* I had worn for days, now stained and smelling of oil.

When the night was black, Ghani-ma set a plan in motion.

“Hide in the house,” she told her little daughter.

“I want people to think we’ve lost you.”

“Take a lamp and search to the end of the village,” she told the boys. “Pretend to look for her. Shout for her and call attention to yourselves, away from us and our business at the oil press.”

The rest of us followed Ghani-ma to the oil press shed, through darkness so thick we held hands to avoid losing our way. Ghani-ma fumbled with the knots and eased open the door, stiffening at every creak. At the other end of the track, the boys’ lamp flickered.

“Little sister! Little sister! Where are you?” they called, their voices shrill. “You can come home now. You won’t be punished.”

The darkness rippled at doors as people peered out.

“Quick!” whispered Ghani-ma. “Roll the oil to the house. They’ll steal it tonight if we don’t.”

I took the sacks of oil cake on my back. The others twisted the huge oil jars through the mud and across the verandah.

“Little sister, please come,” the boys shouted, drowning out our thumps and clatters.

“It’s the *dacoits* you’re expecting?” I murmured to Ghani-ma, when we were safely back in the barred and shuttered house.

“The *dacoits*,” she said, “or their village brothers. When they slip back with cow’s milk for their children and hear there’s oil pressed, they’ll help themselves to it.”

We kept watch by turn until dawn, but only insects and night birds disturbed the quiet.

We worked the mill for another day. And another.

“You’ll not lose by helping us,” said Ghani-ma.

“Half the seed cake will be yours. In Sindhapur, it will make you rich.”

“So far they haven’t come for the oil,” I said, “but tonight or tomorrow or the next night they will.”

“I know it,” said Ghani-ma.

“And next year, and the next, even if you find a way to operate the mill on your own,” I said.

“You’re looking too far ahead,” she said. “I’ve the oil we’ve pressed these past few days to think about now.”

“Ghani-ma, at least we can try to frighten them off,” I said. “Tonight and every night until they come, we’ll be ready for them. You have spare rope in the mill hut, and sticks and stones are free for the taking. That’s all we need.”

The village stretched along a narrow stream that

flowed into the Sindhu a journey of days to the south. The mill building stood in the mud between Ghani-ma's house and another. There were four of us from Muni village, five from Ghani-ma's family, though four of them were still children and one of them tiny. Nine people and one dog against a hostile village and a forest of bandits.

"When they come, they'll head for the door of the mill where they think the oil is," I said. "They don't know we're hiding it in the house."

In the twilight, I sent the children outside with Peela.

"Chase your ball by the neighbour's house," I said. "Crash into their wall, thump their verandah."

So when Sundar and Singh-papa drove four stakes into the ground, one of them right by the neighbour's wall, barks, crashes and shouts drowned out the pounding of the mallet. Across the passages on either side of the mill, where I

expected the robbers would run in panic, we laid rope, knotting one end to the top of a stake, leaving the other loose but looped and ready. We gathered in the house.

"Are you strong enough to work the ropes?" I asked Ghani-ma's younger sons.

"I'm ten and he's eleven," said the one. "We're strong as men, my father said."

I looked at their thin arms and delicate necks.

"For certain, your courage is as strong as a man's," I said. "One of you on each side. Slip the rope over the stake to trip them when they try to escape."

I turned to the oldest son, who had a line of black fuzz above his lip and muscles beginning to show in his shoulders. "The dog is your responsibility," I told him. "Keep him quiet. Hold him down when they come. Don't let him move.

Your sister must help to clamp his jaw shut."

The little girl grinned with pride.

The two boys left to wait by the stakes at either side of the mill. Tej stayed in the house, tending a lamp hidden beneath a blanket. The rest of us crept to the river bank, dragging a collection of pots.

"Don't let them bang," I said. "Sundar, help Ghani-ma carry the cauldron."

"I brought this with me when I was married," said Ghani-ma. "Bronze from the metal workers in Sindhapur. My mother didn't give it to me for a weapon."

"If our plan works, you can fry sweets in it tomorrow," I said.

25 One-Cart Wagon Train

We waited in the dark, crouched in the reeds at the edge of the stream. A frog croaked beside me, so near I jerked in surprise. A croak rose on the other side, then one behind me. Like frog priests, chanting blessings over us as we sat in silence. There was thick black in front of my eyes, or sometimes, when the clouds shifted, the vague outline of building shapes. The brother and sister gripped Peela while Sundar scratched the dog's neck. My legs shivered on the soggy ground.

Any moment *dacoits* could creep from the forest

into the village, break open the door of the oil mill. But nothing broke the tension. Then a rumble came deep from Peela's throat. Sundar grasped my shoulder, and the hairs on my arms shot up, prickling the skin. The little girl pressed the dog's head to her midriff, bent over him, muffling his growl. They were coming.

My thoughts flew to Ghani-ma's younger sons. Were they poised and silent by their stakes? Or had they fallen asleep, slumped and snoring, easy prey for the robbers?

A rustling and a faint clatter floated across the track to the reeds. The *dacoits* were at the oil press door.

"Now!" I ordered.

Peela's jaws exploded in barks. The brass pot clanged as Ghani-ma slammed rocks against it.

"Thieves! Thieves!" she yelled as both arms

pumped.

Her son crashed water jars together, her daughter's toy whistle shrilled, Singh-papa bellowed.

Sundar lurched to his feet, dragged up the bank by the dog. Ghani-ma's son, Singh-papa and I charged beside him, shrieking, flinging rocks from pouches at our hips. A light appeared ahead. Tej had uncovered the lamp.

"Over here," cried Tej's voice from the verandah. The beam of light swept through the dark, guiding us to the mill, although our direction was clear from the angry shouting of the intruders.

Shapes pulled away from the door, moved to both sides of the mill. Feet slapped on the muddy ground, splashed through puddles. Singh-papa and Sundar raced after them on one side, Ghani-ma's son and I on the other. By now the younger sons should have slipped the loops over the stakes and

pulled the ropes tight.

I heard gasps of exertion, saw two dark figures hurtle into the passage between Ghani-ma's house and the mill, untouched by the stones we hurled after them. Tej pushed forward, her lamp casting shadowy light on the scene ahead.

Then the rope did its work. A robber tripped, fell to the ground, staggered to his feet. The man behind leaped to avoid the rope stretched at ankle height, then slammed against the back of the man still struggling to stand up. I strained forward, willed my thighs to stretch further, lift higher. I lunged at the *dacoit,* grasping his ankle. He wrenched it out of my hand in a one-legged spin, balancing with flailing arms to slam his foot into my stomach. I crashed into the ground, my ears ringing from the impact.

With a whoop of fury, Ghani-ma's oldest son hurtled through the air, throwing the man face

down in the mud. I shrieked for Singh-papa and Sundar. They and a barking Peela pounded round the corner, trailed by Ghani-ma's small son.

"This one won't get away," said Singh-papa, pressing the man's shoulders to the ground. "A pity he's the only one we've taken. But one *dacoit*'s better than none. Well done. It was the tripping rope that did it."

We hauled our captive toward Ghani-ma's house, his arms pinioned by Singh-papa. The village track was silent, but I knew there were eyes at every window. Inside, Tej directed the lamp toward him as we tied him up with the rope we had used to trip him.

"Cham, old Navi's son!" said Ghani-ma. "You've come to visit your children, have you? Just this afternoon, I spoke to them, scolded them in fact. They were teasing this little daughter of mine. Do they know their father is a thief?"

“Forgive me, Ghani-ma,” said the man. “You know we only do what’s necessary. It’s how we live.”

Tej’s hand slipped, casting the light where the oil jars were lined against the wall. The man’s eyes bulged in surprise.

“So much oil. A jar or so less in the carts when the farmers come to collect it – who would know or care?” he said.

“That’s insolent talk,” I said. “Be quiet.”

Singh-papa nodded. He liked my boldness. I wished Ishwari was there to be impressed.

“You’ve got him safely tied up,” said Tej. “You could at least be courteous.”

“You’re right,” I said.

Ghani-ma snorted.

“Cham’s a thief and maybe a murderer, so we should be courteous?” she asked.

“So courteous,” I said, “that I think we should free him soon.”

Ghani-ma was speechless. The *dacoit*’s eyes were wary.

“With conditions,” I said. “We’ll free Cham with conditions. Who of his family is in this village?” I asked Ghani-ma.

“His boys, his wife,” she said.

“Singh-papa, Sundar, go with Ghani-ma and bring them back,” I said. “And keep them quiet.”

Ghani-ma and her oldest son followed Singh-papa and Sundar out the door. I brandished a stick over the captive crumpled on the floor.

“What are you doing?” asked Tej. “You’re turning into a thug yourself. My father will be

angry. This isn't his way."

"I'm doing what I must. When we're back safe in Muni village, we'll ask your father what I should have done," I said.

There was rustling at the door. Ghani-ma and her son guided a woman through the opening. Singh-papa and Sundar followed, each swinging a boy down beside the mother. The woman gasped when she saw her husband trussed up on the floor.

"Papa," said the smaller boy.

I drew myself up, threw back my shoulders.

"Your husband tried to break into Ghani-ma's mill," I said. "He says he had no choice."

The woman cringed back against Ghani-ma, her arms clutching her children.

"So I say I have no choice either," I said. "We'll keep you here while your husband goes back into

the forest. You'll be safe as long as he does what we ask. Sundar, go with him. Bring us the bullock pair he and his friends stole from Ghani-ma. Remember Seema's village, how big it is? Too big for *dacoits* to attack. We'll deliver the oil there – it's mostly Seema's mustard seed anyway."

And where Ishwari was, I thought.

Singh-papa looked on with approval, arms folded across his chest. Tej was furious. Her flaring nostrils were comical on her smooth face. My amusement died, however, when I thought of how I was putting us all in danger.

"Leave in secret," I told Sundar. "Go by the river and then cut into the forest."

Sundar began to wind Peela's leash around his wrist.

"The dog stays here," I said. "Ghani-ma, give them oil for the wheels, and cloths for the hooves.

For when they return. And, Cham, make no warning to your *dacoit* friends"

Through the next day we waited, and the next night and day, brooding on Sundar alone in the jungle with a thief and maybe a murderer.

Ghani-ma's sons, forbidden the outdoors in case they let our secrets slip, jangled our nerves with their quarreling. People passed outside on the track and Ghani-ma greeted them from the verandah as usual.

"My boys are not well," she said. "The rains always bring sickness."

We stuffed the woman's mouth with cloth, leaving the children ungagged. Who would notice a shouting child in a house full of children? At eating time, we pulled away the gag and kept her feet tied. She was quiet in her corner, feeding her children, speaking only to thank Ghani-ma for cushions and stick-dolls and throwing stones to amuse the

children.

"I told him it was not a good way, that we'd be sorry someday," she said once.

Singh-papa supervised the watch. If the *dacoits* attacked us, we would be squashed like mud under a bullock's hoof. Peela growled several times in the night but no one approached as far as we knew.

Tej was a constant irritant.

"I can't believe you're doing this," she said, gesturing toward the woman tied in the corner. "My father made you a merchant. This isn't the way to honour his trust. Frightening little children. He should have left you sweeping floors in Muni village."

I was afraid her words were true.

"Like a coward you sit here with a big stick, dry and comfortable while you send Sundar into danger."

"Just a little longer," I said, "and we'll be safely

away in Seema's village."

I tried to sound confident, but I could hear my voice tremble.

"Best to do what Lochan says," said Singh-papa.

Tej screwed up her face and turned away with a jerk, her eyes flashing with rebellion.

On the third night, Singh-papa paired the two of us for the watch.

"You can sleep, Tej," I said. "I'll watch for both of us. I might be a coward, but I can manage that much."

"I spoke in anger," said Tej. "I know you're not a coward. But you used to be a gentle person. What happened?"

We stayed awake together, passing between the window and the verandah, looking for shadows in the dark.

“I should check once more outside before it’s light,” said Tej toward dawn, the birds already chirping. “I’ll be quick.”

“I’ll go,” I said.

“Then check the oil press as well, just to be sure,” she said.

I circled the hut. As far as I could tell in the grey light, all was in order.

Tej stiffened when I re-entered the house. Her breath came in gasps, her eyes were nervous.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

She gestured toward the captives’ corner.

It was empty.

I caught my breath.

“They escaped? By the gods, we’re in for

trouble now," I said

Tej shrugged. Singh-papa snorted out of his sleep and twisted himself up. Ghani-ma rubbed her eyes.

"We were too kind," I said. "We trusted them."

My plans lay in shreds.

"I did it. I was the one you shouldn't have trusted. I told them to go," said Tej. "It was wrong of us to hold them. They weren't ours to keep."

Ghani-ma gasped.

"Tej, you've ruined everything," I said, dizzy from the effort of keeping my voice calm.

I slammed the heel of my hand against my head, beside myself with fury.

"They'll go straight to the *dacoits*. They'll kill Sundar most likely. Kill us too."

Tej jerked, widened her eyes.

“Not kill,” she said. “I helped the woman. I’m sure she won’t let them kill him.”

I snarled like Peela, too angry to speak.

“Don’t upset yourself,” said Singh-papa, pressing my shoulder, forcing me to sit.

We sat, two separate groups, silent except for the splash of rain. Tej and the dog by the wall, Singh-papa, Ghani-ma, her children and I by the hearth, our backs to Tej.

The woman must have reached the robber camp by now, I thought. Any moment, they’ll attack us.

“I’ll wait here in case Sundar comes back,” I said. “The rest of you, hide in the reeds, get away along the river.

“Don’t request that of me,” said Singh-papa. “To run away. I can’t do it.”

Tej crawled toward the hearth, looked me in the eye.

“I freed the woman because it was my duty, and I’ll stay here from duty too,” she said.

“It was your duty, then, to put us in danger?” I asked.

Peela growled at the anger in my voice.

“They’re coming,” Ghani-ma’s son muttered.

I crossed to the rear window, peered through the latticework. A man darted from the trees toward the line of houses, his shape blurred by the rain, a red sash floating behind the only part of him clearly visible. We held our breath, lifted our clubs.

Ghani-ma squeezed her daughter out the door toward the river.

“Run to the reeds,” she said.

We waited, jumping at every crackle of the hearth and gust of wind. The rain thinned. Voices drifted in from outside. I eased the door open a crack and peered along the track. Down the lane, our escaped captive stood on her verandah, bowing and folding her hands to a man who folded his hands in return and spun on his heel toward the forest. A bedraggled red cloth hung at his hips.

“So she didn’t go to the bandits after all,” said Tej. “She’s right here in her house.”

“She has her children to think about,” said Ghani-ma.

She stepped out the door and beckoned toward the reeds. Her daughter ran from the river to her outstretched arms.

We spent the afternoon clutching our clubs, straining our eyes past the window screens, tightening our throats with every shift of light in the forest. But no one else appeared.

Until dusk.

First Peela gave a bark of recognition. Then we heard whispering at the entry.

“Ghani-ma. Ghani-ma.”

Our hostage crouched on the verandah, pressing her boys through the door even before Ghani-ma had scraped it fully open.

“I’ve come back,” she said, looking at Tej. “They’ve threatened me. They’ll take the children if I don’t say where their father is. So far, I told them nothing. Your plans are safe.”

Tej took her hand, led her to her old corner.

“Is this a trap you’re laying for us?” asked Ghani-ma, expressing the suspicion I felt. “You’re one of them, not one of us.”

“No, she’s frightened and needs our help,” said Tej.

“Tie her up,” I said.

Then came another scratching at the door.

“Lochan, it’s Sundar. Let me in.”

“Thank the gods,” I said. “What news do you have?”

Peela bounded toward him.

“Hurry,” said Sundar. “Cham is waiting down river with the cart.”

“He’s fine, not hurt?” the woman asked from her corner.

“Fine, but uneasy while he waits. You must come quickly,” said Sundar.

“Not yet,” I said. “We need the cart here, to load it for Seema’s village. Bring it and hide it in the reeds.”

Sundar slipped away. Ghani-ma watched over her sullen-faced neighbour while the rest of us carried oil jars and sacks of oil cake to the river bank, the glint of stars on the water our only light. Sundar and Cham the *dacoit* arrived with the cart, wheels muted by the river's gurgle.

"I suppose you think we should leave the oil for the village here," I whispered to Tej.

"You're misunderstanding me on purpose," she mumbled, glancing toward Ghani-ma and the woman. "I'll never say they should keep oil that belongs to others. But Ghani-ma and her husband are hated for good reason. They're haughty toward the villagers."

We levered the huge tree-trunk mortar from the floor of the oil press hut and rolled it to the reeds.

"Seema will make good use of this," I said, keeping my voice low.

When we had loaded the cart with the mortar, the oil, Ghani-ma's daughter, and the *dacoit*'s two small sons, we were set to go.

"It's good there are two bullocks," said Tej. "We really need four."

"Sh!" I said, finger on my lips.

"What's to be done about this *dacoit* fellow and his wife?" whispered Singh-papa.

"I have to go with you," hissed the *dacoit*. "My children are in your cart."

"He might be the one who killed my father," rang out the voice of Ghani-ma's oldest son.

"Quiet!" whispered Cham. "I've killed no one. But the others will kill me now that I've helped you."

"The robber is my friend," said Sundar, his words low but strong. "We crawled through the

bush together, we lay in the mud to watch the camp, we stole the cart when the *dacoits* left. I will see him safe in Seema's village."

Singh-papa shrugged.

"Better he's with us than springing at us from the trees," he said.

"Bring him," said Ghani-ma. "Those boys should have a father, bandit or not."

"You're willing to come, hands tied?" I asked Cham.

He tossed his head in the faint starlight, but made no objection.

"Then bring his wife from the house," I told Sundar, "and we'll leave."

We were taking too long. It was time to be away.

Ghani-ma and Sundar dragged the woman to the reeds.

“She’s not to be trusted,” said Ghani-ma. “She begged a lamp to find her lost earring, then tried to wave it at the window.”

“Signalling those thugs?” said her husband. “Forget them. They’re as shifty as half-empty grain sacks.”

He spat on the ground.

Tej stepped back, staring at the woman.

“I helped you,” she said. “Why betray us?”

“They’ll take my boys if I don’t,” said the woman.

The children huddled in the cart, their eyes wide and pale in the darkness.

“No one will be taken if we go quickly,” I said.

Our little one-cart wagon train moved off through the night. Ghani-ma kept a firm hand on the woman's shawl. Tej stayed apart.

I wedged one of Ishwari's blankets against the mortar in the cart to pad the children's backs. The other I folded over my shoulder, fingering the edge as I walked. How Ishwari would receive me when we arrived back at Seema's I had no idea.

26 Together

Cham the *dacoit* knew ways to shorten the journey. We wasted no time seeking out fording places, but splashed across streams in water up to the bullocks' bellies, pulling on ropes to steady the animals, pushing the wheels against the current. We curved through the jungle on gloomy tracks barely wide enough for the cart, sometimes under pale skies, sometimes pelted with rain. It had taken us almost three days to walk from Seema's village to the oil press, but it took only one to return. By late afternoon of the day we stole away from

Ghani-ma's house, we stood by the smooth plaster walls of Seema's house in the shade of the huge mango tree.

The wrists of the *dacoit* and his wife hung at their sides. They had needed their hands free to push through the forest. The hollowed tree trunk loomed high in the cart, draped in Ishwari's blankets. Seema greeted us from her verandah but there was no shine of welcome in her eyes. Her twin sons stood beside her, hands folded on their stomachs in imitation of each other.

I pointed to the cart

"As you see, Seema-ji, we've been to the oil press and brought you the result. All your mustard crushed to oil. Where shall we put the jars?"

"So many to deliver one load of oil? We would have come for it if you'd let us know," she said."

"We had other things to bring as well," I said,

glancing toward the blanketed shape on the cart.

Seema's eyes followed mine.

"We'll clean ourselves, then greet you properly," I said. "I don't see Ishwari. Is she well?"

"Didi is resting. I won't disturb her," said Seema. "Perhaps later."

The servant led us to the washing place behind the building, left us dousing ourselves with pitchers of water, clothes and all. I studied the rear of the house. The sleeping room was to one side, I remembered from our first visit.

"Make an excuse if they come looking," I said to Tej.

She wrinkled her nose and rolled her eyes.

I darted around the far corner, saw a window set into the plaster wall. I was sure Ishwari was in the room beyond, out of sight while Seema

prepared to entertain us in the main room.

I slid along the wall to the opening. The goat tethered at the verandah side raised its head, grass hanging from its mouth, then returned to lipping the ground. I peered through the lattice of the window but could see nothing in the dimness.

“Ishwari,” I whispered. “Ishwari.”

The room beyond was silent.

I scratched the woven reeds, tapped the wooden frame with my knuckles.

“Hail to the Himalayas. Hail to Muni village. Hail to the weaver of Muni village,” I murmured, my voice louder with each exclamation.

There was movement beyond the screen, and then Ishwari’s voice.

“What are you doing?” she hissed.

“Is this what you like?” I hissed back. “Hidden away like a prisoner?”

“You’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” she said. “I’m well looked after here. Go away.”

“I need your answer to a question,” I said, “and then I’ll leave.”

“What question?” she asked.

“All that wool you dyed, waiting for you at your grandmother’s house. When I return to Muni village, should I give it to Daleep to trade?”

“That’s not your wool to trade. It’s mine,” she said.

“Should we send it here, then,” I asked.

There was silence on the other side of the screen.

“Tell me quickly,” I said. “Seema will be looking

for me."

"There's no point bringing the wool here. She finds my weaving coarse," said Ishwari.

"I know. We all heard her say it," I said.

"She's good to me, you know. She depends on me," Ishwari said. "I can't be ungrateful."

I smiled to myself. She was as good as admitting she wanted to leave.

"You can come away and still please Seema," I said. "I know how. Don't question my words when I talk to her."

Ishwari said nothing.

"You agree, Ishwari?" I asked. "Let me arrange it."

"As you wish," said Ishwari.

Her words were as sweet as *jatamansi* blooms.

The servant brought food to the verandah. We arranged ourselves in a circle, cross-legged, elbow to elbow, Cham and his family, Ghani-ma and her children, Singh-papa, Tej, Sundar and I. Seema sat on a stool in her doorway, her two sons hovering behind. Peela was on the ground, tied to a pillar as far as possible from the nervous goat at the corner.

“Tell Didi to come and greet our guests,” Seema told the servant.

Ishwari came, crouched at Seema’s feet. The dog yipped in excitement, strained toward the verandah steps.

“Sit against the cushion, Didi,” said Seema. “Here are your old friends, come to visit.”

Ishwari joined her hands and bowed to each person on the verandah, her earrings swinging.

“The gods blessed Ishwari when they brought her to you, Seema-ji,” I said, avoiding Tej’s mocking eyes as I courted Seema’s approval. “Her face is blooming.”

Seema tipped her chin in agreement. “Good food, good rest,” she said. “Whatever she needs, we give her here.”

There was no doubt that Ishwari looked pampered, hair coiled in a silken rope at her neck, face framed in a circlet of white blossoms, yellow skirt stiff with starch and finely pleated.

She glanced at me then lowered her eyes. I thought it was I who had put the glow in her cheeks, not Seema.

“If only her aged grandmother could see her now, Seema-ji, pillowed on cushions, perfumed hands soft in her lap,” I said.

“Where is this grandmother, Didi? You’ve said

nothing of her. Bring her here if you wish," said Seema.

Ishwari opened her mouth to reply, but I broke in before plans for Bunama interfered with getting Ishwari away from there.

"She's an old woman in the mountains, Seema-ji, too old to travel to the plains. She'll die alone, but happy that Ishwari lives in comfort," I said.

Singh-papa sat back with folded arms, smiling, rolling his eyes at me.

"Oh, how cruel!" cried Seema. "The gods play tricks on me. They bring Didi to me with one hand and deprive an old grandmother of her due with the other. It's a hard thing, that if I please the gods in one way, I anger them in another."

"Seema-ji, perhaps the gods have taken pity on you," I said. "There's a way you can serve them and still send Ishwari to her grandmother."

“Send away my dear Didi? Surely they wouldn’t ask that of me,” she said.

“Give refuge to these families who have had to flee the oil press village,” I said. “Long ago the gods gave you back your son. Now help these people who fear for their children.”

I gestured toward Ghani-ma and the *dacoit* and his wife, who bowed and folded their hands. Seema’s mouth opened and shut, her eyes jerked from side to side.

“And while you watch over them,” I said, “they’ll watch over your interests. Lift the blankets, Sundar.”

Sundar climbed off the verandah to the cart and rolled back Ishwari’s red-bordered blankets, exposing the tree trunk.

“The mortar from the oil press,” I said. “What’s to stop you from pressing your oil seeds here?

Ghani-ma can arrange it. Even faraway villages will bring their seeds if you send your sons to tell them. And your village has many defenders. *Dacoits* won't attack here. Who knows what wealth you'll gain?"

"You brought that huge trunk all this way?" asked Seema.

She pressed her lips together, tapped one hand on the other while she considered. Ishwari's eyes were closed, her fingers clenched.

"And this man with the dirty turban and rope burns on his wrists," she said. "Is he to be trusted?"

Cham the *dacoit* folded his hands and bowed.

"You can trust me with your life," he said. "I swear it on the head of my eldest son. Does a *dacoit* not know the best defence against other *dacoits*? This village is strong. Together we'll stand

with folded arms and heavy clubs, knives clamped in our teeth. Robber bands won't dare attack you."

"He's a *dacoit*, but his wife is brave," said Ghani-ma. "They'll serve us well. Lochan is right. We'll make good oil here."

"Fetch builders, my sons," said Seema. "We'll need a roof for the press."

Ishwari raised her eyes.

"I must leave, Seema-ji," she said. "With your blessing I must leave. You have others to care for now."

"Have we not cared for you well here, Didi?" Seema asked.

"Better than I dreamt could ever be," said Ishwari. "But my grandmother's waiting."

"Go then," said Seema, her hands clasped in her lap. "I suppose you'll start up that weaving again. So

rough. At least take the ointment to soften your skin."

She beckoned to Cham's wife, took the children on her lap.

Ishwari went straight to Peela, squatted beside him to pat his boney back and scratch his ears. Peela's body quivered with happiness.

"It's good you'll travel with us again," said Singh-papa.

"You should have asked Seema for the bullock cart," Tej muttered in my ear. "I could have done better."

"You bargain for the joy of it, Tej-ji," I said. "I just try to be fair to everyone."

" 'Fair' would be to give the oil press to the *dacoits*," Tej said. "I'm sure it was theirs before Ghani-ma's family seized it. But at least Ishwari's back. When she's around you won't act so bossy."

BOOK SIX

ISHWARI

27 Sindhapur

The world's a cruel place, Ishwari's grandmother told her, and even crueler for crook-backs. People will despise you for your hump, or they'll pity you, she said, but only the gods will care to look for your heart beyond the twisted spine.

That's what Bunama said, and for the most part, Ishwari believed her.

But Lochan was different. He never said her weaving was strange the way others did, or worse, heaped praise he didn't really mean, or, worst of

all, acted surprised that a crippled girl could do anything at all. He knew she wove because it was in her blood. He and her grandmother understood that. No one else did.

Just as herbs were in Lochan's blood. When Lochan spoke of plants, recited their names and their stories, Ishwari knew no one else listened as she did.

Sometimes she caught herself dwelling on Lochan's earnest face, felt her heart turn over at his sprouting eyebrows, his long fingers tapping on his knee as he gazed into the distance.

But her reverie always ended in irritation. A man should not be so timid, averting his eyes from her for fear of displeasing Daleep.

Avoiding her, but meddling in everyone else's lives. Putting ideas into Sundar's head about chasing after his mother.

She had been glad to go with Seema and cut Lochan out of her life. If he had no will to fight for her, better to forget him.

But life in Seema's house was colourless. Ishwari was a doll, petted and fussed over when Seema thought of it, afterwards forgotten until next playtime.

Then Lochan arrived, like a bold hill *raja* wheeling into the fort to carry off the princess. Lochan the warrior prince, though no prince striding through Singh-papa's tales had so sallow a face, such thin legs, such crumpled eyebrows. But come to rescue her nonetheless, his chariot a cart crammed with three grubby children and a tree trunk, his warrior band a jumble of women and boys, an old man, a conceited girl with bulging eyes, a *dacoit,* and a market thief with a dog.

She heard the commotion of their arrival from the inner room where she spent most of her time.

“Out of harm’s way,” Seema said.

Ishwari was afraid to let herself hope, nervous that Lochan would shrug his shoulders and walk away if Seema was difficult. Not until the next day, when all was settled and she was plodding with the others toward the river and a hired boat, did she allow herself to believe she was rid of Seema’s hospitality.

What a tale Singh-papa could make of it, in front of the fire in the evening, Ishwari thought. A tale to tell, but not to live through.

Cham the *dacoit* found a boatman for them, and shrugged when Lochan took out his purse.

“Keep your shells,” Cham said. “He’ll help you because I ask him to. He and I, we serve each other. He’ll set you ashore just before Sindhapur.”

“Not before, but all the way to the gates,” said Tej. “It’s worth his while, for we’ll reward him well

when we sell the oil cake in the market there."

"Not possible," said Cham. "A boatman with *dacoit* friends avoids the city fathers and their guards."

Tej pursed her mouth in annoyance, then shrugged her shoulders.

At last, Ishwari thought as she settled into the boat, clasping Peela to her side. Tej is learning she can't have it all to her liking. Not everyone wants the advice and leftover *chapatti* she throws from the steps of her father's merchant house. Sometimes it's a *dacoit* who throws the crumbs and the merchant's daughter who must be grateful.

"The gods be with you, brave Sundar-ji," said Cham as they left. "Come back and we'll hunt bullocks by moonlight again."

"You're a good friend, *dacoit* or no," said Sundar.

“Guard the village well, Cham,” said Lochan. “I vouched for you with Seema. I rely on you to prove me right.”

Singh-papa thrust out his chin in agreement.

Floating downriver to Sindhapur was a pleasure for Ishwari, in spite of swarming insects and rain. She had returned to her own people. She soaked her two blankets, beat out the mud until the red and black were bright, and when the sun shone, spread them to dry on the sloping end of the boat.

But the tedium bothered the others, especially Tej.

“At least this boat’s clean,” said Tej, “but it’s too small. We’ll end up with leg cramps, sitting like this, all jammed up against Ghani-ma’s mustard cake. If Lochan had let me choose the boat way back in Harappa, we’d be in Sindhapur by now with all our trades goods, and with no bad memories of pirates and bandits and mustard oil.”

“You can’t know that,” said Ishwari.

“Of course I know. It’s obvious,” said Tej. “If you hire a boat from shifty-looking characters, you can expect to be robbed.”

Lochan pursed his mouth, but said nothing.

“This group is like the brothers who lived in a hut at the edge of the forest,” said Singh-papa.

He fell silent, waiting for a response. Ishwari looked away, even though she was curious.

“Don’t let others know your wishes,” her grandmother had taught her. “There’s always someone who’ll blight them just for spite.”

But Tej, pushing her face forward, was eager.

“Singh-papa, tell us about these brothers,” she said.

Singh-papa settled back against a pile of sacks.

“As I told you,” said Singh-papa, “these brothers lived by the forest. Every night they squeezed into their tiny house, and curled up on the floor to sleep. And every night the youngest brother made a story for them of distant lands and marvellous places, so that they forgot the hard floor they lay on and drifted off to sleep.

“Then one brother said, ‘Youngest brother, I’m weary of your murmurings that fill our ears every night and never end. Go, and leave the rest of us to sleep in peace.’

“So the youngest brother left to spend his night nestled in a tree, with only himself to carry over river and mountain with his stories. The other brothers curled up on the floor of the house and shoved and pushed and snarled at each other the whole night.

“‘Let me nearer the hearth,’ one said.

“‘You rolled on my arm,’ said another.

“‘You kicked my head.’

“‘You stole my blanket.’

The next night as they lay shoving and muttering, there was a rustling at the window.

“‘It’s a toad,’ said one brother. ‘Get it out of here.’

“‘You do it,’ said another.

“‘I’m not touching it,’ said the third.

“So the toad stayed, and the brothers squeezed away from it, for who likes to sleep against a toad? And they were forced to lie almost on top of each other and the snarling and pushing grew worse.

“The next night as they lay huddled on the floor, the toad returned, and the goat wandered down from the roof and butted into the room past the hides slung over the doorway.

“‘I told you to put her in the shed,’ said one.

“‘Do it yourself.’ said another.

“‘Why should I?’ said another.

“And while they were quarreling, the goat settled on the floor, and all night the brothers felt so cramped they couldn’t sleep.

“The next night the toad hopped through the window and the goat butted through the door hangings and the rains came so heavily that the old cow in the yard broke free from her rope and pushed her way into the room.

“‘Lead her out,’ one said.

“‘No, you lead her out.’

“‘No, you do it.’

“So no one rose to take her away, and the brothers spent a weary night with the toad and the

goat and the cow pressing against them.

"The next evening the toad and the goat and the cow all sought shelter with them again. But this night was different. For behind the cow came the youngest brother, returning to his house from the tree.

"'We're too crowded. Go away. You see that others depend on us now,' his brothers said. 'No room for you.'

"'If it's what you want, I'll go,' said the youngest brother. 'But first I'll tell you a tale. When it's finished, I'll leave.'

"So he murmured a story into the night, and in his words were the fragrance of flowers, the radiance of the sun, the sparkle of rivers. The brothers forgot how crowded they were, and before the tale was done they were sleeping peacefully. All night they smiled in their dreams and the next night they asked their brother to

stay."

Singh-papa sat back and folded his arms.

"How is that like us?" asked Tej. "We don't quarrel with each other. At least not too much."

Singh-papa looked at Ishwari while he answered.

"It's the youngest brother I'm thinking of," he said. "Because of him the brothers slept well, but they had to be taught to be grateful. We have Lochan to lead us. It's because of him we're safe and together. Ishwari knows this. The rest of us should learn from her."

Tej grinned, embarrassed at the scolding.

Ishwari lowered her eyes, careful not to show her satisfaction that Tej had been rebuked and Lochan praised. It was good to listen to Singh-papa's stories, to dig her fingers in Peela's fur, to see Sundar's face break into a smile as he passed

her a clay cup of water.

But she was uncertain how to behave with Lochan. She huddled on the high bench of the boat, watching the river, smoothing her blankets as they dried and turning away from him.

At dusk, as she sat on the river bank finishing the last of her *chapatti*, Lochan crouched down beside her. She meant to say she was grateful to be free of Seema and back on the river, but she heard her mouth spew out other words.

"What will you do in Sindhapur?" she asked. "I hope you've cast aside your foolish plan for Sundar."

"Foolish plan?" Lochan said.

Ishwari saw him shrivel in disappointment.

"Yes, foolish," she said. "What do you expect Sundar to do? Rip his mother and the ruby from his

stepfather's arms and flee with them up the river? That's all over and done with now. Once the lentils boil, you can't make them grow again, you know. The boy's happy with his dog. Let him stay that way."

Sundar's face was turned toward them. Ishwari knew he was listening.

"Duty is duty. Birthright is birthright," Lochan said. "His father murdered, his ruby stolen, his mother and brother lost. Sundar must make it right."

Sundar tipped his head in agreement.

"You make the plans. Sundar carries them out. Is that your system?" Ishwari asked.

"First we have to find Dalia and Prem. Then we'll decide," Lochan said. "It's not your concern. Think about how to sell your blankets."

“And about finding a healer for her back, Lochan,” said Tej. “That’s what Ishwari really wants.”

“What do you know of what I want?” Ishwari asked.

For two days they glided on the current, the river open before them, the sky wide, the forest stretching to the horizon across the level plain. They left the boat when the walls of Sindhapur rose in the distance. Another golden city, yellow bricks gleaming under the fiery sun, although by the time they arrived at the gates, the sky was dark and rain poured down. The guard eyed their bedraggled looks with suspicion, but nodded in approval at the sacks of oil cake stacked across their backs and the string of shells Lochan dug from his pouch for the merchant fee.

“Your oil cake is welcome here,” the guard said. “Animals must be fed. But where have you walked

from? Where's your boat?"

"Stolen while we slept," said Lochan.

Tej rolled her eyes but let the lie pass. The guard smirked, but showed them into the city, where they huddled in the overhang of a guesthouse gate until the sky cleared.

At the edge of the market place, Lochan found a straw seller who accepted a few shells in return for space under his awning and a jug of milk heated over a tiny brazier. Grubby and damp, they piled the cakes of animal feed on the ground and settled to wait.

"Oil cake. To fatten your animals. Mustard cake, fresh-pressed," Sundar chanted, first in an uncertain voice, then with enthusiasm when passers-by turned eagerly to trade shells for chunks of the crusty stuff.

The guard at the gate had spoken the truth. The

sacks they had filled at Ghani-ma's mill were soon half empty, and Lochan's money pouch grown heavy with shells and metal pieces.

"Fine blankets to warm you when the evening's cool," Sundar urged the customers, pointing at Ishwari's weavings.

People looked and shrugged.

"Don't be offended, Ishwari-ji," said Tej. "Not everyone needs a blanket, you know. In time a customer will come."

Ishwari bristled at what she thought was a taunt. Then she noticed Tej's wistful face and knew she meant well.

"I'm sure you're right," said Ishwari.

Lochan handed Sundar some of their earnings.

"Bring us some food," he said.

Sundar returned with rounds of flat bread bulging with chunks of vegetable, steaming even in the warm air when he unwrapped the leaf coverings. The straw seller bit into his with delight, moustache glistening with *ghee*.

A night in a guest house, a return to the straw seller's awning at dawn, and by mid-morning, only a small stack of seed cake and Ishwari's blankets lay by the straw.

"Let's find a spot by the cloth sellers," said Tej. "People who want blankets will look there."

"Singh-papa, go with them," said Lochan. "Sundar and I'll look for news of Prem. The straw seller hasn't heard of him."

"We can look after ourselves," said Tej. "You and Sundar need Singh-papa with you, Lochan. Prem will be angry if he hears you're after him. It might be dangerous."

Sundar thrust out his jaw, clenched his fists.

“I have my arm and my club,” he said. “What else do we need?”

“Peela and Singh-papa should stay here,” said Ishwari. “Face it. There’s not much I can do on my own if someone tries to harm Tej.”

“Or you,” said Lochan. “I’m glad you said it yourself. I was afraid of offending you.”

The two men bowed and disappeared around a turning of the market lane.

28 Customer

Singh-papa, holding Peela's rope with one hand and carrying Ishwari's blankets with the other, led the two women through the market, somehow sure of his way though he had never been there before. The cloth merchants' lane was thronged and noisy. Stalls crammed together, customers pressed thick around them, lengths of unfurled cloth floating above. Clerks boasted, buyers haggled, bearers shouted.

At first, bewildered by the bustle, Ishwari saw place to set out her meagre offering of two

blankets. Part way along a row, a silk-merchant's establishment loomed over the lane, not a stall but a real shop with walls and a door. Tucked in beside it was a booth festooned with ribbons and sashes. Ishwari gasped. So many colours, crimson, yellow, the green of sprouting fields, the pink of woodland blossoms, the brilliant blue of a pheasant's crest. What dyes had they used? The stall was tiny, and the man on the stool had a friendly air. Ishwari smiled in delight at his jolly face peeking out from a wall of fluttering strips and at the red and pink and purple ribbons he had wound around his yellow turban.

"Ribbons, daughter-ji," he said, "to bind the beautiful thick knot of hair at your neck. Or to twine in the long black braid of your little sister here."

Tej was about to protest but kept silent, grinning at Ishwari. Ishwari grinned back.

“Beautiful!” said Ishwari. “Every colour the gods could think of. But until I sell my blankets, I’ve nothing to buy with.”

She laid her hand on the blankets folded over Singh-papa’s arm.

“Perhaps we can help each other,” said the ribbon-seller. “I know honest people when I see them. You set your blankets at the end here and trade them while you watch over my wares too. Then I can leave for a while. How does that sound? Helping each other.”

Ishwari hesitated. Was there danger hidden in the man’s offer?

“It’s a fair bargain,” said Singh-papa. “We can do it.”

“Good,” said the ribbon-seller. “There are things I must attend to.”

Ishwari draped her blankets over the edge of the stall. Singh-papa tied Peela to a leg of the stool and gestured for Ishwari and Tej to sit, their shoulders brushed by the gold-fringed sashes hanging from the rope above. He stood beside the blankets, arms folded across his chest. A woman stopped by the sashes. Ishwari left the bargaining to Tej.

“Take the chestnut brown,” said Tej. “You’ll regret it if you don’t, for you’ll not find the same shade later. And take this piece of yellow ribbon as a gift. No charge for that at all. But you must have the chestnut sash. So rich when the light strikes it”

The customer bought as Tej instructed, and Ishwari slipped the payment into her pouch to pass on to the ribbon seller.

“This is the ribbon seller’s lucky day,” said Ishwari. “You bargain well.”

On into the afternoon, Tej shook out sashes, spread ribbon across her fingers, persuaded people

to buy. Ishwari measured and folded.

Singh-papa found a metal cup buried under a tangle of ribbons.

“Good,” said Ishwari. “I’m thirsty.”

When the water seller passed with his bulging skin sack, Ishwari signalled for a drink. The vendor turned, his hand ready on the nozzle to press out the water, but instead of approaching them, he lifted his head in alarm and scuttled to the side of the lane.

“Make way! Make way!” shouted a man appearing at the corner, a red feather springing from his turban, knobbed stick swinging in time to his step. “Make way for the bearers!”

He moved further into the narrow lane, sweeping his stick from side to side.

“Make way! Make way!”

The crowd stilled, then split apart, pressing against the stalls on both sides. The man marched forward with dignified step, his feather waving. He snapped to attention at the silk merchant's shop and stretched out his arm.

Around the corner ran four bearers, a curtained litter swaying on their shoulders. They drew up before the cloth merchant's, and at a curt wave of the man's hand set down the litter. The merchant appeared from the shop, bowing and folding his hands as a woman stepped from behind the curtains onto the dusty pavement. Ishwari's eyes locked on her, fascinated.

A beautiful woman. Eyelashes like smoke, nose a graceful arch, her walk, as she was ushered into the store, like a reed in the breeze. And wealthy. Silk skirt rustling at her ankles, gold at her ears and forehead, carnelian gleaming through a shawl so fine it was transparent.

Trailed by two eager clerks, the merchant and his client disappeared behind the bolts of cloth piled in the shop. The bearers settled by the litter while the steward stood at the door, hands crossed over the knob of his staff. The crowd, seeing nothing more to interest them, spilled back into the lane intent on their errands. The water carrier splashed water into the cup Singh-papa held out to him.

"Someone important?" asked Singh-papa. "An official family?"

"Trader's wife," said the water man. "She's often in this quarter. Comparing goods to what her own warehouses hold, I suppose."

A clerk hurried out of the shop, scurried down the lane to a drinks stall, then back through the door with a tray of clay cups and a jar beaded with moisture. Ishwari watched for another glimpse of the woman, but the doorway remained empty

except for the steward's silent figure.

Trade at the ribbon stall was steady. Scarves to match a green skirt, red strings to tie on the holy *pipal* tree near the market, ribbons for the hair of a new daughter-in-law. A sea captain bought a bundle of sashes to take back across the sea.

"My sons expect it," he said. "I can't return without something for them. Silken belts in every colour should please them."

Tej bargained, Peela slept curled in a ball under the counter and Singh-papa flicked his eyes over the bustle in the lane, alert for danger. Ishwari fingered her blankets and gazed at the Sindhapuris, studying them, marvelling that people here would probably find her mountains as alien as she found Sindhapur's hot flat plains.

Once more the clerk ran out from the silk merchant's shop, this time toward the litter, sliding a package into the arms of a bearer who slipped it

away behind the curtains. The steward raised his arm, the bearers leaped to attention, and the woman stepped through the door, sandals clacking on the pavement as the merchant bowed her into the litter. The bearers heaved up the poles onto their shoulders and continued along the lane, led by the staff-wielding steward. The woman's face, framed in the golden edge of the curtain, peered at the ribbon seller's stall as they passed.

That's Dalia, Ishwari thought. Her cheek bones are like Sundar's. She felt no surprise. It was as if she had known all along.

The litter faded from view. The silk merchant bowed to Ishwari and her companions, his disinterest apparent, and returned to his shop.

Moments later, one of the bearers ran back down the lane.

"Uncle, please come with me," he said to Singh-papa. "Bring your blankets. There might be a

trade for you."

"I regret I can't leave these ladies here alone. Can the buyer not come to us?" said Singh-papa.

The bearer wrinkled his face.

"Just to the corner," he said. "If you lean forward you can see from here where the litter is stopped. I've been sent to fetch you."

"Go," said Tej. "You too, Ishwari. They're your blankets. Peela's here with me."

"If you say so," said Ishwari, trembling with anticipation.

Ishwari and Singh-papa folded the two blankets and walked with the bearer to the end of the lane, where the woman reclined in the litter.

"Hold them up so I can see them," said the woman.

Singh-papa laid one blanket over his shoulder, held a corner of the other while Ishwari shook it out to its full size. She was sick with nervousness. A serious customer at last.

The woman peered closely with eyes outlined in black *kohl* and gold dust, traced the red and black weave with a painted finger nail.

“You made this?” she asked. “Who taught you the pattern?”

“I learned from the mountains,” said Ishwari.

“The mountains,” said the woman. “I knew them when I lived there. Sharp and harsh as your weaving.”

Singh-papa caught Ishwari’s eye, his face split in a grin under his moustache.

“Certainly you’re a fine judge of weaving,” he said to the woman. “Ishwari’s one of the best. Her patterns are her own.”

“This border of jagged lines. Like the mountains,” the woman said. “I hated them when I was there but I miss them now.”

“Black mountains,” said Ishwari, “against the red sky at sunset.”

“My son was born by mountains like this,” the woman said. “He feels their pull, he says, though he doesn’t remember them. Tomorrow bring your blankets to my courtyard. He can choose one if he likes.”

“To your courtyard?” asked Ishwari.

“The steward will tell you where,” the woman said. “Come without fear. You have a deformity, but in my house no one will cringe from it. My son has too. His arm is shrunken, hangs at his shoulder like a broken branch.”

Ishwari stiffened, but was too drawn by the woman’s words to be offended. This was Dalia for

sure. She knew the mountains, had a son with a withered arm. What strange paths the gods laid for them, to bring them together in the market place while Lochan and Sundar searched all of Sindhapur.

A son born in the mountains, she said. One son. What of Sundar? Had she forgotten him?

“Just the one son you have?” Ishwari asked.

The woman was taken aback, said nothing for a moment.

“One blanket I’ll take,” she said at last. “No more. My son will choose.”

She tipped her chin toward the steward, who signalled to the bearers.

“The courtyard of Harappa Prem,” the steward told Ishwari and Singh-papa before he followed the litter. “Street of the hawk.”

“The woman is Dalia,” said Ishwari when she and

Singh-papa had returned to Tej. “I’m sure of it.”

“You’ve done Lochan’s work for him then,” said Tej. “He and Sundar can stop searching. And she likes your blankets?”

“Very taken with them,” said Singh-papa. “Why else would she call us to her courtyard?”

“Wonderful!” said Tej, her face beaming. “You see, Ishwari? You just needed to be patient. If one person buys, others will want them too.”

Ishwari stared. Such happiness at someone else’s success. Could Tej be so generous?

Tej put her arms around Ishwari, her cheek on her shoulder.

“Aren’t you glad you left Seema and came back to us?” she said.

BOOK SEVEN

LOCHAN

29 Ruby

It was a relief to go off with Sundar and leave Ishwari peddling her blankets in the market place. Her glances were scornful, the tender looks in Seema's village only memories. Better to spend my time searching for Prem and Dalia than pining after Ishwari.

"Do you know the house of Prem the trader?" I asked from stall to stall.

"Which trader Prem?" they asked.

But they tried to help.

They sent us along walls grey with rain to Prem the sandal merchant's, where hollow-chested boys wove straw into soles and a large woman, head weighed down under an elaborate mound of hair, spread designs before us, urging us to buy long after we realised the tiny man watching from a dark corner was not the Prem we were seeking.

And to the metal workers' street, and the ringing of hammers on knife blades and pots like bells in the misty air as the rain cleared and the sky turned to pearl. But Prem in his stained leather apron and bulging shoulders was not the perfumed Prem from my childhood.

We brushed by beds of golden flowers pungent in the sun, droplets from the leaves shaking on our feet, to find Prem the harness maker, his *dhoti* wrapped around legs thinner than the carved staff he leaned against while he sat on his shop platform,

spitting red juice and leaf bits from a stubbled jaw.

"I was never in the mountains," he said, his voice so cracked I could barely make out the words. "It's Harappa Prem you want. Don't go to his courtyard looking like that, though. They won't let you past the gate."

I looked down at my faded *dhoti* and sash folded to hide the holes, at Sundar's threadbare shawl, his muscled shoulder pressing through, his hands black with ground-in soot.

"We'll visit a barber and buy new clothes," I told Sundar, "and find Prem tomorrow."

"At least could we find the house today?" asked Sundar. "Perhaps my mother's face will show itself. Perhaps I'll see my father's murderer, judge whether his arm is strong or puny."

"You don't have to wrestle him, Sundar," I said. "It's enough for him to see you, enough for Dalia to

face the truth of what's been done. But wait for tomorrow, when we look our best, to see them burning in shame."

"A glance today. That's all," said Sundar.

Of course he wants a glimpse of his mother, I thought. My stomach churned, my calves cramped, just as they had twelve years before when I walked away down the mountain slope, the weight of baby Sundar pulling at my neck. I saw again the vacant look on Dalia's face as she banished her child to the shepherds, her servant boy to whatever fate he stumbled into.

"As you wish," I said to Sundar. "Today we'll search out where they live, but keep your fists to yourself."

We followed the harness maker's directions out of the bustle of the market into quiet lanes between high walls. Watchmen squatted at entrances. Children shouted, women called to each

other in hidden courtyards.

“Go carefully,” I said at last. “It should be just down this turn.”

A throng of people burst into the lane ahead of us, swaying, chanting. A priest with shaved head and yellow garland dangling from his neck scurried ahead, waved us back, glanced over his shoulder. A palanquin festooned in flowers floated toward us above the heads of the crowd.

“Bow down. The tree,” the priest gasped, falling to his knees, face in the mud. I crouched down too, pulling Sundar beside me.

I strained my eyes upward. A platform carried by young men with oiled bodies and lowered eyes, a painted pot, a plant of twisted stems and hanging leaves. The procession turned into an entrance.

“What’s happening?” I asked. Somehow I knew it was to do with Prem and Dalia.

"A sapling of the holy *pipal* tree," the priest said. "The Harappan's made the proper offerings and now the tree will be installed in his courtyard. Soon the people will feast. Even beggars can fill their bellies there," he said, his eyes flickering over our ragged clothing.

Sundar sucked in an angry breath, clenched his fist.

"We're travelers, not beggars," he said.

The priest drew back.

"Travelers, rich, poor, everyone," he said. "I said 'beggars' just as an example."

From the shadow of a neighbour's wall, we watched the entrance to Prem's courtyard, heard the chanting within, and then the clatter of ladles on pottery, the drone of conversation. Men in billowing *dhotis*, women wrapped in gold and jewels, sauntered between the entrance columns

into the muddy lane, chattering, gesturing, jovial from Prem's hospitality.

Above the din, I heard the rise and fall of a melody. Ignored by the crowd, an old man sat cross-legged by a column, his head lifted in song, his eyes shut, his arms flung wide. A boy, ribs protruding over a hollow stomach, beat time with a stick.

I stiffened. A man passed out of the courtyard, his ankles spattered with muddy water spurted up by his feet. A man whose small head was weighed down by the great wheel of his turban. I recognised Prem. His squeezed-together chin and nose, his darting eyes were the same as the day he set off with Manas Moru from the stone house on the mountainside. His cheeks were more wrinkled now, his body stooped, but I knew he was Prem.

He held out a leaf piled with food, placed it on the ground by the singer and his companion. The

singer folded his hands in acknowledgement, the flow of his music uninterrupted.

A pair of yellow dogs, all bones and matted fur, slunk around the edge of the crowd, crouched to eye the food. Prem shrugged and turned back into his courtyard, emerging once again with another mound of food.

"Even the dogs must feast today," he said.

Sundar grinned at me with surprise.

"He's a good man," he said. "We've been mistaken."

The dogs pressed noses to the food as Prem set it on the pavement well away from the singer. Clear on his finger as he extended his hand was a ring, the stone huge and dark as dried blood in the dull light.

I nudged Sundar.

“Manas Moru’s ruby,” I mouthed.

Sundar’s jaw was rigid.

“Not good, but evil after all,” he said. “Those dogs should refuse his food. It will turn to poison in their stomachs.”

30 No Club

Tej greeted us at the gate when we returned to the guesthouse. Her eyes shone.

“We have news,” she said, flipping her black braid over her shoulder, tapping her foot in excitement.

“What news?” asked Sundar, his voice gruff. “I saw my father’s ruby on his murderer’s hand. What more news do I need?”

Tej’s face fell.

"You saw him?" she said. "Then wash yourselves and we'll talk. Singh-papa bought us clothes."

Clean and oiled, fragrant in new starched cloth, we joined the group in the guesthouse room. Late afternoon light slanted through the window and glowed on Ishwari's face as she sat on a *charpoy,* fingering the blankets folded in her lap.

I took a handful of dates and nuts from a tray set nearby. Sundar paced back and forth, declaiming like an actor.

"He murders my father for his ruby and wears it in plain sight!" said Sundar. "He must pay for that. I'll go with my club to his courtyard, and shout 'Prem of Harappa! What's that ring on your finger? Is that my father's blood dripping onto your *dhoti*? I'll smash your skull and spill your own red blood on that starched white *dhoti*, Prem of Harappa.'"

He drew up in front of us, folded his arms across

his chest. I glanced at Singh-papa, willing him to deal with Sundar's anger.

"Sundar-ji, you're right," Singh-papa said. "Fathers must be avenged. But understand your enemy first. Talk with him, hear his story. Don't dive in without looking. Check for water snakes before you bathe in the river."

Tej pressed her hand to her mouth, impatient with holding back her news. Singh-papa extended his hand toward her.

"Listen to Tej," said Singh-papa. "The gods have given you a way to approach him."

Sundar, tranquil once again, sat on the floor.

"Lochan and Sundar, you won't believe this," Tej said.

She fell silent, tipped her head and smiled. We waited, our breathing heavy in the silence.

“Don’t tease like a child, Tej-ji,” said Ishwari, smoothing the already smooth blanket on her lap. “Just tell them.”

“What would you say if I told you we’re already expected in Prem’s courtyard tomorrow?” said Tej. “Ordered there by your mother Dalia, Sundar-ji. Don’t worry. We told her nothing about you.”

My eyes flickered toward Singh-papa, who folded his hands and bowed.

“Correct,” he said. “I heard her myself.”

Lochan chewed his lip, scratched an insect bite on his elbow while Tej told her tale.

“For sure, that woman is Dalia,” said Tej when she had finished her description of the ribbon-seller, the litter, the woman. “And her son is that little baby with the damaged arm.”

“This is good, Sundar,” I said. “You can take

their measure while they have no idea who you are. See your mother and brother, observe Prem, plan how you'll approach them."

"What's to plan?" said Ishwari. "It's straightforward. Say 'Here I am, your long-lost son. Take me or leave me.' Then go on with your life."

"We go tomorrow, sell a blanket, and leave," I said. "Keep your club here, Sundar. Tomorrow's for learning."

Sundar hefted his club, unconvinced.

"Don't bring the club," I repeated.

Sundar stared at the wall, his eyes blank.

"No club," he said at last.

The room was silent until Tej cried out.

"Sundar, by all the gods! Control your dog!" she shouted.

Peela's nose was at the sack of food Singh-papa had brought from the market. Sundar pulled the dog away.

"Sniffing at our food, Sundar? How could you allow it?" Tej said. "You should have trained him better than that."

"Dogs and people make mistakes," said Singh-papa.

Peela cringed against Sundar, his face so woebegone even Tej laughed.

31 Guards

In the morning we walked through the mist to the street of the hawk. To Sundar's stepfather, his mother Dalia, his brother with the withered arm. Sundar walked in his own world, closed off from the rest of us. I moved with muscles clenched to control my shaking. How would it be, seeing Dalia again?

At the entrance, the gate keeper sent a servant boy running to the house, bare feet slapping the pavement of the courtyard.

The steward came, his nose high, his hands resting on the head of his staff.

“There are more of you today,” he said. “Wait here. Keep your blankets ready. Dalia and Ekahath will come.”

He turned on his heel, flourishing his staff, and went back to the house.

“Ekahath,” said Tej. “That’s his name, Sundar. That’s your brother the steward’s talking about.”

“My brothers were my cousins who died with the sheep in the mountains. Or Jeeti who died in Leopard village. I don’t remember this Ekahath. He’s not my brother.”

He stared straight ahead, opening and closing his fists.

“Keep your voice low,” said Singh-papa, tipping his head toward the doorman who was straining to

hear us.

“These people are rich,” murmured Tej. “Richer than my grandparents, I think. The wall is painted even on the outside, and see the entrance we just walked through – all carved and polished. And flowers and trees everywhere. Don’t offend them, Sundar, till they’ve paid Ishwari for her blanket.”

“Or don’t tell them at all,” Ishwari said. “We’ve had trouble enough.”

The servant re-appeared through one of the blue-edged doorways of the house, gesturing toward us. A woman and a young man approached as the climbing sun pierced the leaves of a nearby jackfruit tree.

I held my breath as Dalia came close, wrapped in blue like the sky when the monsoon clears, hair coiled high, hands flitting, straightening a gold-embroidered edge. Bangles jingled on her wrists, as thin as I remembered them. Her face was

heavier than when I had last seen her, but the same cheek bones pushed up the sides. The same cheeks as Sundar had. My chest thumped. My head buzzed.

Ekahath was thin, so thin his frame looked stretched. Long toes gripping the wooden knobs of his sandals, fleshless legs sticking out from his white *dhoti,* black hair wound with wooden beads on top of his bony head. His face was young beneath the sternness. Sundar was fifteen; that made this younger brother thirteen. He supported his right arm against his midriff, fingers curled and limp.

"Your brother's a holy man," murmured Tej to Sundar, her eyes round with wonder. "A seeker of the gods."

Ekahath folded his hands in a lopsided greeting, his strong hand pushing the limp one into position. His bow was gracious, his smile sweet. Dalia saluted us as well, but as an afterthought, her mind

more on the blankets than on us.

“Show him,” she told Ishwari.

Singh-papa and Ishwari shook out one blanket and then the other, lifting them away from the dirt of the courtyard.

“You see, my son. Do they tempt you? A blanket from the place of your birth?” said Dalia.

“As you wish, Mata-ji,” said Ekahath.

Dalia pressed Ekahath’s shoulder, peered into his eyes.

“You’re my son, Ekahath, but you let me do nothing. It’s my duty to shower you with precious things, but you have no interest. What’s a mother to do? Who else can I indulge?”

Tej gasped. Sundar jerked back, wide-eyed. The cast-off son, never indulged, not even remembered.

Dalia's glance wavered, swiveled to Sundar and held. Sundar stared back, his chest heaving. A woman and a boy, both with jutting cheek bones and honey skin, stared at each other. Dalia narrowed her eyes, her face stiff with sudden awareness.

"You said you came from Nadri town," Dalia said to Ishwari. "Your friends also?"

"Better to say a few days' walk from Nadri town," said Singh-papa. "From Muni village."

Dalia covered her face with her hands.

"What was I thinking? Why did I call you here?" she said. "I should have realised."

She lowered her hands, looked at Ekahath, averted her face from Sundar.

"So many years," she said. "Now see what I've done, Ekahath. I wanted to please you with a

blanket, but instead, before this day's over, I'll lose you. You'll scorn me, spit on me. I should never have noticed those blankets."

Ekahath's mouth gaped, his body rigid except for the arm bent and limp at his chest.

Dalia flung her arms in the air.

"A pit should open at my feet," she wailed. "To hide me deep. Bury me and let me be forgotten."

I was twisted with embarrassment for her, saddened by her panic, at the same time satisfied to see her pain.

"Mata-ji, please don't upset yourself. I'm happy for the blanket. For anything you give me," said Ekahath, blaming himself for her agony. "Give us both of them," he said to Ishwari. "Take this purse with our thanks."

Ishwari shrugged and bundled up the blankets,

backing away from the pouch in Ekahath's hand, exchanging glances with Singh-papa.

Sundar stepped toward Dalia, his chest heaving. Tej tugged the dog's leash from his fingers.

My skin broke out in nervous sweat, my insides cramped with excitement, as I waited for Sundar to confront his mother.

Sundar sucked in his breath. His voice rang across the courtyard.

"You say the earth should bury you, Dalia wife of Manas my father?" he said. "It will never happen. Never. Mother Earth will heave and spit you out, just as you threw aside your child.

"Sundar?" said Dalia. "Sundar, my son? I massaged your legs with oil every day. I was a good mother to you."

"Neela the shepherd was my mother," said

Sundar. “She gave me puppies to hold and sang by the fire and beat me when I climbed too high. She called me her gift from the gods. And Himavati was my mother. She bathed my face when I was sick, as a mother does, though I was a slave.”

Sundar swallowed. Dalia turned her head away.

“Himavati, my mother - the landslide killed her and the earth embraced her gladly. And Neela the shepherd, my mother, my greatest mother - she was crushed by the mountains too, and the earth was honoured to receive her, though I wasn’t there to see it.”

A strangled sob came from Dalia. She leaned toward Ekahath, who stood aloof, his eyes fixed on Sundar.

“You’re not my mother, Dalia,” said Sundar. “You cast me off, like a broken jar on the refuse pile. Lochan has told me.”

She blinked at my name, but took no notice of me.

“Don’t speak of hiding in the earth where my respected mothers lie,” Sundar said. “You belong in the glare of the sun.”

Sundar fell silent. His ragged breathing filled the courtyard. The doorman paced on the street outside the entrance, hand on his club. No one else moved.

Dalia swayed, reached out to Ekahath who stared past her without comprehension. I caught her arm and held her upright. Her eyes were terrified.

Sundar ran his hand through his hair and sank against the courtyard wall. Dalia was a dead weight on my arm. I lowered her to the brick platform circling a jackfruit tree. Still she clutched my arm. Did she know I was Lochan?

A man stepped out of the building, followed by a servant. Prem, slight, stooped, the skin of his chin showing through his thin beard, grey wisps of hair straggling below his wide turban. His robe was edged with green and red, shot with gold. As he flipped the end over his shoulder, the red stone on his hand glittered in the sun.

“Ekahath, help your mother. What’s happening here?” he asked. “Blankets, the servant says. Landslides. Where’s the sense in that?”

He thrust his face forward the way I remembered, mouth open like a cat testing the air. Dalia dropped my arm as I stepped toward him, folded my hands and bowed.

“Prem-ji,” I said, “I remember you well. I was a servant in the house of Manas Moru in Muni village. I’m Lochan.”

Dalia gasped.

“Lochan,” she mouthed.

“Manas Moru?” said Prem. “What new grief have you brought from Muni village, Lochan? Dalia-ji has no need of news from there. Those mountains hold sad memories for her.”

What came next was so sudden and unexpected I reacted before I understood what had happened. One instant I was searching for the words to tell Prem who Sundar was, the next I was clutching at Sundar’s arm, feeling it slide through my hand, as Sundar hurled himself from behind me toward Prem, brandishing a knife.

Dalia shrieked.

“By all the gods!” Prem shouted.

“Sundar! Wait! Give me back my knife!” called Tej, hauling on the leash as Peela barked and strained after Sundar.

He brought no club, I thought. Just a knife.

I stretched out toward Sundar. Overbalancing, I thumped to the ground, grit digging into my knees. Ishwari clutched at a fold of Sundar's *dhoti* and was pulled flat as he darted forward, her face banging against the rough pavement. The doorman ran in from the lane, his club raised. Sundar staggered, then thrust his arm at Prem's chest.

The knife wavered. Prem grunted, deflected it with his arm, hopping backward to collide with Ekahath rushing to help. Ekahath slammed to the pavement; Prem sprawled on top.

Singh-papa, in three great strides, clamped Sundar to his chest and lifted him away from Prem. The knife clattered to the ground.

"This is not the way, Sundar," he said.

Sundar's arms and legs flailed and then fell limp.

For a moment we said nothing. Sundar's chest heaved, I brushed dirt from my knees, Ishwari probed her scraped nose. The gatekeeper lowered his club, and the servant sprinting from the inner rooms jerked to a stop, the steward behind him. Our eyes were on Prem and Ekahath as they struggled up from the pavement, on the red smears on their chests and *dhotis,* the bloody slash on Prem's forearm,

Ishwari held the arm while I pressed the wound, Ekahath gripping Prem's good arm, easing him down to the pavement.

"Bring cloths," I said and the servant ran off.

Prem's face looked frail, his jaw slack. Pillowed on Ekahath's lap, he looked up at Sundar. Sundar, from Singh-papa's strong clutch, stared at the man he had attacked. Nobody spoke, as if the gods had struck us speechless.

The dog growled deep in his throat.

"Scratch his ears, Tej," Ishwari said, cradling Prem's arm, now tied up securely in strips of cloth. "He needs calming."

Tej caressed the dog's head.

"My knife," she said. "You stole it, Sundar. My great-grandfather's knife."

"I needed it," said Sundar.

The exchange prodded Prem to action. He pushed himself away from Ekahath's lap, threw off Ishwari's and my restraining hands.

"Call the guards," he ordered a servant, who ran through the gate into the street. "I don't know how I became your enemy, but you can explain to the city fathers. They'll not be happy – a wandering pedlar attacking a merchant."

He drew the fingers of his unhurt arm like a knife across his throat.

“No,” cried Dalia, rising from her seat by the jackfruit tree. “He’s not responsible. This happened because of me.”

Her body sagged. I rushed to catch her arm, easing her back down to the brick wall.

“What’s this?” asked Prem, his eyes darting between Dalia and Sundar. “Is she ill? Stop wringing your hands and fetch her maid.”

Once again, a servant ran off.

32 Offerings

Before the guards arrived, the house was peaceful again, outwardly at least. We sat under a mango tree, drinking warmed milk, eating fried pastries. Prem leaned back against the cushions, waiting for the poultice of mashed herbs being prepared in the kitchen. The ring on his finger gleamed in the sun.

“No need to call a healer, if you remember half of what Manas Moru had to teach you, Lochan” he said. “We were great friends. I miss him still.”

Sundar stiffened, his arm gripped by Singh-papa.

How would Prem regard me when he learned the attack was my doing, stirring up Sunder's feelings and then pretending not to see what he was planning?

Dalia sat turned away from the rest of us, arms around her legs, chin resting on her knees. Ekahath kept his eyes lowered, flickering toward Sundar.

"Have I understood correctly, Dalia?" said Prem. "This boy who attacked me. He's Sundar, Manas Moru's son?"

"You can see how he's grown," said Dalia.

"He was frenzied over his father's death, Prem-ji," I said. "He didn't know what he was doing."

"A frenzy not of his own doing," said Ishwari, with a stern look in my direction.

"There's a lot I don't understand," said Prem,

‘but, Lochan, you were sensible when you were a child, and I trust you are still.”

When leather-helmeted guards appeared at the gate, Prem waved them away, passing a purse to Ekahath for the leader.

“We called you in error,” said Prem. “There’s no need for your services after all.”

They looked doubtful, staring at Sundar’s pinioned arms and Prem’s bandaged one, but accepted the shells from Ekahath and walked off.

Prem sat up. The servant wedged another pillow behind his back.

“You told me, Dalia, the boy was dead,” Prem said. “Of a fever, you said.”

“Yes, I said that,” said Dalia, her eyes far away.

“You knew the child was alive?” asked Prem.

“He was well looked after,” said Dalia. “I saw to that.”

“A child lost within days of a husband,” said Prem. “My heart went out to you. You’re telling me it was a lie?”

Prem’s eyes drooped from the pain-dulling herbs I had found in the kitchen and steeped in his milk. He shook himself alert.

“That was not well done, to claim a death when the body lived,” said Prem.

Sundar’s head was bowed. Singh-papa kept his arm on his shoulder, more as comfort now than restraint.

“He was too young to know,” said Dalia

The rest of us hung on every word.

“It was my duty to care for Manas Moru’s son,” said Prem. “Why did you deprive me of that?”

“You say that now, but it was different then,” said Dalia. “You complained that Sundar claimed all Manas Moru’s notice. It was plain you’d never have taken a woman with two infants dragging at her arms.”

Prem closed his eyes, because his arm hurt, maybe, or to shield himself from Dalia’s words.

“So little respect you had for me?” said Prem. “You took me for a man who would spurn a child in need? What had I done, for you to think so ill of me?”

“I made it easy, your decision to take me.”

“So the woman I admired didn’t exist,” said Prem. “What did you do with this boy you said was dead?”

“For Ekahath I had to do it,” said Dalia, spreading her arms wide, her voice growing shrill. “You see that, don’t you, Ekahath? I’ve looked

after you well. The gods made you imperfect to test me, and I've pleased them."

Ekahath crouched on his cushion, cradling his weak arm. He averted his head to avoid his mother's eyes.

Dalia's voice faded. I had to strain to hear.

"Sundar, so big, so strong. He didn't need me."

Prem pushed forward, wincing as he jarred his arm. The servant rushed to support his back.

"Sundar," Prem said, "you had good cause to draw your knife, but why at me? Why not her? The gods be thanked my friend Manas Moru didn't live to see what she's become."

Dalia cried out, then covered her face with her hands.

"Prem-ji," said Sundar, "I stabbed you from duty and will stab you again. Why do you doubt it? You

killed my father and stole away my mother. What son can forget that?”

Singh-papa tightened his grip on Sundar’s shoulders. Prem fell back against his cushions.

“Manas died of a viper bite,” he said. “I watched him.”

His jaw clenched as he struggled to sit straight, propped up by his servant.

“Whoever told you otherwise knows nothing of a friend’s dying, his moaning, his swelling all blue and bleeding, the relief when he dies.”

“And from where did the viper come?” said Sundar. “Who did you reward to hide the snake in the hay?”

“Is this what you believe? Yesterday I was a householder blessed by the priests. Today I’ve become a deserter of children, a murderer of

friends," said Prem.

He collapsed into his cushions. Sundar slumped in the circle of Singh-papa's arms, his face uncertain.

"Lochan can explain," he said.

"Prem-ji," I said, "If you played no part in Manas Moru's death, then how is it you wear Sundar's birthright on your finger?"

Prem lifted his injured arm and peered at his hand.

"Yes, I see," he said. "The ruby. Manas had dreams for this red stone and the fortune it would bring his children. On his deathbed he put it in my hand for the care of his family. And care for his family I did."

He glanced at Ekahath and Dalia.

"As far as I knew, at least," he said, staring at

Sundar. “This boy Sundar was out of my reach. But you need to know this red stone, this great hope of Manas, is almost worthless to the stone merchants.”

He tugged off the ring and held it toward Sundar.

“If you are Sundar, take it,” he said. “I regret it’s not the ruby Manas thought it was, though it’s precious beyond all the rubies of the Himalayas because it was given by Manas.”

“It’s worthless?” I asked.

“Dalia knows it too,” said Prem. “She was with me when the gem worker told us.”

“But perhaps you didn’t know that when you murdered Manas for it,” I said.

Even the servants gasped at my boldness. Prem glared at me. Then he laughed, not in mirth but

with a bitter bark.

“I’m honoured that you feel at ease in my house and can speak so bluntly,” he said.

Ishwari touched my arm.

“Leave it alone,” she said. “This is Sundar’s business with his father, not yours.”

“And Ekahath’s,” said Tej.

Prem sat forward once more. The servant bent to support him.

“I swear,” he said,” that I never harmed my friend Manas Moru, I never sought out others to harm him, I never had a single thought to harm him, not by snake bite, not by any means. I swear it on the heads of Ekahath, the stepson I raised as my own, and of Sundar, the stepson I thought was no more.”

“Prem-ji’s words are true,” said Sundar. “His

eyes are like Peela's, without deceit."

The dog stiffened his ears, twitched his tail. Ishwari scratched his neck.

"Sundar, you've attacked a man who deserved your respect," said Tej. "Throw away the knife you stole from me. Whatever magic it had is broken now."

"No," said Sundar, "the knife has proved its magic, for it sliced open the truth."

"You were wrong about everything, Lochan" said Tej. "The snake killed Sundar's father all on its own, and the ruby is almost worthless, not even a ruby."

"Yes," said Prem, "the stone. "It's beautiful but almost worthless."

He pointed at Dalia.

"I repeat. Beautiful but almost worthless."

Dalia gasped, shrank back on the brick ledge where she sat.

“Yesterday,” Prem continued, gathering his strength, “I had a wife. Beautiful, with winning ways. Yesterday she was needed here, to stand beside me while the priests blessed our house with a holy *pipal* tree.”

He pointed with his good arm to the sapling we had seen carried in the day before, now standing in a little garden edged with brick.

“But,” said Prem, “you, Dalia, preferred to have yourself carried from shop to shop through the city like a queen. And as always, I closed my eyes because you were indeed a queen to me. ‘Let her enjoy herself as she wishes,’ I thought.

“All these years, I’ve closed my eyes, while you’ve lavished love on your son and left the servants to feed me. ‘She lost one son,’ I thought. ‘Let her find joy in the other.’

“And when you squandered shells and silver pieces, I closed my eyes as well, for we had plenty, so what did it matter? ‘Just let her be happy,’ I thought.

“But that was yesterday, Dalia” he said. “Today my eyes are open. Your own child you sent away. Ekahath’s brother. Manas Moru’s son. You’ve shamed me, made me into a man who abandons children. Today I no longer have a wife. I’ll be a brother to you, watch over you as I must. But you’re no longer my wife.”

Dalia fell to her knees on the pavement, raised her arms toward Prem.

“No,” she cried. “You misunderstand.”

“There’s no misunderstanding,” said Prem. “The truth is clear. I’ll go to my bed now.”

The servant helped him to his feet.

“It’s happening too quickly. Don’t be rash,” sobbed Dalia as he moved away.

She yanked at the hair looped on her head, smeared it with dust she scraped from the pavement.

“Reply to me at least,” she cried, but he turned his face, toward the house, away from her.

“My life is over,” she cried, flinging away the golden chain that bound her forehead. “Ekahath, I did it for you. Can you see that?”

Ekahath ducked his head.

Dalia wailed with grief.

I went to her. How could I not? This was Dalia, smiling for years behind my every dream, asking for her comb, her face paint, her fruit drinks. I was her little servant boy, running to her aid. Taking her arm, I pulled her up. Her face brightened.

“It’s not her fault,” I called to Prem-ji as he moved off leaning into the servant’s shoulder. “I know her well. She didn’t mean to hurt Sundar.”

“You see, Prem?” she cried. “I never meant to harm.”

“But you did,” said Prem, turning around. “And now you suffer. It can’t be helped.”

“Prem-ji,” I called, my voice sharp. “Prem-ji, why do you blame Dalia when your fault is as grievous, or worse?”

Prem stopped his slow progress across the courtyard, cocked his head waiting for me to continue. I could hear the trembling in my voice as I spoke words I had no right to speak.

“Sundar-ji’s hair is thick, his limbs are long and rounded like Manas Moru’s. Ekahath’s are not,” I said.

Singh-papa left Sundar, clamped his hand around my arm.

“Lochan is distraught, Prem-ji,’ he said. “Excuse him. He hardly knows what he’s saying.”

And so we stood, my hand on Dalia’s elbow, Singh-papa gripping mine, all staring at Prem, who leaned against his servant and glared back, his bandaged arm stiff in front.

“Can you deny, Prem-ji, that Ekahath, who should have been Manas Moru’s son, is yours?” I said.

Dalia snatched away her arm.

“You know nothing,” she spat.

A sound like one of Peela’s snarls twisted from Prem’s mouth. Ekahath slipped away, stood gazing at the courtyard wall.

“Lochan, by all I hold sacred, you should be

ground underfoot for those words," said Prem.

He fell silent. Birds fluttered and chirped in the stillness.

I had gone too far. Faces gaped at me. Singh-papa's eyes were grave. Tej and Sundar locked eyes. Ishwari bent over Peela.

Prem cleared his throat.

"But I understand," he said.

I sighed in relief. I realised I had been holding my breath.

"You and I, Lochan," said Prem, "we're fruit from the same tree. I remember the boy you were in Muni village. Manas Moru, baby Sundar, beautiful Dalia. I remember your eyes, the light in them when Dalia was near, the same light that flared in me, though I hid it from her, from Manas, even from myself. I understand, but I'm done with that

now."

I felt exposed, my link with Dalia tumbled on the pavement for all to see.

"You've taught me how foolish I was, Lochan-ji," said Prem. "My goddess is no goddess at all. But never doubt it. Ekahath is Manas Moru's son. He dwells in my heart as the son of my friend. And Sundar is there too, if he wishes."

Ekahath came to him, touched his feet, stood before him hands folded. Tej watched with sparkling eyes, tipped her head to urge Sundar to do the same. Sundar hesitated, then walked to Prem, stooped to touch his feet.

Tej and Singh-papa smiled their satisfaction. Dalia rocked back and forth where she sat. Ishwari's eyebrows were raised.

She doesn't trust tenderness, I thought

Like me.

Again Prem cleared his throat.

“Stabbed in the morning by Sundar and worshiped before the sun has set,” he said. “I accept both offerings. They were meant sincerely.”

33 Out of Sorts

“Sit and enjoy the shade,” said Prem, moving with Ekahath and the servant toward the doorway opening into the gloom of the house.

A second servant gathered cups and platters and scurried through another entrance.

“There’s a lot to tell Daleep when we return to Muni village,” said Singh-papa.

Dalia was huddled on the brickwork at the base of the jackfruit tree. She raised her head, focused

her eyes.

“Ekahath,” she called. “You’re my son. If you touch Prem’s feet, you should touch mine as well.”

In silence, Ekahath turned back, brushed his fingers over the pavement at his mother’s feet, and rejoined his stepfather’s progress to the door. Dalia raised her hand to caress his head, but he was gone. Her arm wobbled in the air, then dropped.

Sundar’s face was rebellious as he looked at me for guidance. He was a son too. Should he touch Dalia’s feet? The moment passed. He stayed where he was.

“You shrink from approaching me, Sundar my son,” said Dalia. “But you had a big heart even as a child. See what has happened to me. Cast away by my husband, scorned by my son. Do you not pity me?”

Sundar caught my eye and shrugged.

“I did it all for Ekahath,” said Dalia. “He doesn’t understand.”

Ishwari lowered herself to the ledge beside Dalia, took her hand and held it. Ishwari, fresh like the scent of mountain meadows. Dalia clogged the senses like mangoes ripened too long in the sun.

“I understand,” Ishwari told Dalia. “Lochan and I understand. For people like Prem life lies flat. The weave is clear. Warp straight, threads in neat loops. The shuttle sliding smoothly, no unsightly knots. They think it’s like that for everyone. But for you and me, the pattern’s twisted. Threads all snarled together, no hope of finding the one you want. We unwind the tangles as best we can, unpick the knots. I understand what it was like for you, Dalia. When others judge, they speak from ignorance.”

“Your words give me comfort, Ishwari the weaver,” said Dalia. “I’ll go to my quarters now.”

“These tangled threads you talk about,” said Tej when Dalia had passed into the house. “Ignore them. Just do your duty. That’s what I advise. That’s why I freed Cham’s wife at the mustard press. It was my duty.”

“For you it was clear, Tej,” said Ishwari. “Perhaps not for Dalia.”

“What if one duty trips over the feet of another?” I asked. “If it’s Sundar’s duty to honour his mother and also his duty to scorn her, what then?”

Singh-papa shrugged. “Let the gods show the way.”

“So what do we do now?” asked Tej. “It’s strange to sit in the courtyard when the hosts have gone.”

“We could say Sundar’s our host,” I said. “After all, this is his mother’s house.”

“Do you recognize her, Sundar-ji?” Tej said. “Ishwari’s house on the hill – do you remember living with Dalia there? You look just like her.”

“This woman I don’t remember, and it was better when I knew nothing. I wish I hadn’t come here,” Sundar said, his voice flat.

Ishwari loomed beside me, hands on her hips, her eyes furious.

“This is your doing, Lochan-ji,” she said. “You filled his head with tales of his beautiful mother and evil stepfather and goaded him to strike an innocent man. You played with his life as if the gods had given you the duty. Thank the gods that Prem survived, or you’d be doing penance for the rest of your life, and a thousand lives more.”

I was about to protest, then thought better of it.

“Ishwari is right, Sundar,” I said. “I stirred this up when I should have let it be.”

Sundar tipped his chin and smiled at me, a bewitching smile like his mother's. When would she smile like that again, I wondered. It was my doing that she sat alone in her room, her life in shreds.

"I regret I brought you pain, Sundar," I said. "When the gods threw you in my path, I thought they were leading us to Prem."

"Lochan," said Ishwari, thrusting out her arm so that I stepped back. "If it brings you peace to say you were following the plan of the gods, so be it, but the real reason is different."

Her face was scornful, with none of the love I had seen in her eyes at Seema's house. "Sundar was an excuse for you, Lochan," she said. "You wanted to bask at Dalia's feet again but had no stomach to bring it about yourself. You hid behind Sundar."

I was speechless, embarrassed by her

shrewdness.

“You pushed Sundar at Dalia and skulked behind. You’re like Peela when we caught him gnawing the food bag. Begging Dalia to pet you after she’s as good as kicked you.”

She crouched down on the pavement.

“Woof, woof,” she said, gazing up, panting like a dog, her hands curled like paws, her hips wagging a non-existent tail. “Woof, woof.”

Tej giggled, then shook with nervous laughter. Sundar grinned. Even Singh-papa’s mouth curled up behind his moustache. Ishwari looked ridiculous, just as Peela had looked that day, cringing, head hanging beneath his shoulders. I dropped onto the brick ledge, jarring my spine.

“You’ve made yourself clear, Ishwari,” I said. “Stop now. You’ve knocked me down. No need to dance on me with spiked sandals. And anyway, I

wasn't wrong. A boy should know his mother."

"My father's grateful," said a voice behind us.

Ekahath had rejoined us, and stood palms together, his weak arm supported on his chest. His hair was smoothed with oil, the coil tightened, the tendrils bound. A starched shawl lay over his shoulder, a pouch hung at his waist.

"Prem is grateful you've opened up the truth."

Ishwari looked uncomfortable. I knew she was wondering whether Ekahath had heard her barking like a dog.

"With your permission, Lochan-ji," said Ekahath, "we'll send to the guesthouse for your things. There are rooms for all of you here. And Sundar is my elder brother. This is his house."

Before I could answer, a boy in a loincloth rushed through the gate toward us and threw

himself at Ekahath's feet.

"Please, Ekahath-ji, time is short. Come quickly," he pleaded, his eyes red-rimmed and tearful. "My mother says hurry, or he'll slip away without you."

"We'll speak later," Ekahath said to me, bowing and turning to leave.

He was Sundar's younger brother, a boy, but he carried himself like a city father.

Tej stepped forward, her face eager.

"Is someone sick? I can help," she said.

Ekahath stood still, his eyes closed. Tej shifted her feet, uneasy as the silence stretched on.

"You rest here," Ekahath said at last. "Binku's mother welcomes me because we're friends. She doesn't know you."

Tej began to speak, but bit her lip instead. Ekahath strode out the gate, the boy running to keep up.

“He’s brave.” said Tej. “He doesn’t complain about his arm.”

“Why should he?” said Ishwari, “with bronze cups to drink from and servants to bring sweets whenever he raises his eyebrow?”

“I’ve decided it’s good to have this holy boy for a brother,” said Sundar. “All the bad things I’ve done - he can explain to the gods for me.”

“The gods understand, Sundar,” said Tej. “When you thieved and lied, you didn’t know any better. You’ll be fine now you’ve learned.”

“I was taught well before,” said Sundar, his nostrils flaring, his chest thrust out. “Sham and Neela taught me well And so did the Leopard village. Leaving them all to die in the mud - that

was my own doing."

"If you don't mind, Tej," said Ishwari, "it's you who needs to learn from others. The rest of us already realise we don't know everything."

Tej turned away, squeezing her face to keep from crying.

"Ishwari," I said, "your tongue leaks venom sometimes. Tej is a young girl trying to help. Encourage her. Don't poison it for her."

"We're shocked and tired," said Singh-papa. "Even Peela, with his snout between his paws. He's out of sorts too. Prem has offered us quarters. We need to rest. Call the servant, Sundar, to show us the way."

34 Plans

We entered Prem's room for the evening meal, rested, clean, dressed in new clothes. Tej arrived with her hair piled and looped like Ishwari's.

"Ishwari did it," she said.

"Elegant," I said.

"What about me?" Ishwari asked in an undertone. "Since my hair's the same."

"Elegant of course," I muttered. "And talented

and honest."

Ishwari lowered her eyes and smiled. Somehow we were easy with each other again. When we returned to Muni village, I resolved, I would stand up to Daleep.

Dalia bent to serve us from a basin of spiced eggplant, ladling food on our plates with exaggerated care. Her face was scornful, as if we were hardly worth her notice.

"Sundar, sit beside me, share my plate," said Prem. "A son should be close to his stepfather."

Sundar squatted at Prem's side, pleased or uncomfortable, I could not tell.

"As you wish," said Sundar, "but I've had one father poisoned by a snake, one father buried in the mud, and one master buried too. And you I tried to kill this morning. You're better off without me."

"I'm happy to have you, Sundar," said Prem. A man needs sons for his old age."

"Sundar and Ekahath," said Tej. "You'll be well looked after."

"Ekahath's a good son," said Prem. "He talks to the gods for me. But he has to be watched, or he'd take all our rice to the fisher village. Sundar, keep an eye on him – in case he forgets to eat."

Prem was the trading partner Daleep was hoping for, but Prem was an old man. Ekahath was following his own path. Why not Sundar running the merchant house of his stepfather Prem?

And I could be Lochan the trader, draped in silk, turban twisted on my hair, skimming downriver to Sindhapur with boatloads of goods, hauling goods upriver back to Muni village.

Lochan the trader and his wife Ishwari the weaver.

In the meantime, Sundar and I weighed hides and beads, spices and bolts of cloth in Prem's warehouses.

"What you're holding in your hands will travel all the way across the western sea to Dilmun," I told Sundar. "Our journey from Muni village was nothing compared to that."

"Add Ishwari's blankets to the pile of rugs," said Prem. "They're eye-catching. They'll do well in Dilmun."

"Dilmun's a land of rock, I think," said Sundar. "Far from the high pastures."

Ekahath returned after several days, his *dhoti* rumpled, his toes dusty.

"You went to watch over the little boy's father," Tej said. "How is he now?"

"He's left this life," said Ekahath after a long

pause, glancing at Tej for an instant, then returning to his cup of milk.

“May the gods receive him,” said Tej. “Are you a healer?”

“I understand fevers,” he said, after another long pause.

Tej smoothed the courtyard pavement with her finger, pushed pebbles through a crack near her foot.

“Next time, let me go with you,” she said.

“You’re from a merchant family,” said Ekahath. “Your duty lies with them.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Tej. “Your family are merchants too.”

“Prem knows my heart’s not with trade,” said Ekahath. “But yours is. Accept it.”

Next day Ekahath disappeared again.

“Where is he?” asked Tej.

“Outside the city gates, in the forest. He sits with the holy men there,” said Prem.

“I’ll find the place,” said Tej. “If you come with me, Singh-papa, that’s good. Otherwise I’ll go by myself.”

“Take food from the kitchen,” said Prem. “Dalia will pack some for you. The holy ones are always glad of it.”

So every day Tej and Singh-papa sat with the *sadhus* under the trees and followed Ekahath when he was called to the fisher huts by the river.

“Sick people welcome Tej,” said Singh-papa. “They depend on her. She’s very kind.”

“Sick people welcome me and so will the holy people. The *sadhus* lead a good life and I plan to

join them," she said. "My father will be surprised when I tell him."

I cleared my throat, not sure how to respond.

"Join them?" I said. "How long have you had that idea?"

"It's a great sacrifice," said Ishwari. "Can you give up so much?"

Tej screwed up her face.

"Why does everyone doubt me?" she cried. "They don't believe me in the forest either. But one day I'll be famous, the biggest hermitage in the forest, people traveling for weeks just to see me. Then you'll believe me."

"The biggest?" I said. "Your father will like that part at least."

Sometimes Ishwari and I wandered through the lanes of Sindhapur.

“This blue colour. Why do you use it so often?” she asked at a cloth shop. “It will fade. Or perhaps you tell your customers never to wash it?”

“Who on the Sindhu worries about fading?” asked the merchant. “In our great-great grandparents’ time, perhaps. Do you not know our beautiful blue dye from the *neela* shrub?”

I traded shells for two lengths of cloth, blue for Ishwari, red for Tej.

“Search for a dyer’s,” said Ishwari as we walked away. “They must have a secret, to make the blue set so well. Think what I could weave with a blue like that.”

We asked directions, peered into dim stalls, until outside a dyer’s hall, we found a cart loaded with blocks of deep blue paste wound in knotted string.

“*Neela* dye?” I asked the young boy coaxing the bullock through the gate, steadying the load with

anxious hands. “How many shells for a block?”

“Yes, *neela*,” said the boy.

A man appeared from inside.

“I regret this is already sold,” he said, “and anyway, perhaps of inferior quality. It’s the first batch watched over by this boy.”

“Just one cake. Could you not spare one cake?” asked Ishwari.

He shrugged his shoulders, spread his hands, the skin cracked and stained blue.

“I want to help you, but it’s impossible. This is promised to a ship about to sail.”

“How is it made, this *neela* dye?” I asked. “I know the plant. I saw it thick along the river as we came here. We have the same in the mountains. It takes skill, I think, to turn it into this blue powder.”

“It’s true,” said the man. “I and my brothers learned from my father, who learned from his, and this boy here is learning from me, and so will his sons, if the gods favour us.”

I bowed to the boy slouching by the cart, picking with a dirty finger at an open pimple on his chin.

“Stand straight, my son, and take your hand from your face. You’re making it worse,” said the father.

The boy’s jawline was inflamed with painful-looking sores.

“This woman is a weaver,” I said. “Her head is bursting with designs she could make with this blue. She would make good use of one cake, just to try it.”

“I regret,” said the man. “It’s impossible.”

“May the gods be with you both,” I said, easing

Ishwari away.

“Why did you make me leave?” she asked. “He would have told me about the dye.”

“The time wasn’t right,” I said. “We’ll come again.”

“The dyers will never tell their secrets,” Prem said that afternoon in the courtyard, as we waited for Tej and Singh-papa to return from the forest, Sundar from roaming the streets. “But why worry, Ishwari-ji? This blue dye is not easy to come by, but my trading house has influence, after all. We’ll find a little for you before you leave. And send more when we can.”

His words gave me an opening.

“Prem-ji,” I said, “if you wish, we could join our houses, my master Daleep’s and yours. One trading house, one roof stretching from Muni village to Sindhapur.”

“I also have been thinking,” said Prem, his mouth pursed.

“Perhaps, Prem-ji, your thoughts are the same as mine,” I said.

“I gave Ekahath his freedom to wander,” Prem said, “and so there was no one to follow me in the house of Prem. But now there’s Sundar.”

“Sundar in the house of Prem,” I said. “I also had that idea.”

“Sundar in Sindhapur, Daleep in the mountains,” said Prem. “And what of Tej? She could work in the house of Prem as well.”

“A marriage between Sundar and Tej?” I said. “I’ll speak to Daleep when we return to Muni village. Tej would serve you well. She has her father’s touch in trade.”

Ishwari snorted.

“Does Tej follow plans others make for her?” she asked. “I haven’t seen it. She has intentions of her own. She told you.”

“A trading house in her own hands may tempt her,” I said.

Peela loped into the courtyard, with Sundar behind, grimy from kick-ball in the street.

“With that energy, Sundar will run the business well,” muttered Prem. “Later we’ll talk, out of his hearing.”

35 Power for Good

"You should know, Tej," I said, "It's in Prem's mind to marry Sundar to you."

Ishwari and I had found her sitting under the jackfruit tree in the courtyard.

"Impossible!" said Tej. "I'm going to the holy people. And anyway, Sundar's like my brother. Don't encourage Prem in this. And wipe the idea from your mind too."

"It would please your parents. Prem will give

the running of his trading house to Sundar. One great merchant house, the length of the Sindhu."

"And Lochan ordering people around at both ends," said Tej. "Isn't that your dream?"

"I confess it," I said. "Your marriage would be a boon to us all. Think of your parents' wishes and your own future."

Lochan-ji, don't talk with me about this anymore," said Tej. "It's embarrassing. Has Prem asked Sundar? You might be surprised by what he says. He's with the dog by the cowshed."

Ishwari rushed to keep step with me, hampered by her uneven walk.

"You're smiling," she said. "You love meddling. You weave people's lives the way I weave wool."

But Tej was right. Sundar had no interest in my plan.

“If that’s what you wish, Lochan-ji, I’ll do it,” he said. “You plucked me and Peela from the forest, and gave us friends and full bellies. I’ll never refuse you.”

“Sundar,” said Ishwari, “when you sit by yourself and a smile crosses your face, what are you thinking?”

Sundar said nothing. Ishwari and I waited.

“Perhaps I’ll take Peela one day, to run with the sheep and breathe the air of the high pastures,” he said.

“You don’t dream of being a famous trader?” asked Ishwari.

“If you ask me, I’ll do it,” said Sundar.

“You want to herd sheep?” I asked.

“It’s what I was raised to do,” he said.

“Then return with us to Muni village,” I said, “and Daleep will find a flock for you. Even without you, Prem and Daleep can trade.”

“So that’s settled,” said Ishwari. “Now, Lochan, help me find out about *neela* dye. It’s a steady supply I need. Not just one cake.”

“I have an idea,” I said. “Ointment.”

I asked Dalia for some of the *dhania* herb growing in the corner of the courtyard.

“Take it. It makes no difference to me,” said Dalia, her shoulders haughty.

Only when Ekahath was home did her sour expression waver, her head glance up at his footsteps, her eyes follow him. But he never approached her, though he never turned away.

I pulled handfuls of soft *dhania* leaves from the herb garden. I combed the markets and Prem’s

warehouse for the roots and oils I needed and crushed them along with the pungent *dhania*, the clean fragrance reminding me of my childhood. The skin mixture was one of the first ointments Manas Moru had taught me. I pressed the paste into a stone pot the cook found for me.

"Now for the dyer," I said to Ishwari. "This will either please him or enrage him."

No one stood by the gate where we had spoken with the dyer and his son. An elderly watchman slid in front of us as we stepped through the entrance onto the paved court.

"What do you want here, my son?" he asked.

"Where is Master-ji?" I said, hoping I was asking for the father of the boy with the inflamed face.

"Jeevan-ji is through there if you wish to see him."

He stumbled on the cracked bricks as he led us across the courtyard to the dyer we had met the day before.

“We’ve come to seek your advice, Jeevan-ji, if you will allow us,” I said as we passed through the doorway. A servant set cushions for Ishwari and me.

“You say your dye is already spoken for,” I said. “Is this always the case?”

“You’ve understood correctly,” said Jeevan. “All the blue we pull from the *neela* plants is taken by the sea traders.”

“Could you not spare some for traders to the north and east?” I asked, “for the house of Daleep, which can bring you woolen cloth as fine as silk from the Vipasa river in the north and carry back your *neela* to the mountains?”

“There’s none to spare,” said Jeevan. “Our vats

are strained and my days are stretched to provide what we've pledged to the sea captains."

"What if you build more vats on the promise of what the house of Daleep will take from you? New vats? New paving for your yard?"

Jeevan spread his arms.

"And who will work the vats?" he said, unconvinced.

"What if you give the duty to your son? He's a dutiful boy."

"He's young and unproved," said Jeevan. "Perhaps you don't know the demands of the *neela* plant. It doesn't give its colour willingly. It tosses and churns and twists in the tank, and if you turn your back for a moment, it heaves itself onto the ground. And even if you guard it well till the water has sucked out the colour, still it defeats you, for gather it an instant too early or late, the dye sours,

useless. Never a problem for me since the *neela* welcomes me. But my son – they're not fast friends yet."

"Your son's readier than you think, Jeevan-ji," I said. "And the extra vats you need – we'll help build them."

Jeevan rubbed his chin, licked his lips.

"Consider our proposal," I said. "Your son will be a great help to you."

I brought out the pot of ointment.

"The gods have made him a handsome boy," I said. "This balm – precious roots from the Himalayas - I crushed them myself, having some skill in herbs. With your permission it will clear the redness. His face will shine like the moon."

Jeevan bowed, took the pot in his hands.

"You'll see," I told Ishwari as we walked back to

Prem's house. "He'll seize on my idea. Daleep will be happy and you'll have all the dye you want."

"Well done," said Ishwari. "This time you did well. But when you meddled with Sundar, Prem could have died."

"Just as Manas Moru told me," I said. "The power for helping, the power for hurting, they're the same. He told me when I was a child. Now I understand it. My gratitude to Manas Moru and his foresight."

36 Bargains

“So, Lochan,” said Tej one evening. “Let’s strike a bargain.”

“About what?” I asked.

“Ishwari’s your promised wife. Correct?”

Ishwari jerked her head, startled by Tej’s bluntness.

“You know it’s true,” I said, answering Tej but looking at Ishwari.

“My father advised against it. Correct?”

“It’s not courteous to speak of this in front of Ishwari,” I said. “In those days I was weak. Now I’ve changed.”

“I’m past minding, Lochan,” said Ishwari. “I understand Tej’s father. Why choose a bent back when the world’s full of straight?”

“To tell the truth, Ishwari,” said Tej, “I hardly notice your back any more. I’m used to it.”

Ishwari pressed her lips together and said nothing.

“Lochan,” said Tej, “I can twist my father to your way of thinking, save you from confronting him. But you must help me in return.”

“A trader, as always,” I said.

“My father will need a broker in Sindhapur,” Tej said. “To connect with Prem’s trading house. I can

be that broker, if you make it happen."

"I've already tried," I said, "but you won't agree to marriage with Sundar."

"I could be my father's broker here without being Sundar's wife," Tej said.

"Your plan to renounce the world and enter the forest?" I said. "What happened to that?"

"I listened to those who knew and I saw the plan was foolish, Lochan," she said. "I want you to speak to Prem. Be my father's voice, since he's not here. Make Prem agree, and I'll make my father accept Ishwari. A friend helping a friend."

"Make Prem agree to what?" I asked. "It's your father who decides if his daughter can stay on her own in a distant city."

Tej lowered her head and was silent.

"Lochan," said Ishwari, "you're making this

difficult for Tej. She's not talking just about trade, you know."

"Do you understand, Lochan?" asked Tej. "Ekahath and I. Prem's trading house and my father's. Just as you wanted with Sundar. But Sundar I don't want for a husband. Ekahath I do."

"By the gods, you're jumping from one bad plan to another," I said.

Singh-papa stepped toward me, his palms together.

"I've watched him for a few days now, Lochan," he said. "There's strength in him. And more wisdom than in a grown man. In two years he'll be the age to marry. Ekahath's a worthy choice."

"Worthy, of course," I said. "But I still say impossible. Ekahath follows a life of wooden beads and a water jar. People like Ekahath don't marry. And if Sundar's a brother to you, as you say, Tej,

then Ekahath's a younger brother."

"Please," said Tej. "Approach Prem. If Ekahath's father agrees, how can the son refuse?"

"Tej, I'll speak with Prem," I said. "But don't expect too much."

Tej grinned.

"Favour for favour, as I promised," she said. "Do this for me, and I'll have my father praising you for choosing Ishwari."

"If it's what you want, you just had to ask. About Ishwari, I'll talk to Daleep myself," I said.

Later, when we gathered to eat in Prem's room, Tej entered alone.

"Will Ishwari come soon?" asked Prem.

"I haven't seen her," said Tej.

"I'll get her," I said.

The servant folding clothes in the women's quarters had no idea where Ishwari was. Nor did the servants in the kitchen. She was not in the back courtyard with the cows, not on the bench under the jackfruit tree, not by the newly-planted *pipal* tree. In the end, the steward found her coming in through the gate from the street.

"The watchman didn't see you go out, daughter-ji," he said. "It's dangerous in the streets alone."

"Prem is waiting. Where did you go?" I asked as we crossed the courtyard, the steward pacing behind.

"I wanted to walk," she said. "After Tej's words, I wanted to walk."

"Tej angered you?" I said.

"I'm not angry, and Tej did nothing any different

from the rest of the world," Ishwari said. "There's no point being angry. I'm just disappointed."

"Sit here," I said, stopping at the jackfruit tree.

She sank onto the brick ledge. The steward hovered nearby.

"I'm disappointed," she repeated. "Tej brought it all back to me, bargaining with you to get me accepted by Daleep. It won't change. I'm deformed and that's how people think of me."

I put my arm around her shoulders, pulled her to my side. The steward covered his mouth to hide his grin.

"For your sake, I wish your back could be straight," I said. "But not for mine."

She smiled, rubbed at her eyes.

"Dwell on your weaving and your beautiful hair. Don't dwell so much on your back.

“How can I not,” said Ishwari, “when I see the look in people’s eyes?”

She rose from the ledge. I followed her through the door to Prem’s room, lowered myself on a cushion to share a plate with Prem and Sundar. By the time Ishwari took her place between Tej and Dalia, her composure was restored. But her eyes were turned inward.

“Prem-ji,” she said after we had eaten, while I wound fresh bandages around Prem’s arm. “Can you advise me?”

“I’ll try my best, Ishwari-ji,” said Prem.

Even Dalia’s eyes sparkled with curiosity in the lamplight.

Ishwari took a deep breath, then spoke fast, her tongue stumbling over her words.

“They say that in Sindhapur there are healers

from everywhere. Do you know of one who can help this crooked back of mine?"

"Well now," said Prem, looking flustered. "I need to think about that."

A voice rose from the doorway behind us.

"I can answer, Pita-ji, if you wish," said Ekahath.

Ekahath, home once again from the forest, his *dhoti* creased and tendrils of hair straggling from his topknot. Tej stiffened at his entrance. Just like Peela, I thought, when he hears Sundar's voice. Dalia stiffened too.

Ekahath approached his father, touched his feet and Dalia's, then crouched back on a cushion, greeting the rest of us with folded hands.

"I can answer your question, Ishwari-ji, if you allow me."

Ishwari agreed with a tip of her chin, then

lowered her eyes, pressed her hands together in her lap.

"In Harappa I knew the healers well, Ishwari-ji," said Ekahath. "My mother found them everywhere. In the forest, in the market, in musty rooms, on silken cushions by lotus ponds. In the end, they all said the same thing.

"'When he was an infant, we might have done something. Now his arm is set. We can't change it.'

"And the healers here in Sindhapur – I move among them. I know them. They'll say the same to you. Forgive me for saying this, Ishwari-ji. Your spine is set. I'm sorry."

The room was silent, waiting for Ishwari's reaction.

"Of course, Ekahath," she said. "I was foolish to think otherwise."

“When we came to Sindhapur,” said Ekahath, “I told my mother ‘No more healers. Let my arm be.’”

“I thought this city would cure me,” said Ishwari. “So many people. So many skills. But it’s not to be. I see that now.”

Tej took Ishwari’s hand. Sundar’s eyes were wet.

“My grandmother tells me to be grateful,” said Ishwari.

“Perhaps not grateful,” said Ekahath. “But untroubled. A burden carried in the open, scoured by the sun, cooled by the breeze, maybe in time it grows lighter. It’s the hidden burdens, the secret ones, that swell and burst, soaking us with poison. Like my mother, burning in shame.”

Dalia gasped.

“Have respect for your mother, my stepson,”

said Prem, his face soft.

Already, Dalia's magic was working in him. Soon she would be the centre of his life again.

"Ishwari-ji, I wish my arm was strong," said Ekahath. "Bitterness always waits near me for a chance to slip in. Binku's father wanted water and I had to call for help. The gods have given me an arm that can't even hold a dying man. But they've given me the strength to live a truthful life. That's a greater gift than an arm."

Tej hung on Ekahath's words, her eyes bright, but Ishwari shrugged.

"It's easy for you, Ekahath," said Ishwari. "You're a saint. I'm not."

"Nothing about being a saint is easy," said Singh-papa. "That's why there aren't very many."

"Enough of saints," said Prem. "Now Lochan

and I will speak of business. Leave us to talk."

The others left, and Prem and I sat with the lamp casting shadows between us on the embroidered floor cloth. Tej tossed me a look as she passed through the door, rolling her eyes toward Ekahath. Prem waited until the voices and shuffling feet reached their rooms and silence had settled on the courtyard.

"So, Lochan, have you thought further of our trading company? The house of Manas Moru shall we name it? After my good friend whose death brought us together in the end?"

"The house of Manas Moru," I said. "A good name."

"And what of Daleep's daughter?" he continued. "Will Tej agree to stay in Sindhapur? It's a great gift to me, Lochan, that Sundar has arrived. Strong, tall, just like Manas Moru. A stepson to carry on for me. He's needed here."

“Prem-ji, the gods play tricks,” I said. “They give us gifts, then snatch them away.”

“You have unwelcome news. Tell me,” said Prem.

“Sundar is your stepson, and will serve you if you request it. But he grew up a shepherd, and so he wishes to remain. He’ll wither to nothing here on the plains. You’ve embraced your stepson just to give him up again.”

Prem sucked in his lips. His face was dull in the flickering light.

“A merchant’s life is full of setbacks,” he said. “I expect them. But this one is hard.”

“You have another stepson,” I said.

“Ekahath belongs to the gods,” said Prem. “I’ve agreed to it. Manas Moru has a shepherd and a holy man to honour him, but there’s no one to

serve the house of Prem."

"Tej can serve it well," I said. "The blood runs strong in her."

"So I thought, but she'll be of little help to me in a shepherd's hut."

"That's not her intention," I said. "Why not a marriage of Tej and Ekahath? A holy man is no less holy if he honours his stepfather by taking a wife."

Prem spread his arms.

"Of course, but Ekahath refuses," he said.

"Pita-ji," came a voice from the shadows, "please rest. I'll explain to Lochan-ji."

"You've been listening in?" said Prem. "So be it. The matter concerns you."

Ekahath slipped into the room. He folded himself onto the floor near his stepfather.

“Daleep honours me if he offers me his daughter, Lochan-ji. But I can’t accept. My feet take me where they will. A wife would trip me like a root on the path. It’s not for me to marry.”

“I’d never trip you,” came Tej’s voice from outside. “I can help you, Ekahath.”

She slid her hand around the door frame, eased herself into the lamplight. Prem caught my eye and shrugged.

“You too, Tej-ji?” he said. “This is a strange way to leave Lochan and me alone.”

“I had to come. Lochan might forget something important,” said Tej.

Singh-papa appeared behind her.

“Singh-papa-ji, you also, lurking outside the door?” said Prem. “Don’t remain standing. Come and sit.”

Singh-papa bowed, then turned to Tej

“Tej, you mustn’t be here,” he said. “Not when it’s you they’re discussing. Come back to your room. Here, Ishwari, go with her.”

Ishwari moved out of the shadows beyond the doorway.

“Tej would scratch my eyes out if I took her away now,” she said.

“Welcome, Ishwari,” said Prem. “Are you the last? Is the whole city listening in to my conversation?”

“This is not the time to send me off, Singh-papa,” said Tej. “I must be here. I’m needed.”

She stepped further into the room, her arms spread wide like an actor in a play. A flicker of interest flashed across Ekahath’s face.

“Prem-ji, I can help with the trading and Ekahath

can follow whatever life he wishes," she said, avoiding Ekahath.

"I already do whatever I need to, with no wife to claim my thoughts," said Ekahath, addressing Prem, his glance sliding toward Tej.

"Ekahath devotes time to his step-father," said Tej, "and so he should. What difference if a wife claims him too?"

"Anyone born has a father or a father's memory to serve," said Ekahath. "A wife's a different matter. A man may choose a wife or not. And I've no wish for such a tie. I won't be held."

"I wouldn't hold you back. It's not my way," said Tej, her eyes locking with Ekahath's.

"This is not right," said Singh-papa. "The daughter of Daleep bartering for her own marriage."

“No need for bartering,” said Ekahath. “I’m not made to be a husband.”

“I’ll be too busy with the trading house to complain,” said Tej.

“That’s the problem, you see,” said Ekahath. “Let me be frank.”

He swept his arm across the room, the cushions, the embroidered cloths.

“Tej-ji, I could give all this up tomorrow. I come here for my parents’ sake, but I could give it up. But you can’t. There’s excitement in your voice when you speak of trading. That’s where your heart lies, striking bargains, fingering cloth and furs and beads to test their value.”

Tej’s mouth opened but made no sound.

“Could you be content with one shawl,” asked Ekahath, “roughly woven? I’ve come to know you.

You'd be plotting how to trade it for a better one."

"Your *dhoti*'s of fine weave and you sit on soft cushions whenever you wish, Ekahath. You like fine things too," said Tej.

"Bare ground or silk cushions. I'm comfortable with either."

Tej pursed her lips, stepped toward Ekahath.

"Ekahath, you worry about your step-father," she said. "I know you do. I can lift this worry from you and Prem. I'll keep Prem's accounts, I'll arrange carts and boats, I'll be here with him. You can wander with the gods whenever you want to."

Ekahath stared at Tej, his eyes wide in the lamplight.

"Prem-ji knows I come when I can. He's at peace with what I do," he said, his voice fading.

The silence lengthened. Ekahath glanced up,

looking for the next volley.

But Tej had run out of arguments. Ishwari stretched out her arm to guide her away, then hesitated. She whirled to face us, biting her lip, clutching her elbows to her midriff.

"Ekahath," Ishwari said, "I'm forced to speak. To speak of painful things you'd rather not hear. Of your mother."

Her voice was strong, her eyes fierce. Ekahath fell back, recoiling from the force of her words. Prem and I too. Tej slumped, her mouth gaping.

"Ekahath," Ishwari continued. "For someone so wise, you are foolish when it comes to your mother. What kind of wisdom lets you leave a woman to grieve alone, pulling her hair and weeping? She's your mother, Ekahath. She might be broken, but you can't toss her out with the burnt lentils and cracked pots. You were broken from birth. She didn't toss you away."

Ekahath lowered his head.

"You say Tej will come between you and the gods?" Ishwari continued. "You have eyes to see, but still you're blind. Can you not see she's a gift they've bestowed on you?"

Ekahath fingered his weak arm. The crackle of the lamp filled the room.

"Did you not hear me, Ekahath?" said Ishwari. "I said you were broken, but your mother kept you anyway. And you refuse to see what the gods have shown you, a way to serve them and serve your mother both."

Ishwari had finished. She shrank back against Tej, her eyes darting around the room. Sundar moved from the gloom of the doorway to squat beside the two women, a silent guardian.

"Welcome, Sunder," said Prem. "I thought you must be there. Ishwari, those were strong words, but they needed speaking."

Tears glittered on his cheek.

“Ishwari,” said Ekahath. “I’ve heard you, and will see to Dalia as I should.”

Sundar called out from where he crouched by Ishwari and Tej.

“Ekahath, my brother, Ishwari’s advice is good. Could you not take Tej as your wife? She’ll care well for you and for Dalia, our mother. I tell you this as your older brother.”

Ekahath stared at Tej. Tej tossed her head and stared back. I drew in a breath, released it slowly.

Ekahath shrugged.

“Tej-ji, I am willing,” he said, “if that’s what you wish.”

“Ekahath,” said Singh-papa. “You’re blessed. Not all wanderers are so lucky.”

37 As It Should Be

Prem and Daleep joined their trading houses, and the house of Manas Moru prospered. Its roof was broad, one corner on the mountainside in Muni village, another over Prem's courtyard in Sindhapur.

And all of us who sheltered under it prospered too.

Singh-papa and I weighed wool and counted boxes and spent months on the river travelling for

the house of Manas Moru.

Every spring, Sundar trekked to the high pastures, his flocks of sheep vast, for Daleep was generous. Black, white, grey, and spotted, they swirled through the mountain passes like ripples in the Vipasa, dogs barking and nipping at their legs, Peela bounding close to Sundar. Every fall he returned to Muni village, woven caps and salt and other goods slung in packs over the backs of his sheep. The best of the wool he gave to Ishwari.

In time, Tej joined Prem's household as his daughter-in-law. She gloried in the shiploads of blankets and wood and spices crossing the western sea to Dilmun and the cartloads of copper and pearls rolling to lands far south of the Sindhu. Sindhapuris were glad to work for her, since she was fair, but one look at her mouth pursed in anger taught them never to question her commands. Even Daleep, warm by the fire in Muni village, waited for her advice, which she sent by every boat

hauled up the river from Sindhapur, along with offerings of sweets to the *deodar* tree outside her grandparents' gate.

Though she had promised not to, she scolded Ekahath for staying away too long. Then, when he returned to the courtyard to rest under the jackfruit tree, she thrust his pouch of herbs and water jar at him and scolded him for neglecting his duty.

"Yes, Ishwari, a husband must be guided by his wife," Ekahath said, folding his hands and bowing, but still he came and went at his own choosing.

"Not every wife is as understanding as I am. Do you realise that?" Tej asked him.

"I'm grateful," he said, tipping his chin and smiling.

Tej smiled back.

“Those two smile at each other,” said Singh-papa, smiling himself, “as if the rest of us aren’t here.”

Tej scolded Prem for working too hard and Dalia for sulking.

“Mata-ji, you exhaust your spirit doing nothing. Don’t sit so much,” she told Dalia. “Water the herb garden. Keep an eye on the sweepers. They’ve left grit in the corners.”

Tej was wise, for Dalia seemed happy when she was busy.

“This daughter-in-law of mine,” Dalia said to Ishwari during one of our visits to Sindhapur, “acts like a mother-in-law. She gives me no peace.”

“She’s overbearing, but you’ll come to love her,” Ishwari told her.

In Muni village, Ishwari rubbed her

grandmother's swollen hands with oil, and wove and dyed. Each blanket was more closely woven than the last, edged with black mountains and red sunsets, or blue sky dyed with *neela* from Jeevan's dye works in Sindhapur. Still, the red dye made from *majishtha* she and I gathered together on the slopes behind our house was her favourite. And whenever she wrapped a blanket around her shoulders, she fastened it with the bird-shaped pin I had bought for her in the marketplace in Nadri town.

Often, I sat with Ishwari on the slope above the Vipasa, the goat nibbling plants on the roof, the forest high behind. The stone house of Manas Moru was mine and Ishwari's. I felt his eyes smiling on me as I sorted through the roots and leaves he had taught me to gather.

Manas Moru, the gatherer, the wanderer. His sons were strong and kind and wanderers too, one spinning wool on mountain trails, one with a water

pot dangling at his side. And I, his servant Lochan, almost his son, bargained for wool and scrambled over rocks, a sack on my shoulder. I also was strong and kind.

Sweetness caught at my throat each time I returned to the house on the mountainside, where above the rise and fall of the river, all was as it should be. As Manas Moru had asked.