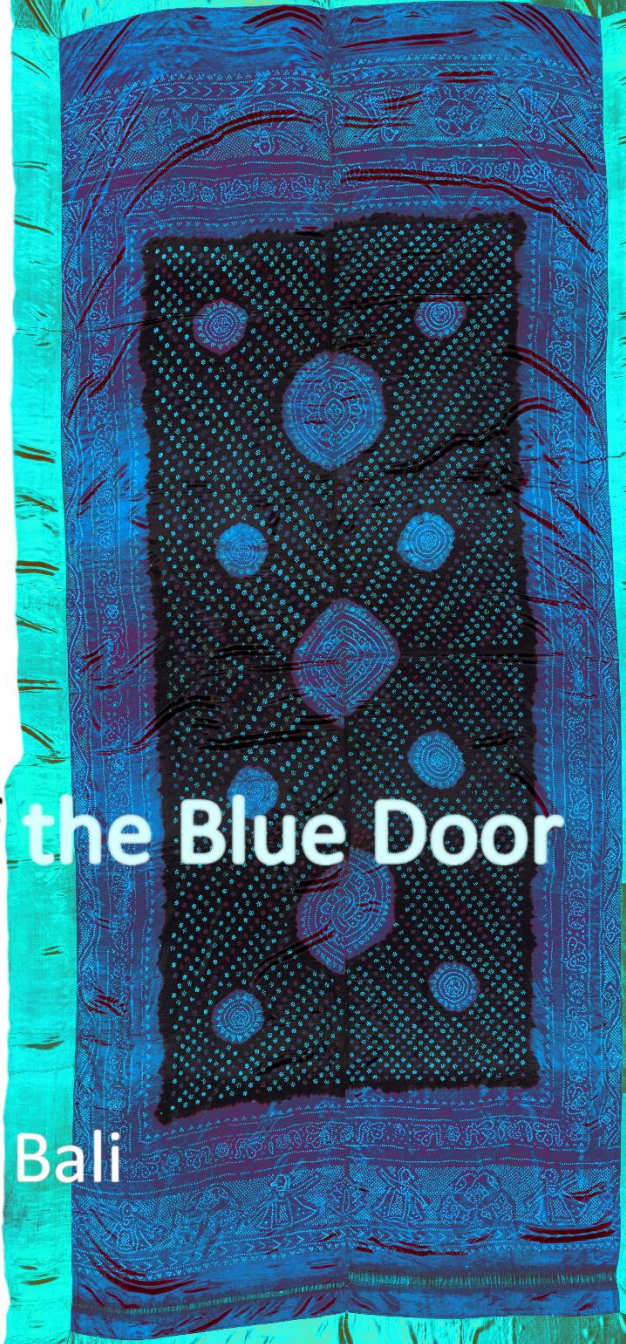

Tales of the Blue Door

Judith Bali

Table of Contents

Sooma the Merchant

Sooma the merchant loved his son Saj, but knew his weaknesses, and depended on the servant Rohan to keep him safe from harm. Sooma had a round belly that hung over his *dhoti,* a drooping moustache, and a broad smile. There was much in his world to make him smile, for his trading house flourished, his courtyard was airy, and his storeroom was full. Even ordinary things filled him with joy. Birdsong and blue skies and bowls of cool water, the servant

serving him *chapatti*, his wife Deepi, fine-boned and delicate, twirling in a new skirt.

Most of all, he smiled at his son Saj. Saj was thin and wiry, with bright eyes that were never still and an open smile like his father's. On the day Saj was born, Sooma stood by the stream behind his house, gazing at ducks flying black against the violet sky, and promised himself that his son would never face the hardships he had endured.

For Sooma's storeroom had not always been full, his courtyard airy. He liked to sit by the brazier in the evenings, telling the story of how he had won Deepi and come to live with her in the house with the big courtyard.

"Long ago, before my belly grew round and my moustache drooped," he would say, patting his stomach and laughing loudly, "I was a market vendor, bobbing and smiling behind the counter of my stall hung with ribbons and braided cords and

sashes. Deepi-ji, light-footed and fragrant with jasmine, and much younger of course than she is now…"

Deepi would smile and toss her head.

"… Deepi came often to look over my colours and fabrics which she said were the prettiest in the market. She chatted as she sorted through ribbons or checked the drape of shawls on her shoulder, and I treasured every word she uttered," Sooma said, and Deepi, leaning against her cushions in the courtyard, would giggle.

"The dyer's sons in the stall beside me," Sooma said, "teased me about my 'great lady', but only once. My body was awkward, but my arms were strong, and when I raised my fist, they recoiled and their mother cried out. The old man who sold wigs and hair creams on the other side planted a hand on my shoulder, forcing my arm down, while the dyers bowed and swore they meant no harm and had

nothing but respect for the lady. And after that, they never spoke of her again, but folded their hands politely whenever she came.

“She told me about her big house by the stream (it’s ours now, but in those days I’d never been inside such a place), her wealthy father, her elegant mother, the solemn ceremonies with chanting priests, the festivals where the women’s hair was woven with flowers, the men’s chests weighted with golden chains, and the cooks stirred cauldrons of food in the back courtyard. Just as we enjoy now. For you boys, such things are routine, but for me, her chatter was a window into a world I’d never seen.”

“But Sooma sahib, you are in this world now,” Rohan would say, because Sooma expected him to ask. “How did you come to be here?”

We listened to the story with fresh ears each time he told it. It was, after all, the story of how Saj came to be.

"How is it I'm sitting here? Master of this courtyard and of a trading house known the length of the river and across the sea? And with Deepi as my wife? The same Deepi who whispered to me in the marketplace, still beautiful today though her face has grown wrinkles of wisdom.

"It happened like this. One day I heard her father had died, and for two months I didn't see her. Then she took up her visits again. I grieved with her, then worried with her when her mother remarried and her new stepfather took over the household. She came less and less often to the ribbon stall.

" 'Ribbons are wasteful, my stepfather says,' she told me one damp day in the cool season .

"She didn't come again until the flame tree at the crossroads near my stall was dripping with yellow bloom."

"We know the tree, Father," said Saj. "It's still there."

“It’s taller now, of course,” said Sooma. “That day, Deepi whispered to me that her stepfather was a cruel man, and his sister Gulab and her daughter Elina were worse, and their only interest in her mother was her property.”

“Such a kind man Sooma was,” said Deepi. “There was a lovely rose-coloured sash spread on his counter. Sooma saw me looking at it.”

“Touching it with such longing,” said Sooma. ”I told her to take it as a gift. There were dark circles under her eyes. They’d never been there before the stepfather came.

“She said her stepfather would beat her if she took it. And I didn’t see her again until the hot season. I looked up from pouring a jug of water over my shoulders to cool myself, and there she was. There were changes in the big house, she said. Her stepfather died of a fever, and the priests had barely finished the ceremonies when her mother fell ill.”

“Not ill, Sooma,” said Deepi, her voice coming from the darkness beyond the brazier, for night had fallen while Sooma told his tale. “Poisoned. Poisoned by her evil sister-in-law and her pudgy daughter Elina.”

“Poisoned,” Sooma agreed. “Deepi knew, but there was no one to care but her.”

“There was a dealer in herbs with an evil reputation,” Deepi said. “I saw him slip into their quarters one day and suddenly my sweet mother was no more.”

“My grandmother,” Saj interrupted. “Murdered. I’ll throttle the people who did this.”

“They’re long gone,” said Sooma. “I’ll tell you the story.”

“Your father, so young in those days, and so brave,” said Deepi.

“Well, you see,” said Sooma, “my heart almost broke to see your mother, hardly out of childhood, return

home defenceless and grief-stricken. Home to a house once happy, but now filled with evil. Until then I'd always slept soundly stretched out in my blankets behind the counter, but now I twisted on the wooden platform, my shoulders bruised, my head churning with worry about Deepi alone with Elina and Gulab and Elina's grovelling husband Banda. I worried, but didn't see her again until the dry heat had passed and rain bounced from the pavement, battering the stall."

"They took over my house," Deepi interrupted. "They wore my mother's jewellery, sent off my mother's servants and brought in their own, called me disrespectful and slapped my face when I protested."

"That pushed me into doing what I'd been mulling over in the sleepless nights. Maybe the law gave Gulab and Elina a claim to the house or maybe it didn't, but common sense said they couldn't seize everything from an innocent girl. And certainly they

should answer for murdering Deepi's mother, although there was no proof. I had to take things into my own hands.

" 'Wait until the harvest festival,' the dyer's wife told me. 'The three of them will be alone: Gulab, Elina, Banda. They'll send their servants to the bonfire but turn up their noses at such things themselves.'

"Evil people," interjected Deepi. "They thought they were favoured, better than the rest of us. But Sooma showed them their error. They never dreamed what he was going to do. Nor did I."

"I made a plan," said Sooma.

He turned toward Saj.

"You get that from me, my son," he said, patting Saj's shoulder. "Your talent for making plans."

Saj grinned at Rohan, pleased with the praise.

“Market vendors expected strange behaviour from the wealthy,” Sooma continued, “but they had no patience with poisoners. The dyer’s sons were eager to help me, and threw themselves into preparations. They twisted up their moustaches like the tusks of charging boars. Their father tugged on an old leather vest and cap and brandished his cudgel like a seasoned soldier. The wigmaker, his huge body propped on cushions, turned his grandsons into demons, faces streaked with white, eyes circled in red and black.

“In the dark, we approached Deepi’s house. The old wigmaker, an enormous wig on his head, a robe flowing around his ankles, a carved staff in his hand, wheezed in the rear. We burst through the gate past the watchman, swinging clubs, beating sticks on the pavement, shrieking in a frenzy.

“Gulab and Elina and Banda came screaming down the stairway, rushing through the courtyard toward

the exit. Deepi was with them, screaming too. She had no idea what was happening."

"I recognised you soon enough," Deepi interrupted, "whooping and shrieking like a madman. You in your crumpled shirt - your father's never been one for neat clothes," she said in an aside to Saj - "and the others decked out like brigands from the forest."

Sooma brushed at his wrinkled *dhoti* and continued his tale.

" 'Flee, flee!' the watchman cried, deserting his post and shoving past us toward the street.

"The wigmaker whirled his staff to block the opening. He was gasping from exertion and bent with age, but when he squared his shoulders and rapped his staff on the pavement, the three usurpers and the watchman cowered in front of him."

"They mistook him for a magistrate," said Deepi, "and he played the part well. Robe, wig, perfumed

beard. Looming in the flickering torchlight. It was comical, to see those villains cowed."

"I played my part well too," huffed Sooma. "

Deepi smiled and tipped her head.

"To tell the truth, I was surprised how agreeable they looked, for all the evil inside them," said Sooma. "Smooth foreheads, thick hair, arched noses. "I made my voice deep and rough and said to the wigmaker, 'Honoured sir, these are the poisoners. Gulab, Elina. Banda. If you search their rooms, there will be evidence.'

"I knew there wouldn't be, for Deepi had already looked, but I wanted to throw them off balance.

" The wigmaker pounded the pavement with his staff, then gazed at everyone in turn. The courtyard was silent, except for the wigmaker's breathing.

" 'Gatekeeper, you are free to go,' he said at last in a ringing voice. 'You were merely doing your duty.'

“The gatekeeper scurried away down the lane.

“ ‘You three, Gulab, Elina, and Banda,’ he said. ‘You have poisoned a woman, decked yourselves in her jewels, and seized her house for your own. I give you a choice.’

“The three of them were trembling, Elina’s face hidden in her shawl, Banda’s sash hanging loose.

‘If you wish, the city guard will take you to the jail to answer for your crimes, or if you prefer, you can leave the city immediately and never come within its walls again. Which do you choose?’

“He thumped the pavement again with his staff.

“They set off the next morning, each with a scowling face and the bundle of food and clothing allowed them. We never saw them again. And a few years later, Saj, you were born. And all this is yours.”

“What happened to the wigmaker?” Saj asked.

“He left this world soon after, still laughing about how he played magistrate,” said Sooma. “The dyer’s family went back to their home in the south where they probably spin a good tale about their adventure here.”

“Your father has done everything for you, Saj,” said Deepi. “Always honour him for that.”

Saj hardly needed this advice, for he smiled on his father as much as Sooma smiled on him. His intentions were always good, though he needed to be watched. Ideas came quickly to Saj, grand schemes glittering with wealth and honour. But his enthusiasm vanished as quickly, leaving trampled dreams in its wake.

“He’s young, and will grow wiser with age,” Sooma said.

Rohan held Saj in check, for Saj and Rohan had been friends since childhood. Master and servant, but

friends nonetheless. While Saj darted from project to project, Rohan toiled behind, solid and reliable.

“We’ll make pottery,” said Saj as he crouched by the stream when they were ten years old. “Cartloads of bowls to sell and get rich.”

He looked up at Rohan, breathless with excitement, his face beaming.

All morning they scraped up mud, rolled it into lumps that vaguely resembled drinking bowls, and set them on the bank to dry.

At least, Rohan did. Saj pressed together one bowl before his interest waned, and he wandered off.

“Come on, Saj-ji,” said Rohan. “This was your idea. Why should I do it all?”

But Saj ignored him, busy kicking stones along the bank, stalking monkeys, lying on his stomach gazing into the water.

When the housekeeper discovered the shapeless chunks of mud by the stream, she scolded them.

“Don’t you know this is Sooma-ji’s prayer spot,” she said. “There’s sludge oozing everywhere. Clean it quickly, before he comes.”

Rohan pushed his morning’s work into the stream and brushed the bank smooth with a branch fallen from the thorn tree.

Saj helped for a moment, then his sash came loose and drooped into the mud. He used it to tie his legs together at the calves.

“If humans had one leg, this is how we’d have to walk,” he said, hopping along the bank and splashing Rohan with muddy water.

Then there was the honey water idea.

“We’ll be rich for sure,” said Saj, leading Rohan on a raid of the storeroom, then arranging stolen clay

cups and jugs of honey and water on a mat spread at the crossroads near their house.

Rohan sat through the hot afternoon, serving the few passers-by who took pity on him, tossing down a shell or two in payment. Saj ran after a troupe of jugglers, but returned in time to be discovered by their doorman and dragged home to Sooma-ji.

“You have the makings of a fine businessman,” Sooma told Saj. “I’m pleased with you. But no more wandering the streets like a beggar. You’re confined to the courtyard as punishment. Rohan, get back to your duties.”

Saj cheerfully took the blame for their venture. That was one of his endearing qualities. But he was just as quick to take credit himself for Rohan’s hard work. Rohan did not complain. He was after all a servant.

As the two boys became men, Rohan went less and less often to the village up the river where he had been born, which had become an alien place, his

grandmother dead, his uncle, who had sent him at age seven to serve in the city, filling his days with chores whenever he visited and begrudging him the food he ate. Rohan stretched in relief when he returned to his little room in Sooma's house, the cot woven with new rope, the carved chest for his clothes.

Days with Saj were rarely tedious. Saj's schemes progressed from boyhood games to elaborate and costly trading ventures.

He hired a captain to carry a shipload of hunting dogs across the ocean to Dilmun. Rohan watched as Saj sat with the sea captain in a wine shop by the wharves. Saj hung on every word of the captain's boisterous tales of the sea, his face bent toward him, open and trusting. The captain's eyes were calculating.

"Don't deal with him," Rohan told Saj. "He plans to cheat you."

But Saj, who thought ill of no one, let alone of a captain who clapped him on the back and made him laugh, handed over his cargo of barking dogs and their keepers, and never saw the captain again.

“Learn from it and put it behind you,” said Sooma. “I expected this. It’s by failing that you’ll learn to succeed.”

But then a shipment of mangoes rotted in a warehouse on the wharf, forgotten while Saj spent a week at a ceramics worker’s, fascinated by the kilns that turned clay into smooth pots. And a few days later, Saj acquired a cartload of carved toys from a genial stranger with a smile and a respectful bow. The stranger disappeared upriver with a generous pouch of silver while the warehouse workers unpacked a jumble of rough carvings: dogs, cats, bulls and tigers all with the same four legs and vague features.

“Your ventures have a way of coming to nothing,” Sooma finally said, the smile behind his moustache a little strained. “But no matter. The gods have been generous to me. Who better than my son to use my wealth?”

“He’s a good boy,” said Saj’s mother. “But when will he learn responsibility?”

Then Saj was overtaken by a new enthusiasm. At the crossroads one spring day, by the flame tree where the yellow blossoms hung, a young girl with a nose sweeping from her forehead like an eagle’s bill, a thick braid and a plain shawl sat lost in contemplation. Jerking to a stop, Saj held out his arm to pull Rohan back, and stood gazing at her.

“Look at her face. She knows something,” said Saj, his eyes, usually flashing from side to side, fixed on the half-closed eyelids of the young woman. “She must have tapped into deep secrets. I want to learn them too.”

“These holy people are all pretty much the same,” said Rohan. “They sit without moving a muscle and travel inside themselves. You’re made for other things. Your legs would start twitching even before you started.”

It was the girl’s delicate neck and graceful shoulders that had entranced Saj, Rohan knew, but he also knew Saj had no idea of what drew him. He was convinced he was on a spiritual search. Saj was always sincere in his enthusiasms.

“I’ll seek her advice,” Saj said, placing a coin at her feet. He lowered himself cross-legged to the ground, pulling Rohan down beside him.

Passers-by came and went, some offering coins, some merely sitting in silence. The young woman sat unmoving, and Saj and Rohan waited. Finally, she opened her eyes and sipped from the water jar by her side.

Saj sprang to his feet and approached the woman, bowing. Rohan, his foot fallen asleep, stumbled behind.

“Holy one,” he said, “Your face is flooded with peace. I wish to learn from you. Show me the way.”

She set down her jar on the packed earth, beside a basket of packages she must have purchased in the market.

“I am not the one to teach you,” she said. “You must seek out my teacher. He will guide you.”

“Where is that teacher?” asked Saj, his eyes alight with enthusiasm.

“Seek him in the forest,” said the woman. “If you’re meant to, you’ll find him there.”

“Please ask him to give some time to Saj, son of Sooma.”

The woman’s eyes widened.

Before Saj could ask more questions, she closed her eyes and sank back into herself. Rohan nudged Saj away.

“We’ll go to the forest right now,” said Saj.

“Start fresh in the morning,” said Rohan. “The search may be long.”

At dawn they set out along the damp bank of the swelling river, past barley fields where grain waved in the grass like strings of jewels, through tangled scrub budding with green, into the forest of shrieking monkeys, dappled light and birdcalls. They sweated in the still air, clambered over rocks, sloshed across streams, tore their *dhotis* on thorns. In the midday heat, when even the birds were still, they crouched by a tree trunk to eat the dried fruit and *chapatti* Rohan had tucked into his sash. Saj’s sash carried a bundle of fruit and nuts for the holy master.

If they ever found him, Rohan thought to himself.

“We should start back now,” said Rohan. “We don’t want to be in the forest after dark.”

But Saj was in the first flush of enthusiasm.

“Just a little further,” he said striding ahead, his arms swinging, his eyes snapping with excitement. “He has to be somewhere near.

Rohan followed, shaking his legs to ease the cramping muscles, until the sunlight began to ease and the forest came alive with the twitter of birds and the rustle of their wings.

“Home now for a meal and a well-earned rest,” said Saj, beaming at Rohan, sighing with contentment as he surveyed the tree-covered rise far in the distance. “More searching tomorrow, and as many tomorrows as it takes.”

The next morning, Sooma watched his son rub oil into a piece of tree branch he had chosen for a staff.

“Let’s see what happens,” Sooma murmured to Rohan and Deepi. “Carrying offerings to a holy man is better than leaving carts of mangoes rotting on the dock.”

Rohan said nothing of the beauty of the young woman.

For two more days Saj and Rohan toiled through the forest, monkeys chattering at them from branches, deer flashing into the trees as they passed.

“Do you know of a holy man sheltering here?” Saj asked a woman bent under a load of firewood.

“Beyond the hills,” she said, pointing back the way we had come. “They say his hut is somewhere there.”

A group of herb gatherers, a boy with a caged jungle fowl, a man with a large sack over his shoulder and a furtive look in his eye, all had advice, but all steered them in different directions.

On the fourth day, their attention was caught by a blur of white and a rustling in the trees and they held their breath as the young woman broke into the clearing. Her hair rose smooth from her forehead, just as Rohan remembered it.

“So, Saj son of Sooma, you and your companion are still bent on seeking out my teacher?” she said.

“This is Rohan,” said Saj. “Can you guide us?”

She worked the basket off her shoulders and set it on the ground, then wiped her damp face with a corner of her shawl.

“It’s airless among the tree trunks where the breeze doesn’t come,” she said, ignoring Saj’s question. “I’ve been digging vegetables for my mother’s cooking pot.”

She pointed to the tangle of dirt-caked roots in the bottom of the basket. Her fingers were stained with

earth, and the yellow border of her skirt puckered with burrs.

“Are you going to your teacher’s now?” asked Saj. “I’ll carry your basket for you.”

Rohan was embarrassed for him, for he could see the reluctance in the young woman’s face.

“It’s time to return to the city,” he said, taking a step back into the trees they had just left. “Your parents will worry.”

“Don’t make your parents wait,” said the woman. “You must go now.”

“At least tell me your name,” said Saj. “So next time we meet I can address you properly.”

“I’m Dani,” she said.

The next morning Saj strode out through the city gate, then hung back, his eyes squeezed together in uncertainty.

“Do you think she’ll be pleased to see me” he asked.

“Of course, as long as you are collected and courteous. But isn’t it the holy man we are seeking?” Rohan said.

“Of course,” said Saj, squaring his shoulders. “But Dani is our best guide. What do you think, Rohan? Should we look for her in the same place or try a different part of the forest today?”

He led the way into the trees.

There was no Dani, and no holy man either, to be found that day or for days after, although Saj carried two bundles of nuts and raisins in his sash, one for each of them. Rohan longed for Saj’s obsession to die and for him to lose interest in the endless ramblings. The sweat and grime, the cackles and shrieks of birds and monkeys, were intolerable in the heat of the dry season.

At last, they came upon Dani, crouched by a stream that had dwindled to a sluggish trickle. She slid an armful of bulrushes into the basket at her side and stood, folding her arms across her chest, tossing her head.

Saj beamed.

“I knew we’d find you,” he said.

“Do you only gather vegetables now?” he said. “I liked watching you communing with the gods.”

Dani shrugged.

“I also knew you’d find me,” she said. “I made sure of it. I’ve been following you for days.”

“Following us?” said Saj, intrigued. “You should have joined us. We could have eaten together under the trees. I’ve been waiting to share this with you.”

He took the packet of food from his sash and held it out to her, his eyes sparkling.

Rohan was not so trusting.

“All this time, you’ve been creeping behind us?” he asked, his chin thrust forward. “Why?”

Dani drew back, startled by the menace in his voice. She fumbled for words.

“How can I trust this urge you have to find my teacher?” she blurted out. “Maybe you think his hut is full of offerings and you plan to rob him.”

Saj gasped in horror, still holding out the packet of food.

Rohan looked at Saj, so gentle, so open-hearted, and was furious at Dani’s accusations.

“Don’t say such things about my friend,” said Rohan, stepping in front of Saj as if to shield him, his voice deep with rage. “It was you who told him to seek out your teacher. He wants to learn from him, not harm him.”

Dani fingered the long braid on her shoulder.

“You’re right,” she said. “Forgive me. But I must protect my teacher, and others too. It’s a student’s responsibility.”

Saj pushed past Rohan, his eyes riveted to Dani, his mouth spread wide in a sunny grin.

“I’ll tell you the truth, Dani,” he said, “I’m not really searching for your holy man any more, though since he’s your friend, some day I hope to meet him. I was searching for you. And now you’re here.”

Rohan was aghast, sure Dani would spurn Saj, and Saj would be tossed into despair. He tugged at Saj’s arm but Saj stood firm, exhilarated by his boldness.

Dani sucked in her cheeks and was silent. Then she spoke, her eyes narrowed, her face severe.

“Yes, I’m here, but only to warn you,” she said. “I’ll say it openly. Stay away from my teacher.”

“If you wish,” said Saj. “I already said it. It’s you I want to meet.”

His smile was still wide.

“Why must he stay away?” asked Rohan. “Last month you told him to seek out your teacher. What changed?”

Once again Dani sucked in her cheeks and was silent.

Then, suddenly, she blurted out an answer.

“There are things I know. Deepi’s son has no business with us,” she said, stumbling over her words.

She paused to collect herself.

“Saj said it himself,” she said. “He has no true interest in my teacher and the great truths.”

Saj lowered his head, then rallied, still smiling, and thrust the packet of food into her hand.

For a long moment, Dani stared at the ground, then bent to set the food in her basket.

“I come sometimes to this stream,” she said, flipping the braid on her shoulder. “Maybe you’ll find me here.”

In the next weeks, there were many hikes into the forest. Only twice more they came upon Dani.

Once she was sitting by a tree, lost in meditation. Saj wanted to watch, but Rohan saw her avert her eyes and knew she was avoiding them.

“We shouldn’t disturb her devotions,” Rohan said, his words measured, like a priest’s. “We’ll find her another time.”

Saj took his solemn tone seriously and left.

The second time Dani was digging plants by the muddy stream bed.

“Rest a while,” said Saj, “and share this food with us.”

Dani crouched by a tree trunk and chewed on a *chapatti*.

“When will you come back to the city?” asked Saj. “That trance we’ve seen you in sometimes. Could you do it again?”

Dani looked down her long nose at Saj.

“To the city?” she said. “When my teacher sends me for supplies. And that trance, as you call it, isn’t like a street juggler’s dance. It’s not to entertain you.”

She sniffed, and broke off a morsel of *chapatti*. She held the piece in her hand, eyes fixed on Saj as he picked raisins from the lunch packet and tossed them in his mouth. The forest stretched around them in the quiet of the midday sun.

“Those brown reeds over there?” Dani said, breaking the silence. “I’ll dig some roots for you. They’ll taste good for your evening meal.”

She wrapped the dripping roots in leaves and presented them to Saj.

“Take these to your home,” she said. “Don’t follow me, thinking to spy out where we live.”

“Of course not,” said Saj. “I already agreed.”

“What’s she hiding?” Rohan said as the two boys made their way home. “We’ve no idea who she is. Maybe she comes from a family of robbers.”

“I know her heart,” said Saj. “The rest isn’t important.”

“A new vegetable to try,” Deepi told Sooma as she served him his meal. “The boys brought it from a friend.”

“A wonderful friend,” said Saj. “She knows everything about the forest.”

Rohan ducked his head. Sooma and Deepi shrugged at each other, but said nothing.

The rains came. Rohan hoped that the ankle-deep mud and dripping trees would discourage Saj, but still Rohan was coaxed into the forest every few days. Again they found Dani bent over the reeds by the stream, now swollen and brown. Her hair was slicked flat by the rain, her eyes delighted as she watched a yellow dragonfly swaying on a stem.

Her smile was as broad as Saj’s.

“See how delicate her wings are,” Dani said, “but do you know she can fly all the way across the ocean? Even an eagle can’t fly so far.”

She left the dragonfly and leaned toward us. She handed Saj a cloth packet pulled from a pouch at her waist.

“Dried drumstick flowers,” she said. “Fry them in mustard oil.”

“You like to cook?” Rohan asked, fishing for information.

“My mother cooks,” she said. “But I won’t tell you more.”

She watched while we walked away.

“Who is this forest girl who gives you vegetables?” asked Deepi that evening.

“The girl I have chosen to marry,” said Saj, unaware of the dismay his words would cause.

“But we know nothing about her,” cried Deepi.

Sooma’s face twisted, but he kept his voice calm

“That may be your intention, my son,” he said, “but marriage isn’t like one of your business ventures. This will shape the rest of your life. And ours,” he added.

Saj smiled, eyes absorbed in his dreams.

“You’ll like her,” he said.

That evening, Sooma and Saj came to Rohan’s small room near the kitchen.

“I’ve told Saj to come downriver with me to check our warehouses,” said Sooma. “That gives Saj a break from all this forest wandering and you a few days to find out about this girl. Follow her. See where over the hills she and her holy man hide themselves.”

“Do this,” said Saj. “I’ve agreed to it. My parents need to know where Dani comes from before they can give me their blessing.”

Rohan was relieved at the chance to hunt out the truth. He lurked in the bushes near the stream, until on the fourth day he spied Dani digging roots by the rocks. When she hoisted the basket over her shoulder and slipped back into the trees, he stole

behind her, stepping barefoot and silent over the rough ground, his sandals dangling at his waist.

Breaking suddenly into a clearing, he retreated back into the forest, and stumbled against a tree trunk, dislodging a flurry of screeching green parrots.

“Who’s there?” Dani called out.

Rohan crouched behind a tree, his heart thumping, as Dani peered across the clearing. Two of the parrots swooped back to settle on a branch. Dani shrugged and moved on, her stride easy and graceful.

Rohan followed, breathing heavily from the exertion, bruising his foot on a stone, and squeezing his lips together to smother his cry. The way grew steep, the trees thinned, and Rohan fell back to avoid being exposed on the open ground. He slithered on his stomach over bare stone, knees and elbows scraped by rock and clumps of grass.

Finally worming his way to the top of the hill, he saw a stream bubble from the rock to plummet down the slope into forest that stretched to the horizon. Dani slid to the bottom, dislodged pebbles clattering, and slipped between the tree trunks. Rohan picked his way after her to the edge of a clearing, his muscles tense from being held quiet.

“I’ve brought vegetables, Mother,” Dani called out.

Rohan crouched behind a twisting banyan trunk as Dani crossed the clearing to a small house set on a patch of earth, dappled with sunlight sifting through the leaves. Thatched roof, latticed windows, fat clay jars by the wall. A woman sat on the edge of the veranda watching Dani’s approach. A tiny round woman with a cheerful face, one foot curved beneath her and the other swinging gracefully, her leg too short to reach the earth. Her nose flared above her mouth just as Dani’s did.

Dani folded herself at the woman's feet, laid her cheek against her knee.

"You're very late, my daughter," the woman said with a smile, caressing Dani's shoulder with a plump hand, then raising her voice to call out. "Parini!. Parini! You're needed," she shouted. "Roots to scrub."

A young girl, a thick gold ring hanging from her nose, appeared from behind the house. Rohan felt a kinship with her carelessly-wrapped skirt, her bright red hair escaping in wisps from her braid.

"There you are, Parini," said Dani's mother. "Some work for you."

The girl lifted Dani's basket from the ground.

"Yes, Elina Rani," she said.

Rohan's muscles stiffened. The woman's name was Elina.

Deepi's voice echoed in his head. Deepi, sitting so often by the brazier in the darkness, sharing tales with Sooma. "Elina," Deepi had said. "Gulab and her pudgy daughter Elina stole my house and killed my mother."

"Elina," Rohan said under his breath, looking in horror at the mother and daughter on the veranda. Sooma and Deepi would never allow Elina's daughter in their house. Saj's hope would be shattered.

Rohan leaned against the banyan tree, hearing the gurgle of the nearby stream but too shaken to feel the peace that running water usually brought. He had no will to move, disheartened by the news he must carry home. Birds, reassured by his stillness, chirped in the leaves above, drawn by the clusters of purple fruit.

Dani and Elina sat on, Dani still leaning against her mother's knee. Sometimes they spoke, but in voices too soft for him to make out the words. As the

afternoon light dulled into evening, a man came from the house to join Elina and Dani on the veranda. White hair and beard fanning out around his face, beads hanging on his bare chest. In one supple movement, he sank to the floor, his legs crossed, his arms on his knees. Dani's holy man, Rohan thought.

The servant Parini came from behind the house, her arms balancing a tray of food. She set the tray in front of the man, an end of her shawl slipping as she bent. The laughter of the women as they rushed to snatch the shawl away from the man's dinner gave Rohan the cover he needed to retreat.

But the birds did not allow him to leave in secret. As he stood, shaking out legs numb from crouching, the birds burst from the tree in a panic of shrieks and flapping wings.

Parini straightened.

“There’s someone there,” she called. “I see you. Come out.”

The man stepped off the veranda, spreading his arms in welcome.

“There’s nothing to fear,” he said.

Rohan sidled into the clearing. He sucked in his breath. Composed and courteous, he thought, remembering the advice he had thrown at Saj. He straightened his shoulders, folded his hands, and bowed.

Dani stepped off the veranda and advanced toward him, pointing her finger.

“You,” she cried. “You’re Saj’s friend.”

Rohan bowed again.

Dani’s mother edged off the veranda. Her face was stiff.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Don’t be angry, Mother,” Dani cried, her voice frantic. “I told them not to follow me.”

“I am Rohan, serving in the house of Sooma the merchant,” I said.

“Sooma!” Dani’s mother cried out. Parini and the holy man reached out to support her as she swayed.

“Elina, you are safe here,” said the man.

His voice was stern, but the wild white hair fanning around his face seemed almost frivolous. Rohan bit his lip to stifle a nervous giggle.

“Sooma!” Elina sobbed. “Strong, you say, Sanjaya Matulah-ji? What use is strength against the evil done to me? Take this boy away before I sink into the ground.”

She threw her head back, her wails anguished.

“Go! Go!” said the holy man, waving Rohan away.

Sanjaya Matulah, Rohan thought. Matulah. Mother's brother. The holy man was Elina's uncle, and the evil Gulab's brother.

Sanjaya guided Elina back to the house, glancing at Dani and rolling his eyes toward Rohan.

Dani leaned against Parini. Dani, braid smooth, cheeks sculpted. Parini, braid disintegrating in a tangle of red tendrils. Both girls glaring.

"Your mother is Elina," Rohan told Dani. "You hid that from Saj."

"So now you understand," she said. "I told Saj not to follow me for good reason. Was he too timid to come himself, so he sent you?"

"Saj's father sent me," Rohan said.

"You or Saj or Saj's father, it's all the same," said Dani. "I should have turned him away as soon as I heard his name. I should never have watched by the stream and given him roots."

The light was fading, but Rohan could see the tears welling in Dani's eyes.

"Look here," Rohan blurted out. "Saj spends his days dreaming of you. When his parents see where his heart lies, perhaps they'll forget your mother's past and welcome you."

Dani's mouth fell open.

Parini stepped forward.

"You understand nothing, Rohan-ji," she said, her eyes fiery. "Let Saj's parents forget as they will. Dani's mother can forget nothing."

Dani pressed Parini's arm.

"There's nothing more to say. Let him go," she said. "Go, I told you," she said, waving Rohan away.

She spun on her heel and swept into the house. Parini followed, collecting the holy man's untouched dinner tray as she went. Parini glanced back at

Rohan as she bent, widening her eyes. Rohan hoped that she was signalling for him to wait. He slipped behind the banyan tree to watch.

Dani, her mother and Sanjaya took their places once again on the veranda, and Parini came and went with platters of food. Rohan watched from the banyan, straining his eyes as the day faded and birds called out evening songs and swooped across a sky drained of colour. The group on the veranda withdrew into the house, and as the blackness thickened, the glow of the brazier on the veranda seemed to grow brighter. Parini was almost beside him before he was aware of her, a dark shape muffled in a shawl.

“Rohan-ji, are you there?” she murmured.

“Here,” he hissed, waving his hand in the dusk.

“Rohan-ji,’ Parini said, her voice hushed. ”Dani says to leave it, but you should know the truth before you go.”

“What truth?” Rohan asked.

“The truth of Sooma and Deepi’s cruelty to Dani’s mother,” said Parini. “You live in their house, but I can see you have no understanding of what they’ve done.”

Rohan’s heart pounded. Blood rushed to his head. He was torn between his desire to please Parini and his loyalty to Sooma and Deepi.

“Sooma and Deepi are kind and generous,” he said. “I don’t need to understand anything else.”

“Listen to me,” Parini said, her voice rising in anger. “This kind and generous Deepi poisoned her husband and her sister-in-law too.”

For a moment Parini was silent.

“She murdered Elina’s mother. Dani’s grandmother,” she repeated, her words low and her face strained in the faint light from the veranda.

“You’ve got it all wrong,” said Rohan, his voice cracking. “Elina’s mother was the poisoner. Elina too, most likely.”

Rohan stared at Parini, terrified she would run screaming to the house. Parini stared back.

“And then Deepi’s lover Sooma brought his friend the magistrate,” Parini continued, as if Rohan had said nothing. “The powerful do as they please. They turned Elina and her mother out of the house that was theirs by right. Gulab and Elina and Elina’s cowardly husband, who ran off and left them and his unborn daughter to misfortune.”

Rohan’s curiosity was piqued in spite of his frustration at Parini’s twisted tale.

“The unborn child? Was that Dani?” he asked.

Parini agreed with a tip of her head, the movement a blur in the darkness.

“They fled to Elina’s uncle, who brought them to this place. They’re safe here. Sanjaya’s close to the gods.”

Rohan looked toward the house. Through the black of the night, a faint light from the window fell over the empty veranda.

“So, Rohan, return to Saj,” said Parini. “Tell him that Dani can have nothing to do with her mother’s enemy.”

“I’ll tell him,” he said, “but it’s doubtful he’ll care for my advice, or yours.”

“But sleep under the trees tonight,” she said. ‘Don’t travel the forest in the dark.”

She slipped away. Rohan peered through the darkness until shadow passed the veranda.

He drank from the stream, rested his head against a tree trunk and drowsed. He was haunted by the disappointment his news would bring to Saj’s face.

Then, as he sank toward sleep, he imagined Parini's face, her unruly red hair and crooked smile. He opened his eyes to Parini's whisper.

"Rohan," she said. "Rohan, I've brought food."

She placed a *chapatti* in his hands, and lay more on his knees.

"A blanket as well. Leave it here when you go in the morning."

Again she slipped away, gliding through the moonlit clearing.

Two days later Sooma and Saj returned from the seaport. Rohan waited until they came to sit in the courtyard, bathed and oiled and folded into fresh *dhotis*. Sooma grunted, his bowl of buttermilk suspended halfway to his mouth, when Rohan told them what he had learned. Saj's jaw was rigid.

"It's not true," Saj said through his teeth. "Dani's not the child of murderers."

Deepi sat beside him, her arms embracing his shoulders.

“You must face the truth, my son,” she said.

“You’re telling me, Rohan, they’ve been there all this time?” said Sooma. “What about the evil Gulab? You’ve said nothing about her.”

“No longer in this world, I think,” said Rohan. “I saw only Elina and Dani.”

“This girl had no right, knowing what she did, to give gifts to Saj and steal his heart,” said Deepi, planting her hands on her hips.

Saj hunched over, his elbow on his knee, his head in his hand.

“So now the truth is known, and you must put this affair out of your mind,” said Sooma. “You can’t associate with a family who murdered your grandmother.”

Rohan hesitated to cause more upset, but spoke on, unwilling to keep things from them.

“Sooma-ji,” he said, “they’ve twisted the truth. They say that Deepi-ji and you are the murderers, and drove off Dani’s mother and grandmother from their rightful home.”

Deepi cried out, throwing her hands over her face.

“There’s no end to their wrongdoing,” said Sooma. “They pile evil on top of evil.”

Saj moaned, the lament erupting from deep inside him. He raised his arms, his fists clenched.

“I can’t bear this,” he howled. “Dani is good. She has no part in this.”

“My son,” said Deepi, ”it’s always the innocent who suffer.”

Saj set off for Dani’s home the next morning.

“Take me there,” he told Rohan, “or I’ll find it myself.”

Dani and Parini were beside the house, dribbling dried peas into a heavy clay grinder, scooping the split peas into a basket. Saj strode directly to them, his body wound tight, his eyes crackling with resolve. Dani sprang to her feet, thrust her chin in the air. Parini slipped up the steps of the veranda into the house

“Dani-ji,” pronounced Saj. “Our parents gave pain to each other, but we can conquer that. When we’re husband and wife, the wickedness of the past will be healed.”

He held out his hand to her, his face beaming. But Dani hugged her arms to her chest, her mouth tightened into a thin line.

Rohan heard steps on the veranda. Dani’s mother burst through the door.

“What’s happening here?” Elina shouted. “Young man, stop this talk of marriage now!”

She leaned against the wall, her round face crumpled.

“I warned you, Saj,” cried Dani. “I said don’t follow me. You should have listened but instead you ruined everything.”

Rohan opened his mouth to protest, but Saj spoke first, pressing his arm.

“Dani-ji…” Saj began.

Dani cut him off.

“If you’d stayed away as I told you, I could have made things right,” she said. “Slowly. Bit by bit. But you’ve turned my mother’s anger into a fire. There’s no hope for us now.”

“Good, my daughter,” said Elina, rearing up from the wall. “You speak well. No hope at all for a proven

enemy of this family. Leave, young man. We don't want Sooma and Deepi's son here."

For a moment no one moved. Dani and her mother glared at Saj. Saj gazed at Dani, his face slack from shock. Parini and Rohan gaped at each other, not sure what was expected of them.

Footsteps rustled in the trees, and Dani's great uncle broke into the clearing. He strode to the house and planted himself by the step, leaning on his walking stick. Elina hovered beside him on the veranda, Dani and Parini stood on his other side, their chins held high, Saj and Rohan stood facing him.

"Elina, my niece," Sanjay said. "You speak of enemies. The enemy here is a lie. It's time we told Dani the truth."

"No, my uncle," moaned Elina, spreading her arms in supplication. "Leave things as they are. We shielded her from ugliness. Don't tear her life apart."

“Let this follow its course,” said Sanjaya. “Listen, all of you, while I tell this tale.”

Elina crouched on the step, her mouth working, her hands twisting. The rest settled on the hard-packed earth of the yard, waiting for Sanjaya to speak.

Sanjaya stood with both hands on the knotted wood at the head of his walking stick, his face framed by his springing hair and beard. His eyes flickered over Parini and Rohan and Saj, then came to rest on Dani.

“My family comes from a town upriver from here,” he said. “My parents had three children, and when they passed on, my young brother and sister were left alone with the servants, and the wealth our parents had provided. I had gone off to seek the gods in the forest, but when I returned from time to time, I was satisfied that the two children spent their days in comfort.

“By the time I realised that their lavish clothes and rich food were a covering for the suffering

underneath, it was too late. They were blighted from the lack of strictness I should have imposed. I returned home to find a brother who spent his days gambling away my parents' wealth and a widowed sister so wicked that the servants kept her baby daughter away from her."

Dani turned her head toward her mother.

"Yes, Dani. Your mother," said Sanjaya. "Elina was nurtured by servants, not by the woman you knew as Gulab your grandmother."

Elina wiped tears from her cheek with the edge of her shawl.

"Don't speak of her like that, Sanjaya Matulah" cried Elina. "She was my mother after all. She was cruel only to protect me. She told me so herself."

"A daughter should not be blind to her mother's faults," said Sanjaya. "However for many years I also was blind. Gulab beat her servants, sold rotten grain,

bought my brother's silence with honey wine. There were rumours, and now I believe them, that she burned a neighbour alive in his house to avoid repaying him a loan, and killed her husband when he became less generous with his gifts of jewelry."

Dani gasped.

"That can't be," she said. "She killed my grandfather?"

Elina buried her face in her hands. Parini stroked Dani's arm.

"She learned of a wealthy widow here in Sindhapur, tutored my brother on how to woo her with a confident air and empty promises. You know this part of the tale, Saj. The death of my brother, Deepi's stepfather, the death of Deepi's mother, the meeting of Deepi and Sooma."

"So my parents' story is the truth," said Saj, turning toward Rohan. "Not the lies you told us last night."

Rohan glanced at Parini, who had believed the twisted tale that she had recounted to him. Her mouth was slack, her eyes wide with shock.

Elina shrank lower on the step, her face still hidden in her hands.

“Gulab and Elina came to me when they were chased from Deepi’s house. As they should have. I was the older brother, the uncle, and there was a child soon born to protect.”

Dani crouched at Elina’s feet.

“Mother,” she said, her voice trembling. “You knew these things?”

Elina struggled to her feet and lurched into the house, saying nothing.

Sanjaya pounded his walking stick against the earth, his white mane quivering from the impact. He held his face high, his eyes red-rimmed and hollow.

“Don’t put all the blame on your mother, Dani,” he said, his eyes red-rimmed and hollow. “Much of the fault is mine. I should have forced her to tell the truth long ago.”

“It was her decision to do wrong,” said Dani. “You’ve taught me that.”

“Your mother was a young girl,” said Sanjaya, “helpless, deserted by her husband, about to give birth, in her mother’s power. She closed her eyes to Gulab’s evil.”

“You’ve all lied to me,” said Dani.

“I thought it best,” said Sanjaya. “Without the lie, you would have despised your mother and grandmother. I didn’t want that for a young girl.”

Saj stepped toward Dani, his eyes shining.

“So now there’s no objection,” he said, holding out his hands. “Your family has no reason to hate my

mother and father. We can be together. I knew we would be from the first day I saw you."

"'Your parents will object, surely," said Sanjaya. "My sister and niece harmed them deeply."

"They'll be fine," said Saj, his smile confident. "They'll understand when they see Dani."

"And what about my objections?" said Dani.

Saj stumbled to a stop, an uncertain grin on his face. Dani faced him, her chin high, her arms straight at her sides. Rohan stretched out a hand to Saj, and then withdrew it, not wanting to interfere.

"You have objections?" Saj asked Dani, his voice muted, his confidence in shreds.

"I asked you not to come here, but you sent Rohan anyway. You burst in and overturned our lives. Foul things stirred up that were best forgotten. I warned you, and you didn't listen. Please go, and don't return."

The clearing was silent. Rohan watched Parini and Parini gazed back, her eyelids raised. Then Rohan drew Saj away.

“Dani!” Saj called out, and pulled back, but Rohan gripped his arm and led him into the forest.

“It’s for the best, my son,” said Sooma, when they reached home. “Her family has murdered, after all.”

“Forget this girl who gives you vegetables,” said Deepi. “There are many others who will gladly share this house with you.”

Saj hunched under the neem tree staring at the courtyard pavement.

“Where were you?” he asked Rohan one evening a few days later, stopping him as he slipped through the gate after a day in the forest.

“Visiting Parini,” he said.

“You can’t do that,” said Saj. “Her mistress misled me and treated me badly. I forbid your friendship.

“But we have an understanding,” Rohan said. “She’ll marry me.”

Saj caught his breath, his face rigid. He turned his back to Rohan.

“I cannot allow it,” said Saj, his voice breaking. “Go to her or stay here. You can’t have both.”

For a moment, Rohan was silent.

“Then I must go,” he said.

Years of service and love shattered in a moment.

“Collect your things, then,” said Saj, bowing his head, scrubbing his eyes with his fists.

Sooma and Deepi came to Rohan as he was rolling his spare clothing into a bundle.

“We’ll miss you, but give him time,” said Deepi. “He’s not himself.”

“He’s suffering through a hard lesson,” said Sooma. “Not everything turns out as we want it to. He’s never faced that until now.”

Now I begin another life’s tale, thought Rohan as he plodded through the forest. First was of an orphan in servitude to an uncle, second was of faithfulness to Sooma the merchant, and now comes the third, the tale of Rohan and Parini.

At that thought, his feet moved faster.

Alaya

My mother said to live for the day at hand and leave the past to itself. But some things stay with me and make my stomach shrivel in the night. Especially the way I tricked Arnesh. In the daylight, I tell myself I was too young to know better and it was all Hari's fault and sometimes I even blame Arnesh for being gullible. But lying awake in the hour before the birds begin to call, I'm honest with myself. I misbehaved. I was greedy for riches, careless of causing pain, weighed down by the past, and afraid the future would pass me by.

I knew nothing of Arnesh or Hari when I was sixteen, a maid in the widow Nasbia's house. Be content with what life gives you, my mother taught me, but after she died I was bitter, toiling for a haughty mistress who pulled my ears when she was displeased.

I carried water from the stream, scrubbed clothes, fetched salt and flour and *jaggary* from the village market. The villagers, the women huddled over their wares, the men trudging with digging sticks to their thin mountain fields, struggled to survive from day to day and had no time to care about an orphan girl who'd been taken in by the big house. And in the big house, I was ignored except when I was being scolded.

My childhood had been carefree. My father was the headman's friend and chief game hunter. We lived inside the headman's walls, in a house with two rooms and a verandah, filled with the fragrance of buffalo milk and honey and dried apricots, deer meat and jungle fowl simmering on the brazier. For Tugal the headman was generous to my father with his hunting share and to my mother with storeroom provisions.

But one night in the cool season, our house went up in flames, and suddenly I was alone. My father, my

mother, my baby brother, all dead. Perhaps a toppled oil lamp, or a shawl caught by the brazier. We never knew for sure. I was unharmed, for I'd been called to sleep in the big house, curled up beside the headman's elderly mother in case she needed help in the night.

They kept me on as a servant, although I was only ten. Tugal said he owed it to my father for his faithful service, and anyway I was useful looking after his mother. Then Tugal died of a seizure one evening while he sat by the fire, and his mother died of sorrow soon after. And instead of being sweet Alaya, daughter of a beloved friend, I became Alaya the orphan, drudge for the widow Nasbia, her gruff son and his sullen wife.

One morning when I was sixteen, a man appeared, striding in easy steps over the hillside and across the stream to the rock where I was scrubbing one of Nasbia's skirts. I sprang up, clutching the folds of cloth to my chest.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I would never harm a water spirit, for that is what you must be, as lovely as you are.”

I knew to be wary of men who flattered, even though I had had little experience beyond the cramped days in Nasbia’s compound. But the stranger charmed me with his smile, his broad forehead, his solid shoulders, his hair curling thickly on his neck. He was not like the young men I saw every day, the hollow-chested villagers or Nasbia’s son with his belly sagging over his *dhoti.*

“I am Hari,” he said. “If that’s your home past the trees, I would welcome a cup of milk and a cold *chapatti*.”

I hung my head, my tongue twisted in my mouth as it never was when I exchanged words with the villagers.

“Ask at the gate,” I said, stumbling over the words. “Nasbia will find food for you.”

“May the gods smile on you,” he said, folding his hands and bowing, backing away as if he was taking leave of a princess. “And when I ask at the gate, who shall I say has sent me?” he asked.

I gaped at him, not understanding.

“What’s your name?” he said.

“Alaya,” I muttered, then repeated it more firmly. “Alaya.”

I watched him swing away across the hill.

I couldn’t follow until the sun had dried the laundry spread on the bushes. When I returned to the compound, the bundle of clean clothing slung on a stick over my shoulder, the man was sitting against a tree, out of the sight of Uda the watchman. I pretended to ignore him, but I tossed my head, my long braid swaying as I walked by.

“You’d be wise to keep out of Nasbia-ji’s way,” Uda the watchman said as I passed into the courtyard.

“You’ve made her angry.” He sucked in his breath and sliced his finger like a knife across his thick neck.

“No matter,” I said. “I serve her from duty, not to win her approval.”

I climbed the stairs to Nasbia’s sleeping room. Nasbia swept in as I was folding the skirts into her carved chest.

“We fed your vagabond and so we should have,” she said. “We don’t send people away hungry. But what were you thinking?” she continued, thrusting her finger at me in accusation. “Do you entrust any beggar roving the hills with your name? We take you in, and that’s how you show gratitude? By disgracing us?”

“His name is Hari. He’s not a beggar,” I said.

Nasbia grabbed me by the ear and pulled me downstairs to the storeroom. I didn’t struggle, for she was stronger and brawnier than my thin

shoulders and slender arms. And she was doing what she had a right to.

“Sit here and sort lentils until I say you can leave,” she said, pointing to the crock by the wall, “and there will be no more making free with strangers.”

I pushed lentils across the sorting tray, picking out pebbles and bits of husk with no thought of disobeying her. But when I was let out of the storeroom to stretch my arms and breathe the starlit air in the courtyard, my thoughts were of the man called Hari.

I slipped past Uda into the trees outside the walls. I was not surprised when Hari loomed out of the dusk.

“Alaya, I’ve watched for you,” he said, taking my arm.

I pulled away, frightened by the warmth of his hand on my skin.

“The gods have guided my footsteps to you. You’re meant to come with me,” he said.

A world of promise flared in me for an instant, then darkened into dread. A wide smile and curling hair could hide evil.

“Don’t lay everything on the gods,” I said. “The gods might guide our footsteps, but we choose where to walk. I choose to stay here.”

“You’ve earned a better life.”

“I’ve earned nothing,” I said. “These trees conceal us and ask nothing in return, and I don’t either for my service to Nasbia and her household. “

“Who taught you to speak like a holy man wandering the forest?” Hari asked.

“Do not mock my mother’s words, for she was a godly woman,” I said.

“Believe me, I’m not mocking,” said Hari, although I could hear the sneer lurking beneath his chuckle. “Quite the opposite. Those words have given me the seeds of a plan which could make us both rich as *maharajas*. Chests of gold at your feet, handfuls of jewels.”

“I’ve been outside long enough,” I said. “I must go in now.”

“Meet me here tomorrow evening,” Hari said. “I promise you’ll like my plan.”

I had no intention of appearing before him the following night. Or so I thought. Nasbia was right to warn me away from him. Riches were well known for luring people to their doom.

But the next day, as I fetched sticks for the oven, a splinter of bark pierced my thumb under the nail. The sudden pain made my eyes water, and suddenly through the tears I saw an image of a fountain, a vine with red blooms trailing over the wall. And I

was there, reclining on cushions, a servant kneeling before me with a tray of oranges and grapes.

Why not be rich, if Hari knew a way? Rich people didn't scrape their fingers on rough firewood or make do with just one section when an orange was divided among the household. There was a lot I didn't understand in those days.

So that night I walked through the trees to Hari.

"The first night I waited in the woods," he told me, "it was for your red cheeks and the shining braid swinging on your shoulder. I admit it. But red cheeks and braids are as easy to gather as pebbles in the path. There's something more important to discuss tonight."

Hurt, I spun away, but he grasped my arm before I could stalk off.

"In Sindhapur there's a young merchant with a treasure room of gold and no wife to share it," said

Hari. “He spurns every bride his mother searches out for him. But you will please him. I realized so last night.”

“Foolish,” I said. “You’re an ignorant boy catching a housecat, mistaking it for a tiger. If you show me to a Sindhapuri merchant, he’ll mock you to your face.”

But there’s a chance he was right, I thought. A rich merchant’s wife. A life in far-off Sindhapur, where the streets were paved and flowers bloomed all year and market stalls were piled with spices and silks and embroidered shawls. Or so I’d heard.

“Do you hear the way you talk? That’s what I mean,” said Hari. “This Arnesh fellow’s the same way. Always spouting high ideas instead of getting on with what he has to say.”

Hurt again by his bluntness, I pulled away, then turned back to him.

“The fine weave on a basket is nothing if the edge is frayed,” said Hari.

My mouth dropped open in surprise.

“You’re not making sense,” I said.

“Exactly,” said Hari. “Those aren’t my words. They’re what Arnesh said about a young woman his mother found for him. Beautiful, well-bred, obedient, she said. And instead of a simple yes or no, Arnesh proclaims ‘The fine weave on a basket is nothing if the edge is frayed.’ He talks just like you. You’re a perfect match.”

“So you know this Arnesh well?” I said. “He does whatever you ask? There’s no groom and no bride and still you’re setting out the wedding feast?”

“No, I don’t know him well, but I my sister knows everything. And I hear mother and son talking when I pass by their garden. They’re rich, and I have a plan to make you a bride in their house.”

“A plan that will vanish like mist burned off in the heat of the sun,” I said, and turned back to the gate.

“When you think for a while of what I’m offering, you’ll come,” he called softly from the darkening wood. “I’ll be waiting.”

The seeds planted in my head took root. A fine lady, wealth, adventure, Sindhapur. In the evening of the next day I slipped once more past Uda at the gate to search out Hari in the trees. This time I carried a bundle of spare shawls and skirts and the small store of silver coins I had hidden away.

We spent the night under the trees, shivering in the cold, then as soon as the sky lightened, scrambled along the stream bank to the river. My coins bought us passage on a boat and by the time the sun was high, we were being poled along the river to Sindhapur.

“Tell me more about this plan of yours,” I said to Hari several times.

"This is not the place," he said. "Later, when we're alone in Sindhapur, with only our ears to hear."

Hungry and sweaty, I thought with longing of Nasbia's airy house and hot *chapatti*. But out of pride, I kept my regrets to myself.

The walls of Sindhapur, golden in the sun, reared in the distance long before we reached them. Arrived at the wharf, I was helped from the boat by the riverman. I bent my head back to see the top of the city gate. Three times my height, I thought.

The peaceful days on the river, the muted calls of our boatmen, the creak of timbers, the birds and lapping water, had not prepared me for the boisterous activity on the waterfront. I was thrown into a whirl of vegetable carts, caged jungle fowl, baskets of fish, and shouting people. I stepped onto the paved road that that led to the wall, but Hari pulled my elbow toward the stony riverbank.

We walked until the city uproar was lost in the gurgle of the river and the insect buzz. We curved round a reedy backwater to a cluster of wooden huts and drying fishnets.

Hari pointed to the poorest of the huts, set back from the others and bare of nets and baskets.

“This simple hut is where our plan begins,” he said.

I eyed its sagging walls patched with rags, the doorway hung with a threadbare curtain.

“What is this place?” I asked. “It’s not a good beginning at all. If the milk stinks of bitter weed, churning won’t make the butter sweet.”

“Begins, I said. The end will be sweet,” said Hari. “You’ll see.”

He pushed aside the curtain and drew me through the opening.

“Parini-ji,” he said.

“Brother-ji!” said a young woman, setting down a garland of yellow flowers and embracing Hari.

The room was dingy, but the rug covering the floor gleamed red in the splinters of sunlight piercing the broken wall. I stared at the woman. Lean face, eyes lively in their sunken sockets, thick hair flaming where it was touched by the sun. A heavy gold ring hung from one side of her nose.

“So you found someone on your travels” she asked.

“Her name’s Alaya,” said Hari. “I told her she’s here to make her fortune, and ours as well. She can marry Arnesh. Then you and my brother-in-law will live in splendor. And I can say goodbye to this fishing shack.”

“Since it’s splendour you want,” said his sister, “I’ll help you win it, but as for me and Rohan, we’ll rest content in our forest cottage with the blue door. Now let me have a look at you, Alaya.”

She prodded my shoulders with roughened fingers, tugged my hair, pinched my cheeks.

“Why are you so sure your plan will work?” she said. “Plain or beautiful, wealthy or poor, Sandhya’s son rejects everyone. Why would he choose her?”

“This one he’ll like,” said Hari. “Say something, Alaya. Show her.”

“Say what?” I asked.

“Anything,” he said. “One of your expressions.”

My mind was blank.

“Fine, then,” he said, shrugging.

He sucked in his breath, then clenched his teeth, raising his fist.

“I’m telling you to say something,” he snarled, his face twisted in anger. “Show my little sister. Say something.”

My nervousness exploded into anger.

“No need to shout,” I blurted out. “Don’t you know? It’s the puniest monkey who shrieks the loudest.”

“Exactly!” Hari cried in triumph. “Did you hear that, Parini? She talks just like Arnesh.”

His sister stood back to examine me again, her arms crossed. I lowered my eyes, nervous she had turned against me.

“This might be managed,” she said. “I’ll stay here tonight and think it through.”

We sat on the dirt floor eating spiced peas and *chapatti* bought from the neighbour, and then I settled for the night on a sagging cot. I wrapped the blanket tight around my feet against the spiders I had seen scurrying along the wall and looked up at the blue-painted shelf hung with yellow flowers. Hari lived in a strange mix of squalor and beauty.

Sister and brother murmured together as I fell asleep, tired from days on the boat and our long walk.

“I’ve explained everything and we’ve thought it out,” Hari told me in the morning as he brought me a bowl of milk. “If we move quickly, we can make this work. We need the silver in your pack to add to ours.”

“Do what we say, and your future will be bright with gold,” said Hari’s sister. “From this moment, you must forget that I’m Parini, sister of Hari. You and I will be mother and daughter, Nasbia and Alaya, recently arrived from the northern hills.”

“Nasbia?” I said. “Nasbia, my mistress? But she’s round and short, not thin like you. And old. And she has no daughter.”

“All that means nothing,” said Parini. “We’ll dress and act like the wife and daughter of Tugal the headman, and no one will think we’re anyone else.”

“Give us your silver,” said Hari. “My sister has shopping to do.”

I pulled out the money pouch from my bundle of clothing and placed it in Parini’s hands. I said nothing about the silver pieces sewn into the waist of my skirt.

Parini set off along the rutted path to the city. Hari and I followed as soon as I swallowed the cold rice and water set out for my breakfast. Hari strode like a prince with muscled shoulders and shining hair, a prince in a skimpy loincloth and bare feet. I wore clothes borrowed from a neighbour and carried a basket over my shoulders. The skirt scarcely covered my hips and the basket smelled of fish.

“I don’t trust you on your own, so you’ll have to come with me,” said Hari. “Rub dust on your hair and face to dull them. No one will notice a fish girl.”

“Hai, Hari,” a rough-haired man called out, clapping Hari on the back. “Who’s your companion? Going into the fish business, are you?”

“No companion of mine,” said Hari and waved me away.

I fell behind while Hari strode ahead, glancing back to check my progress.

We passed through the tall city gates, the eyes of the guards expressionless as they watched us, and joined the crowd flowing along the street. The pavement was wide and smooth under my bare feet until it opened into a market place and shrank to a network of narrow lanes threading their way past rows of stalls and smiling shopkeepers.

“You can set down that stinking basket now,” said Hari. “No one will pay attention to you in this crowd.”

We came to a woodcarver. An elderly man, his slack cheeks sprinkled with white stubble, a woolen shawl folded over his shoulders, looked out at us from a platform inside his shop. A heavy bedpost, its pattern of leaves gleaming with polish, stood beside him.

“Say nothing,” Hari muttered as we approached him.

“Looking for a bed for your master?” he said, smoothing his hand over the carving on the post. “There are three more of these back in the workshop.”

“It’s the woodworker Mangi I seek,” said Hari, folding his hands and bowing so that his curls tumbled forward around his neck.

“What would you want with him?” asked the man.

“If he’s the Mangi I have heard of, he is the possessor of a majestic palanquin, which the great

ones of the city are pleased to use when they have need of it."

"The great ones, yes," said the man. "I'm the Mangi you seek, but my palanquin, with handles of carved *sissoo* wood and curtains of silk, is not for you."

"My servant and I," Hari said, gesturing toward me, "are from the household of Nasbia, a great northern lady who requires the very best for her daughter. She has chosen your palanquin for tomorrow, and will give you silver to thank you for your trouble."

He held up the pouch at his waist, weighed it in his hand.

Mangi's eyes bulged.

"Now I understand. The lady has chosen well," he said, bowing with joined hands.

"Mid-morning tomorrow," Hari said. "The daughter arrives at the river gate. The palanquin and four bearers should be waiting."

He turned down the lane, tossing his head at me to follow.

“You know the path home,” he said, as we walked past street dogs fighting over the abandoned fish basket and emerged from twisting lanes onto the wide pavement. “So make your way on your own. The less tying us together, the better.”

He loitered by a water seller’s stand while I joined the straggling pedestrians on the river path. Later, he swept by me on his long legs, pretending to ignore me but letting an orange drop by my feet. Hot and thirsty, I bit through the skin and sucked out the juice.

He was in the hut when I arrived, and Parini was too, weaving red and white blossoms into a garland for the blue shelf.

“Alaya,” said Hari. “See what my sister has found for you.”

“Not your sister, Hari,” said Parini. “I’m Nasbia, mother of Alaya. Don’t forget it.”

“Correction,” said Hari. “Alaya, see what your mother Nasbia of the north has found for you.”

In the sunlight seeping through the broken wall Parini held out cloth-draped arms. A skirt glowing yellow like a field of mustard at harvest time, a border purple as the glossy skin of a *brinjal.* A golden shawl so fine it drifted in rhythm with her breath.

“An easy harvest,” Parini said, her narrow face proud. “I know the way to the storage chests in most of the rich houses in Sindhapur. Only Arnesh’s house I pledged to my husband never to enter. Sometimes I’ve sold things to the very households I took them from the day before. These clothes won’t be missed.”

She piled the clothing in Hari's arms and unwrapped a cloth packet which she slid from the waist of her skirt.

"But this treasure was difficult to come by."

She looped a chain of gold beads around her fingers, spread a palm shimmering with gold ornaments.

"The goldsmith will be on the lookout for these but you'll soon have more jewelry than you can wear if our plans are successful. He would have caught me if I hadn't crouched under the skirt of his display table while his boys chased through the market for me."

"So, Alaya, tomorrow we act," said Hari.

"Tomorrow?" I said. "That's too soon. I need time to prepare."

"We've prepared everything," said Hari. "Even the saying you must repeat when you encounter Arnesh.

Soon you'll be a wealthy wife. And Parini and I will be set for life."

"How?" I asked. "How will you be set? I'll be a rich wife, but how will you be better off?"

"Arnesh at last will be settled, when we had almost given up hope, and my husband will be content," Parini said. "That's my reward."

"No need to go into that faithfulness stuff, Parini," said Hari. "Listen, Alaya. It's simple. We help you now. Someday maybe you help us."

"No, Hari," said Parini, her face stern. "This is for Rohan. This is not a bargaining matter. If Arnesh and Alaya are willing to marry, that's the end of it."

Hari smiled and bowed his head, handsome with his waving hair and broad shoulders. And ruthless.

"Alaya, here's the truth of it," said Parini, turning her sunken eyes on me. "My husband Rohan was the servant of Sooma, the old master of the big house.

Sooma's son was disappointed in love and lost his zest for life, so his father took him far away to start anew and gave the house into Arnesh's keeping. Arnesh is the old mistress's nephew. My husband watches over Arnesh because in his heart he still serves the old master, who took him in as a child. Rohan will always be faithful to the house that sheltered him. And what that house needs is a mistress to stand by the master. So for my husband's sake, I help to find a wife for Arnesh."

Hari I didn't trust, but I felt safe with Parini. I pushed down my misgivings with images of silken clothes, fragrant oils, breezes full of the scent of flowers and the twittering of birds.

"What do I have to do?" I asked.

"What any girl dreams of," said Parini. "Bedeck yourself with jewels, take your ease in a palanquin, make eyes at a young and wealthy merchant."

“Learn these words, Alaya,” said Hari. “The snake thinks he’s brave when he attacks the mouse.”

“And when will I say them?” I asked.

“I’ll tell you. Just learn them,” said Hari.

“Say them now, so we can hear you,” said Parini.

She glared at me, her hands on her hips.

“The snake thinks he’s brave when he attacks the mouse,” I muttered.

“With feeling,” said Hari.

“The snake thinks he’s brave when he attacks the mouse,” I repeated, exaggerating the words, tossing my head.

“Good,’ said Hari. “When I tap my forehead, you slip from the palanquin and cry out those words. The rest I’ll handle.”

In the light of an oil lamp before dawn next morning, Parini helped to rub my skin with rose oil and pleat

the yellow skirt around my hips. She piled my hair into intricate coils woven with red and orange *palash* blossoms, hung golden chains from my neck and ear lobes.

Hari pushed past the ragged curtain into the room, wearing a clean white *dhoti* that draped low on his calves and a shiny red turban. Parini bundled a coarse brown blanket over the delicate shawl wrapping my shoulders and elaborate hair, and handed a Sibbylar covering to Hari.

“Keep your splendour hidden till you reach the gates,” she said. “Hari, slouch like an old man until you reach the city so you can enter unrecognized. Alaya, remember that you’re Alaya daughter of Nasbia, from the renowned merchant family of the north. And for today, Hari is your servant.”

Hari and I set out along the river road, our ears filled with the shriek of waterbirds skimming the surface. Fishermen and farmers gazed at our strange

appearance – two travelers, one so old he needed a stick to walk, draped in blankets on a hot day - but then returned to casting their nets and easing vegetable carts over the rutted track. Past a boat unloading passengers from upriver, we slipped behind a thicket of tamarisk trees and threw off our coverings. We passed through the city gate as a merchant's daughter and her servant from the north, newly arrived on a riverboat.

Mangi the woodworker had carried out Hari's request. He was waiting inside the gate beside a magnificent palanquin resting on the pavement. Arched roof carved with flowers painted with gold, sides of woven lattice, red curtains spangled with silver, tasseled cushions heaped on the embroidered carpet. Four young men with scrubbed faces and red turbans waited nearby to hoist the carrying poles on their shoulders and bear the litter away.

Mangi folded his hands and bowed to me.

“Welcome, Rani-ji,” he said. “Please step inside and rest while your servant and I conclude our business.”

I lay back on the cushions, the silken shawl billowing around me, and watched while Hari poured a small pile of silver into Mangi’s hands.

“As we agreed,” Hari said. “The palanquin and bearers for a day.”

Mangi tipped his head in agreement.

“Bearers, this man Hari will direct you,” he said. “Obey him.”

Mangi walked off, disappearing into the throng of carts and pedestrians.

Hari beckoned to the four bearers, jingling the silver in another pouch tied at his waist. The tallest stepped forward, followed by the others.

“As you carry this palanquin through the city,” Hari said, “it’s possible when we reach a certain corner,

the handle will appear to come loose, requiring you to lay your burden down while we investigate."

The men folded their hands and bowed.

Hari clapped his hand on the shoulder of the tall bearer.

"Then when we continue, this bearer will suddenly stumble and fall, and you others must struggle to set down the palanquin without sending it crashing to the street. And of course, Mangi has no need to hear of this."

The four men bowed again, their eyes on the money pouch.

"Follow my lead," said Hari, "and be surprised by nothing. Now let's be off."

As the bearers smoothly lifted my cushioned seat onto their shoulders, Hari thrust his head through the palanquin door.

“When I tap my forehead, remember,” he said. “The snake thinks he’s brave when he attacks the mouse.”

Lolling back on the cushions, I was carried through the crowded streets of the city. Hari strode ahead, his walking stick swinging, his turbaned head high, his muscled shoulders gleaming with oil.

“Stop!” said Hari as we turned into a street of high walls and large houses. “Something is rattling. Put down the palanquin. It’s not safe.”

People walking nearby turned to watch.

Pushing the bearers aside, Hari twisted and tapped the front handle.

“Climb to the roof,” he ordered a bearer. “Has something come loose up there?”

The other bearers, joined by several curious passers-by, watched the man crawl over the roof.

Hari bent to murmur to me, “Watch the house just down the road. The entrance with the arch on top. Cough when you see a man walk out.”

Arnesh, I thought. At last.

The bearer slid back to the pavement.

“Nothing?” Hari said. “Check the rear.”

He leaned past the palanquin and shook the handle behind.

Further along the street, I saw movement. A man followed by a servant strode under the arch into the street. For a moment, my eyes were riveted on a gaunt face, a *dhoti* blue as the sky clinging to bowed legs, a sash of gold and green wound around meagre hips.

Then I remembered to cough.

Hari glanced back, then thumped the side of the palanquin.

“Enough,” he said. “It’s all fine. Take up the palanquin, and continue.”

The bearers rushed to shoulder the poles and carry me forward. The man I guessed was Arnesh walked briskly in our direction along the busy street, his eyes passing over us.

From my cushions in the palanquin, I watched Hari pace ahead of us, slapping his shoulder at a non-existent fly as Arnesh drew close. The head bearer responded, stumbling to the ground and letting the handle slide from his grasp. The palanquin rocked, Hari shouted, the bearer cowered on the pavement, the remaining bearers struggled to steady the palanquin and set it down. I was thrown against the wall, grabbing the door frame just in time to save myself from sliding out onto the street.

Hari clamped his hand on the ear of the fallen bearer and hauled him to his feet.

“You fool!” he cried, shaking him by the arm. “Do you care nothing for the harm you’ve done?”

The street was silent, the passers-by gathered to watch. Arnesh hurried to reach the disturbance.

Hari lifted his walking stick and thumped the bearer’s shoulders.

“Do you care nothing that Alaya Rani could be shaken or injured by your negligence?” he cried.

He lifted his walking stick and thumped the bearer’s shoulders.

“It’s all my fault,” sobbed the bearer. “Punish me as you will.”

“To be sure,” shouted Hari, slamming his stick once more over the bearer’s back. “You’re a fool.”

He tapped his forehead in disgust, then tapped it once again to be sure I saw him.

I slid out of the palanquin, the gold earrings swinging against my cheeks. I winced at the fierceness of the blows, even though I knew the scene was staged.

“Leave him alone,” I called out. “It’s not his fault he stumbled.”

Hari glared at me, slapping his forehead once more, then raised his walking stick to strike again.

Glancing sideways, I saw Arnesh draw close. I stepped toward Hari, holding out my hands.

“Stop this right now,” I cried. “You’re behaving like a thug, beating a helpless man. You think you’re a hero? A snake thinks he’s a hero when he attacks a mouse.”

Arnesh’s head snapped in my direction. Hari smirked at me, dropping his arm and pushing the bearer toward the palanquin.

“We’ve wasted enough time,” he said. “Alaya Rani’s mother is watching for us at the guesthouse. If you

wish to return to the palanquin, Alaya Rani, we can continue to the Spotted Deer."

"Wait," said Arnesh, folding his hands and bowing to me, his blue *dhoti* billowing. "Allow me to admire your skill. You eased a troubling situation and brought calm to the street."

He stared at me, his eyes deep beneath a bony forehead.

I bowed to acknowledge his praise, pleased that Hari's plan was succeeding and flattered that I had caught Arnesh's attention.

But then he spoiled the moment.

"It seems a pot glazed with bright colours can still be useful for holding water," he said.

I sucked in my breath in irritation, uncaring of the good impression Hari expected me to make.

“You insult me by calling me a painted pot?” I said, my chest heaving.

The onlookers gasped. Arnesh’s servant stiffened until Arnesh touched his arm to calm him.

“No, no, Alaya Rani” said Arnesh. “You misunderstand me.”

“I understand you well,” I said. “You’re the one who’s a painted pot in your silks and golden sash. A peacock with nothing in his mind but the shimmer of his tail feathers thinks everyone’s as empty-headed as he is.”

“No,” said Arnesh. “You misunderstand me. I mean to praise you. Bright clothes, a bright eye, a bright mind.”

I bent to climb back into the palanquin, unsure whether Hari would be pleased or angered by my performance. Unsure what Arnesh thought of me.

“Remember, Alaya Rani,” Arnesh called out as I settled against the cushions. “Even a blind peacock can feel the warmth of the sun on his head.”

The warmth of the sun? I must have intrigued him.

I was carried off in the palanquin, Hari swinging his walking stick as he led the way, dark hair curling under his turban.

The guesthouse of the spotted deer was several streets away. Hari, still acting the devoted servant, supported my arm as I slid out of the palanquin.

“Remember who you are,” he muttered. “The daughter of Nasbia, the merchant’s widow. Walk through the entrance with your nose in the air, in case we’re being watched. My sister has made arrangements.”

Parini was waiting in a room inside with the fish-smelling clothes I had worn the day before. She pulled off the *palash* blossoms and smoothed my

hair into a braid while I unwound the yellow skirt and detached the gold from my neck and ears.

Hari returned bareheaded from dismissing the palanquin and paying the bearers the promised bribe, his flowing *dhoti* replaced with a simple loincloth. A small man with eyes as wide and gentle as a deer's was with him.

"The landlord's been paid and promised more," the man said. "I'll wait here for messages."

"Good, Rohan-ji," said Parini.

He looked at me. I stood before him in silence.

"Courageous and sure-footed," he said. "Like my Parini. I am satisfied. You'll be a good companion to Arnesh."

Parini's husband. As Parini said, he thoght only of Arnesh.

“We’ll leave by the back gate and be home by evening,” Parini said.

Once again, Hari and I were a shabbily-clad sister and brother from a fishing village.

Parini wound the lustrous yellow skirt and shawl, Hari’s silken *dhoti* and bright turban around her body, then covered them with her clothing. The golden jewelry she hid in a pouch of dried cheese and bread hung at her waist. She shuffled off alone, thin shoulders slumped over her suddenly rotund body.

“Her eyes look sad,” I said to Hari.

“She’s clever that way,” he said. “People feel pity and never guess she’s a thief.”

Hari and I walked through the crowds together. My feet ached from the pavement and my head drooped. Playing a part had tired me, even reclining in a cushioned palanquin. Hari slouched and limped

to disguise his appearance, but I felt safe beside his shoulders and strong back.

We passed through the gate and onto the river path.

“Check behind those tamarisk trees,” I said. “Our blankets may still be there.”

We peered into the thicket, but the blankets had disappeared.

“Who cares about a pair of moth-eaten rags,” said Hari. “Soon we’ll warm our toes with soft-woven coverlets.”

“Perhaps Arnesh wants nothing to do with me,” I said. “I called him a peacock.”

“He was pleased,” said Hari. “More than I hoped. Exactly what he’s looking for. Honesty and spirit.”

“What do we do now?” I asked.

“We wait. If Arnesh acts as we expect, he’ll send his mother to the guesthouse to speak with Nasbia. I

was careful to call out “spotted deer” where Arnesh could hear. Of course, Nasbia will be gone, but the landlord will offer to search her out and deliver a message. My brother-in-law will be the messenger. Then it will be up to Parini.”

Two days later, as Hari predicted, Rohan appeared outside the shabby hut in the fishing village.

“Sandhya Rani wishes to call upon you,” he told Parini.

“Good,” said Parini. “Let the landlord send her a message that the widow Nasbia was found just as she and her daughter were leaving for the north. Honoured by Sandhya’s wish to visit, but having no place to receive her, she’ll call on her tomorrow on her way out of the city.”

Parini and Hari slipped into the city, returning with a new supply of rich clothing and the promise once again of the palanquin.

“That’s the last of your silver,” he told me.

The next morning, Parini and I swathed our bodies in silk and gold, and Hari wound his head in crimson. Parini darkened the circles under her eyes, dulled her face with soot, and hid her red hair under a coiled black wig.

“This must be done quickly,” Parini said. “I’ll make it clear that the widow Nasbia must depart for the north immediately, and has no wedding gifts to offer Arnesh and his mother, for she brought nothing to Sindhapur but her daughter and her servant. If Arnesh wants you as his bride, he must take you as you are.”

The bearers set down the palanquin by Arnesh’s house. The gatekeeper watched as Parini hobbled to the entrance leaning on a stick.

“Nasbia of the northern mountains come to see Sandhya Rani,” said Parini, her shoulders under her stolen silks bent with what appeared to be age.

A maid led her upstairs. Hari followed behind, flourishing his walking staff. I was taken into the courtyard to wait on a cushion under a neem tree.

I was too nervous to drink the lemon water the maid brought me. I set the cup on the ledge circling the tree trunk and pressed my arms into my stomach to ease the fluttering.

The maid returned to take me upstairs. Arnesh stood near the wall in a *dhoti* the colour of grass after rain and a gold chain on his chest. I averted my eyes, unsure how to greet a man I had ridiculed for being a peacock.

“So this is the girl,” said a small woman sitting cross-legged on a couch. “Come closer.”

Her hair was wound in a silver coil on her neck, her eyes twinkled, her smile was sweet.

“Are you willing to be my daughter-in-law?” she asked.

Arnesh stood stiff, Hari glared a warning at me, Parini tipped her head in encouragement.

I bowed my head, my palms together.

“Inspired by you as a mother-in-law, I shall know the happiness of a hundred queens,” I said.

The room seemed to sigh with relief.

“A truly wise answer,” Arnesh said.

“My son has chosen you, so I am satisfied,” said Sandhya.

So the priest was called, the ceremony performed, and I said farewell to Hari and Parini as they left for the northern mountains. Or, rather, for the run-down fishing hut with the blue shelf and pot of flowers outside the city.

I pulled the gold from my ears and throat and slipped it into Parini’s hand.

“This is all I have for now,” I murmured, “but when I can I shall give you a greater reward for bringing me to this place.”

Parini stooped to climb into the palanquin. Hari came close to me, folding his hands and bowing.

“Wait until you’re settled,” he murmured. “One day I’ll appear before your gate, and you can repay us then.”

I watched him stride off ahead of the palanquin, trim legs, muscled shoulders, sculpted face. Standing by my new husband, his figure unimposing in spite of his silken *dhoti* and gold-encrusted sash, I felt abandoned.

Life in Arnesh’s house was pleasant. When I had declared that Sandhya would be my inspiration, I had spoken to impress, but my words turned out to be true. With Sandhya’s help, I mastered embroidery, crisscrossing shawls with delicate lines and circles as we sat under the neem tree. I thrilled to tales of

Arnesh's great-grandfather, who journeyed over mountains and seas to build the trading house now in Arnesh's hands. I learned to coax the tendrils of jasmine and blue skyflower onto the edge of the pool and the sunny courtyard wall, and to recognise the songs of the yellow warblers and red sunbirds and soft pink doves darting through the leaves,.

And Arnesh was gentle and good. I came to cherish the evenings when he returned from the trading house and we sat together under the neem tree.

"Bales arrived from the south today," he might say. "Fine woven cloth. Come in tomorrow and pick for yourself and Mother."

"With beading?" I asked.

"Some have. I've chosen a sash with gold edging for myself," he said.

“Did you send grain to the temple?” his mother called out as she scurried by on her way to supervise the kitchen.

“A wagonload,” he said. “I promised two of firewood for next week.”

“Did Ram’s grandchild arrive yet?” I asked.

“Yesterday,” said Arnesh. “And Ram brought in sweets for everyone.”

“What did you give him?” I asked.

“A blanket,” said Arnesh. “Striped, with fringe.”

When I carried out a plate of fruit or roasted chickpeas, he beamed at me as if I brought a priceless treasure.

“I am nothing without you,” he said.

“Husbands always say that,” I said. “A crow’s screech is beautiful to her mate.”

“Now that my days are filled with beauty,” he said, “a contented heart makes every meal a feast.”

But I hoped for Hari to come, to approach me in the street or appear by the wall to receive his promised reward. I couldn’t help comparing Arnesh’s figure, meagre even encased in sumptuous clothes, to Hari’s powerful shoulders and searching eyes. When I walked in the city, I carried a pouch of gold and jewelry I had set aside from the things Arnesh gave me.

At last, one day in the market, a voice murmured, “Parini and Nasbia. My sister has two names. Sometimes she’s Parini. Sometimes she’s Nasbia.”

I whirled around. Hari was grinning from an alley between two stalls, holding out his hand.

I dropped the pouch onto his palm.

“May this bring you happiness,” I said. “Perhaps you can trade some of it for a pretty jug for your blue shelf. For when your sister visits.”

“This pouch is one way to my happiness,” he said. “Sometime I’ll tell you of others.”

For a moment I thought that his eyes would gaze at me as they had in the past. But they roamed over the market, paying me no attention, as he tipped his head and turned away. Handsome he was, I reminded myself, but not to be trusted.

In the months that followed, his face and black curling hair hovered more and more faintly in my head. My son was born, a small baby, scrawny like his father, but with power in his kicking legs.

One afternoon I sat by the pool, singing to Banu as I cuddled him in my lap. A voice floated over the wall.

“Two names she has. Parini and Nasbia. Nasbia. Parini.”

I finished my song and drank from the cup of orange water set on the edge of the pool.

“I wish to walk,” I told the servant, entrusting Banu to her arms and sauntering across the courtyard to the gate.

Hari was waiting for me behind a corner of the wall. The smile that had once thrilled me had turned sinister, and his courteous bow seemed false.

“My happiness is in your hands, Alaya,” he said. “I need gold for the woodworker Mangi who will build me a fleet of palanquins to hire out and make me rich. And after the palanquins, so many other ventures. I need gold.”

I should have expected this, I thought. I felt sick to my stomach.

“I gave you what I had. My debt is paid,” I told him. “Where’s Parini? Does she know of this?”

“My sister’s needs are different from mine,” he said, still smiling. “I helped you to where you are today. You must repay my generosity.”

“You don’t understand generosity,” I said. “Generosity is like water. It cools our throats and washes the dirt from our feet but expects nothing in return.”

Hari bowed again.

“I’ll return next week,” he said. “You can find the gold by then. You must. Arnesh will not be happy to learn how you tricked him. He’ll throw you out and you’ll never see your baby son again.”

Hari was right. Arnesh would be furious. Sandhya would turn her gaze away. Banu would be lost to me. But how could I obtain gold?

For a week, I agonised. Arnesh would notice if I gave away more jewelry. Short of breaking into Arnesh’s treasure box, I had no source of gold.

And now I understood. Hari would never be satisfied. He would come to the wall again and again to murmur “Nasbia and Parini” and smirk.

On the last day I went to Arnesh. I would shatter Hari’s power with the truth, even though my own life would be shattered as well.

“Nasbia is really Parini the thief and Hari is her brother, not her steward,” I said. “And the palanquin bearer stumbled by design so I could thrust myself in your path.”

Arnesh’s eyes clouded with reproach.

“I was foolish,” he said. “I told myself the gods had brought us together, and was blind to your trickery. The mind is a clever magician and sees only what it wants to see.”

He left the room and spoke to me no more that day.

The next afternoon, Hari’s voice rose over the wall.

“I have nothing for you,” I said. when I joined him outside.

“Then I must go to your husband,” he said.

Sandals scraped on the pavement and Arnesh appeared around the corner. Hari’s head jerked in surprise.

“What is there left for you to say to me, Hari-ji?” he said. “Alaya told me everything. You have no hold on her anymore.”

“She told you everything?” Hari sneered. “Did she think to say she’s a thief and a swindler? Pretending to be a rich widow’s child, decking herself in stolen gold, impressing you with witty sayings.”

“She did this once,” said Arnesh, turning his gaze on me. “But her finer qualities shine every day. One stumble doesn’t destroy the beauty of the dance.”

I lowered my eyes to hide my relief. Arnesh was giving me another chance.

He placed a pouch of coins in Hari's hand.

"You brought Alaya to me," he said, "so I won't let you go empty-handed. But leave, and don't bother this household again."

Hari's arms were firm, his shoulders broad, and Arnesh was puny. But as Arnesh bestowed the purse, he was regal and Hari was furtive. I was proud my son had a father like Arnesh.

Back in the courtyard, I sat under the neem tree with Arnesh, Banu on my lap.

"I'm sad I caused you pain," I said. "A stumble might not spoil the dance, but the dancer can never forget her clumsiness."

"The past is not the keeper of the present," said Arnesh. "Let the wind blow it away so new flowers will bloom."

He kissed my hand where it lay on Banu's head.

Still, even now that Banu is growing into a man and the red of my cheeks has faded, I wake up in the night and shudder at my deceit, and how close I came to losing my happiness. Then I hear Arnesh snoring beside me, and I touch his shoulder and smile.

Parini

Just before the watchman barred the gates for the night, Parini slipped through the entrance, the shine of her ginger hair hidden under her shawl.

She ducked across the courtyard in the shadow of a lurching bullock cart, darting into the warehouse when the driver jumped down and crouching behind the bales of woolen mats piled by the wall. The watchman pretended not to notice, aware of the coins she would pass to him later.

“Enough for today,” Mangat the merchant called to his sons. “Hot *chapatti* and a warm fire are what we need now.”

Mangat was a good man, always with a smile on his broad face. She would take just a little from his stores, Parini told herself, so little he would hardly notice. He gestured to his sons, the light from his lamp streaking wildly across the stacked bales and crates, the air stirred by his *dhoti* brushing Parini’s cheek as he strode by her hiding place. His three sons hurried out the door behind him.

“We rely on you, Dilipa-ji,” Mangat called to the watchman. Dilipa snapped to attention, his jaw rigid under his rough turban, then eased up the heavy bars of the outer gate. Mangat and his family disappeared into the busy street, and Dilipa, scraping shut the huge door, settled on the ground by his watch fire, a club at his side.

Parini was in darkness. She stood, stretching her cramped legs, feeling for the bundles stacked beside her. She tugged at a fringed mat, hoping to slide it free from the tight cloth bindings. Just one, or maybe two. It didn't matter which ones, for the weaving would be strong in any of them. Mangat brought only first quality goods into his warehouse.

Two was a good number. One to sell, and one to soften the brick floor of her hut. Dhiren would crouch there, playing with the wooden monkey she had taken from the toymaker's stall the week before, and she would sit cross-legged by the blue door knotting rope sandals to sell in the market.

Gently she pulled at a corner of the mat, easing it out of the crisscrossed bindings. Slowly the mat slid free, the wool thick in her fingers, the fringe pooled in her palm. In the faint moonlight seeping through the latticed window, she could not make out the colour of the stripe at the edge. But no matter. Red was auspicious, but all colours were beautiful.

The second mat came more easily. Mangat and his sons might not notice they were missing, and if they did, she would be long gone. With them hidden under her clothes, she could stroll through the city and out the gate barely noticed, in spite of her fiery hair.

Needing to loosen her skirt to make room, she set the mats on the bricks. Her eye was caught by the borders. One was grey like velvet feathers on a dove, and the other was indeed red, glowing like *palash* flowers in the spring.

Her breath caught in her throat. The warehouse was in darkness. How could she see the colours?

She peered through the gloom. Across the room, a faint light was leaking from behind more bales of goods. Was she being watched? Surely Dilipa had not betrayed her. He counted on her coins as much as she counted on him.

Holding her breath, her heart thumping, she edged across the floor. In the far corner of the room, the sorting room door hung open. As she drew closer, she heard a clicking coming from inside. She leaned through the opening.

Just a child, she thought.

A boy crouched over a tray of beads in the light of an oil lamp, his fingers working to separate them by colour. A small boy, whimpering, his arms thin, the bumps of his spine poking through his back.

“You’re still working?” asked Parini.

The boy’s head swung to stare at her, his hand tipping the tray and dislodging its contents.

“Oh no!” he wailed, swatting wildly at the rolling beads. “Please don’t tell Nikhi sahib. I’ll finish, I promise.”

“Why would I tell Nikhi sahib?” Parini asked, bending to scoop up the beads.

The boy's eyes widened, then relaxed, recognizing Parini as an ally. He sniffed, and sniffed again, dragging his knuckles across his nostrils.

"Do they know you're in here?" he asked.

"I'm here, and that's what matters," said Parini. "I'm Parini. Who are you?"

"Vik," he said.

"So now the merchant Mangat employs boys to work all night?" Parini asked, tipping the last of the beads onto the tray.

"Mangat sahib said I could be trusted," Vik said, smiling through his sobs, "and gave me an important job."

His face collapsed.

"But today I made a big mistake. Nikhi won't tell him if I fix it all by morning."

"I've heard of Nikhi," Parini said. "Mangat's son, but not like Mangat at all."

She lowered herself to the floor, crossed her legs, folded her hands in her lap.

"Tell me everything," she said. "Most likely I can help you."

"I weighed out beads. Mangat sahib said they were for a big shipment across the ocean. I did it, and the cloth sacks were ready to sew up. Mangat sahib and his son came to check, and I found out I had done it all wrong."

"Wrong how?" said Parini.

"You see this?" said Vik, touching the apparatus on the floor beside him.

"A scale," said Parini.

“It’s for the weighing,” said Vik. “I put this stone in one basket and beads in the other until the bar lines up with this notch. Nikhi sahib showed me.”

“So what was wrong?” Parini asked again.

“I mixed the colours, you see, and I wasn’t supposed to. So now I have to separate them, the round ones, the long, red, blue, yellow. Nikhi didn’t tell me that. He dumped the colours together when he showed me.”

“So you didn’t make a mistake at all,” said Parini. “It was this Nikhi. Didn’t you explain to Mangat?”

“It’s not good to shame a son in front of his father,” said Vik. “And anyway, Mangat sahib wasn’t angry. He just said to do it all again and went to his counting room.”

“So you said nothing?” Parini said. “Took all the blame?”

“Yes,” said Vik. “But afterward, I wish I hadn’t, because Nikhi came back and said I had to sort it all by morning or he would throw me out.”

His face crumpled.

“But it’s not working,” he sobbed. “It took all day just to weigh them out. Now, sorting and weighing again? I’ll never do it in time.”

“Of course, you will,” said Parini. “With two of us to do the work, we’ll finish well before dawn.”

“You want to sort too?” asked Vik. “You’ll get in trouble if they catch you.”

“They’ll never know I was here. I’ll be back with my little boy in the forest before the sun is up,” said Parini.

She crawled closer to the sacks of beads.

“Show me what we have to do,” she said.

For a while, the room was silent but for the clicking of beads, Vik's murmured directions, and Vik's occasional sniffles. Once Parini shifted closer to the lamps to add oil, and once a mouse poked out a pointed nose, then retreated quickly to scrabble behind the storage jars by the wall.

Vik slid a handful of red beads onto the balance, then looked up.

"Do you always come here at night?" he asked Parini.

"Only twice before," said Parini. "Mostly I stay with my son in our cottage in the forest."

"Oh," said Vik, falling silent again.

"Why is your hair that colour?" he asked suddenly. "Is your son's hair red too?"

"Black, as his father's was," Parini smiled.

"Where is he?" Vik asked.

“With a friend. A holy man,” Parini said.

The room was quiet once more as Parini sorted and Vik weighed.

“Is he older or younger?” Vik blurted out. “Than I am, I mean. I’m ten.”

“He was born five years ago. In those days he had a father and a mother to look out for him. Now there’s only me.”

“My grandfather looks out for me,” said Vik, “but he mostly rests. He was happy when Mangat sahib said I could work here. They give me rice and vegetables to take home. And oil, and once even new clothes.”

“You’re a good grandson,” said Parini.

Vik stopped his work to study Parini’s face. His eyes were slack with fatigue.

“You’re good too,” he said.

“Some would disagree with you,” said Parini. “You know why I came here tonight?”

“I think you’re a thief,” said Vik. “Was your son’s father a thief too?”

“No,” said Parini. “He never took up thieving. My son’s father was a servant in the merchant Arnesh’s house. That’s why I will never steal from Arnesh’s household.“

“You’re a thief but you’re kind,” said Vik. You stayed to help me with the beads.”

His mouth stretched open in a wide yawn. He rubbed his fist across his eyes.

“Yes,” said Parini, “I stayed to help, and the work is almost done. I’ll fill the last few sacks while you curl up by those jars and sleep. Mangat sahib will want you alert in the morning.”

Parini weighed the last of the blue beads and added the sacks to the ranks already lined up by the wall.

Vik was sound asleep, curled on his side, his breath bubbling through the thin shawl he had pulled over his face and chest.

She gazed at him for a moment, then slipped through the outer room and into the courtyard, where the watchman's fire was dimming against the lightening sky.

Dilipa swept his arm toward the gate, urging her on. She darted forward, then stopped.

The mats, she thought. She had left them lying on the floor while she tracked down the clicking beads. She wanted them. Her head was filled with the image of her small son playing happily by the red stripe.

She spun on her heel and dashed back into the warehouse, groping across the bricks for the two mats.

“Watchman, do your duty,” a voice whined from the courtyard. “We don’t retain you here to drowse by the fire all night.”

Nikhi. The merchant’s son.

Parini’s heart thudded in her ears. She pulled herself behind the bales of cloth, almost to safety, but was betrayed by the scrape of her sandal on the floor.

“Show yourself, whoever you are,” the voice demanded. “I’m Nikhi, the eldest son of the house. Don’t defy me.”

He swung his lamp, turning the bales into menacing shadows. The light streaked across her, then swerved back, hovering over her face.

“I thought so,” said Nikhi. “A thief. With ugly red hair, no less.”

He loomed over her, gripping her arm to yank her to her feet.

“Dilipa, useless son of a useless mother,” he shouted. “How did she get in here? Fetch the guards. Tell them it’s for the merchant Mangat so they won’t delay.”

Dilipa’s footsteps clattered in the courtyard.

Parini stood straight as a gate post, her head held high, the discarded mats tangled in her sandals.

“A thief, but not for much longer,” sneered Nikhi. “Nothing to steal in jail.”

A gasp came from the inner room.

Nikhi twisted round, hauling Parini with him. Vik stared from the doorway, the shock on his face stark in the dawn light.

Nikhi narrowed his eyes, pulled on the moustache that trailed over his fleshy lips.

“What are you doing, my boy?” he asked. “Have you failed at the task I gave you? It’s a good thing I came early to check.”

Vik opened his mouth but said nothing, and hung his head.

Nikhi brushed by him, dragging Parini with him. He stopped short, then peered into one of the small sacks lined up by the balance.

“What’s this?” he said, his breath harsh. “Have you cheated?”

He shook open another, and then another, Parini almost losing her footing as he pulled at her arm. Vik gazed into her face, his eyes worried. Parini smiled at him.

“Something’s not right here,” said Nikhi, pursing his lips. “You must not have done this properly.”

“But Sahib-ji,” said Vik, “it’s all done well. The colours, the weight, everything. She…” he began,

looking at Parini, then fell silent when she fluttered her hand. “I’ll show you, Nikhi sahib,” he said.

Vik dashed over to the sacks and placed one on the scale, adding weights to the other side. Nikhi tugged his moustache, a sour look on his face.

“You see,” said Vik. “Exactly right.”

Nikhi shrugged, conceding defeat by holding up one hand. The other was clamped around Parini’s arm.

“So, my boy, you’ve managed it somehow, and your place here is safe,” he said. “For now. But the moment I find out you’ve cheated me, you’ll be gone.”

“Yes, Nikhi sahib,” said Vik, folding his hands and bowing.

“And now to deal with the thief,” said Nikhi, sweeping out of the room. Parini lurched beside him, struggling to keep her feet out of the way of his heavy sandals. Vik’s anguished eyes followed her.

Dilipa returned, leading two city guards through the door. Parini had been concentrating on Vik, but now that she knew Vik was safe, the leather breastplates and long staffs of the guards brought shivers to her stomach.

“Caught in the act,” Nikhi said, shoving her toward the guards. “Breaking into our warehouse. Take her away. My father will speak with the magistrate later.”

“These thieves are brazen,”’ said the bald-headed guard, gesturing to his companion.

The younger man seized Parini’s wrists, binding them with rope.

Parini stumbled along the street, the young guard tugging the end of the rope so that her arms were stretched out in front, the other slapping his staff against her calves whenever she faltered. Her shoulders burned from the strain on her arms and

her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth from thirst, although in her despair, she barely noticed.

After years of creeping unnoticed into homes and storehouses, of helping herself to a shawl here, a ribbon there, or a pot of honey or whatever else she could sell, she had been caught. She took little and moved lightly and was generous with coins to watchmen, and until now she thought no harm could touch her.

She had believed her brother Hari.

“You can slip in anywhere,” he often gloated. “You’re invisible.”

Now she was discovered.

How could this be Parini, she thought, hauled away by guards to jail. Surely she was somewhere else, gliding through the city gates on her way to Dhiren in the forest.

And what of Dhiren? She thought of him running in the dirt outside the holy man's cottage, his cheeks plump, eyes sparkling, his hair tumbling on his forehead. Sanjaya would watch over him - a holy man would not cast aside a five-year-old child – but Dhiren would suffer, abandoned by his mother without a word.

The mat with the red stripe filled her head. Dhiren's, it would have been, if she had not lingered to count beads with Vik and been caught. A sob caught in her throat.

"No point weeping," said the bald guard, thumping his staff on the back of her legs. "What's done is done. Live with it."

And what of the goat? Parini thought of her languishing in her pen, no loving arms to bound into, no neck to nuzzle. She sobbed once more. But no point weeping, the guard had said, not unkindly.

After all, the goat would not starve. Grass grew thickly in her pen and a stream trickled through.

Parini threw her shoulders back, in spite of the rope pulling at her arms, and thrust out her chin. She was suffering for it, but still she was glad she had helped Vik. Legs thin as sticks, body hardly bigger than Dhiren's although he was twice Dhiren's age, and faithful to his grandfather.

The guards pulled her past the high brick walls of the jail compound and up to a tall man waiting inside.

"What's this?" he asked, his shoulders stooped over his thin ribcage, saliva spraying from his mouth.

The younger guard gripped Parini's wrists.

"Lower your eyes," he said. "You're in the presence of the warden.

"Caught stealing in Mangat sahib's warehouse, Warden-ji," said the older guard, folding his hands and bowing.

The warden gestured behind him, moving aside so the guard could lift the slab of wood barring the door. Parini was thrust inside, her wrists unbound, her feet stumbling on the dirt floor. She stood dazed as the door scraped shut, the heavy bar thumped down.

“So they finally seized you,” announced a hearty voice.

Parini whirled around, peering through the light leaking in where the brick wall met the roof. The room was dotted with women, sitting, walking, leaning against the wall. A tiny grey-haired woman squatted on the floor grinning at her.

“I’ve seen you in the market helping yourself to cucumbers and cinnamon and whatever else you fancy,” said the woman. “Hair like copper, wrinkled skirt. What did they catch you with today?”

“Nothing,” said Parini, shrugging. “I was after some floor mats, but my timing was off.”

Another woman cackled beside her.

“Timing, timing, timing,” she said, chanting like a priest. “There’s time here, my *rani*. Only time. Sit all day and look at one wall, then look at another.”

“That’s Alka,” said the first woman. “I’m Tenny. Alka’s been here a long time. See her hair? She can’t be bothered anymore.”

Alka’s hair was unbound, her face shrunken.

“And you?” asked Parini.

“I’ll be gone as soon as my son comes,” Tenny said, combing her hair with a wooden comb, twisting it into a thin grey braid. “He’ll be here as soon as he puts together enough coins to pay for me.”

“We have to pay?” Parini asked.

She crouched on the floor beside Tenny.

“Who do you have to speak for you?” Tenny said.

“No one,” moaned Alka, rocking back and forth. “There’s no one to speak.”

“I know, Alka-ji, and I’m sorry for it,” said Tenny. “But I meant this other woman.”

“Parini,” said Parini, her stomach churning. “My name is Parini. There’s no one for me either.”

How long would it be before she looked like Alka?

“No one with some coins to spare?” asked Tenny, smoothing her braid on her shoulder. “The way my son does for me? He comes gladly, for I’ve done the same for him, and will again.”

“No one but my foolish brother,” Parini said, “and who knows where he is? And the holy one in the forest who watches my son when I come to town. To sell herbs, and sandals, he thinks. He mustn’t find out what I do besides.”

“Then you’ll be here for a long time,” said Tenny.

“Long time. Long time,” moaned Alka.

Parini’s throat tightened, her head buzzing.

“My child,” she croaked. “Who will care for him? The holy man expects me. And what of my goat?”

She gripped her head in her hands, moaning and rocking back and forth as Alka had.

The other women watched, their faces impassive.

In the evening, the guards brought her a cot and a blanket to wrap around herself. The ropes of the cot were slack and the blanket edge was frayed, but more comfortable than she was used to. She lay in the dark, longing for the hard floor of her little forest hut, with the blue-painted door, Dhiren snuggled beside her, muttering in his sleep.

The next day, she was given work outside in the yard. And for many days afterward. The sun was hot, and there was little shade, and the shawl she tied over her head was always damp with sweat

where it pressed on her forehead. Parini drew water from the well and scrubbed clothes, chopped vegetables, sometimes she ground dried lentils in the great stone mortar. Always, whatever the task, she and the others were guarded closely.

One dawn, after the guard pushed open the door for the kitchen workers to stagger in with the huge pots of lentils and rice for breakfast, he pointed at Tenny.

"The prisoner called Tenny," he bellowed.

Some of the prisoners gasped. Tenny was unruffled, looking up from the bowl she was filling.

"Your son is here," said the guard. "Take your bundle of clothes and leave."

Tenny smirked in triumph.

"Finish this," she said, passing her bowl to Parini, patting her hand. "Shall I take a message to your holy man? Perhaps he has gold hidden away to pay

your way out of here. There'd be a reward in it for me too, no doubt."

"No need," said Parini. "I'm happy serving my time here."

She would miss Tenny's bright spirit, but not her slyness.

The rains came, and the courtyard bricks ran with mud. She spent her days crowded with the other women in their dark musty room, twirling a spindle of cotton thread, or sitting by the wall, her arms around her legs, her cheek on her knees, thinking of Dhiren. Would Sanjaya become impatient caring for a child? Never, she thought. Sanjaya was gruff, but his heart was soft.

One grey morning, the women were sent to launder bedding before the afternoon downpour. As Parini picked her way across the muddy bricks of the yard, the burly guard with the bald head pushed toward her.

“The prisoner called Parini,” he shouted.

Parini jerked to a stop, the basket of soiled clothes banging against her back.

“Your fine’s been paid,” said the guard. “Fetch your things from inside and go.”

Alka stood nearby watching, her face bleak beneath her tangled hair.

“Go, go,” moaned Alka. “Go or stay. Go or stay.”

“Alka, you should be the one to go,” said Parini. “I’d exchange with you, but I have a child waiting for me.”

“Don’t concern yourself with Alka,” said the guard. “She’s been set free twice, and both times she hung around the gate until we let her back in. She’s best off here.”

Parini made a bundle of the spare skirt and shawl she had been given, and walked toward the warden, who waited at the gate.

“Go,” he said, spraying her with saliva. “This time you’re fortunate. Next time might be different.”

Next time, thought Parini. There will never be a next time.

Out on the street, she rolled her shoulders and breathed deeply, sucking in her sudden freedom. But her joy shrank, replaced by worry about Dhiren and uncertainty about who had paid for her release.

She joined the shuffling crowd at the river gate. A city guard stopped her, poking through her bundle of clothes. Her heart drummed in her ears. The guard motioned her forward and she walked down the ramp and along the slow brown river.+

I've become foolish, she thought. I was nervous of the guards for no reason. Only three weeks in jail, and I'm cringing like a lifetime prisoner.

She turned from the river into the grove of *sal* trees. She tugged off her sandals. The sun sparkled through the leaves, the weeds on the pathway dug into her feet the way she remembered, monkeys screeched and birds skimmed above her as she passed. She dragged her hands across the tree trunks, delighting in the rough bark against her palm and the fragrance of sun-warmed vegetation filling her nostrils.

The forest grew gloomy as rainclouds covered the sky. Parini reached the marshy stream bank where years ago she had taught her mistress to gather roots and cresses. Her mistress Dani, Sanjaya's granddaughter. Dead of snakebite. Yellow dragonflies danced in the last of the sunlight. Dani had loved them.

She scarcely slowed as the ground rose steeply and the air darkened. She tied her pack around her waist, freeing her arms to balance herself on the rocks, her hardened feet sure in the crevices, unbruised by the sharp edges.

When the weather broke, Parini was climbing the last cliff above Sanjaya's cottage. The rain slammed onto the rocks, spattering her ankles with mud and forcing her to her hands and knees to avoid slipping. She slid down the slope, landing in the clearing with soggy leaves clinging to her skirt.

Water splashed down, beating the earth of the enclosure, dimpling the surface of the stream. There was no sign of Sanjaya or Dhiren, who must be sheltering, warm and dry, inside the hut. Water slid off the porch overhang, barely missing the brown-faced goat peering from behind the post. A goat with a ragged ear torn in a wild dog attack.

Her goat. Sanjaya must have brought her from her hut. A kind man, but Parini feared his gruffness.

She stood with folded hands and watched through blurred eyes for the holy man to appear and acknowledge her. She imagined Dhiren tossing pebbles by the brazier, immersed in the sound of the pounding rain, grinning widely when he realized his mother had returned.

“I greet you, Parini-ji,” called Sanjaya from the porch. “Wring the water from your skirt before you come inside.”

He stooped to re-enter his house, shaking raindrops from his shawl as he went.

Under the porch roof, Parini squeezed moisture from her clothes and dripping hair.

“I was gone a long time without sending you word, Sanjaya-ji,” she said when she passed through the doorway, bending to touch his feet.

“The city must have a great appetite for your fruits and herbs,” said Sanjay, gesturing for her to rise.

His face was stern as always, his eyes far-gazing like the lion he resembled, with his ruff of hair and beard springing around his face. A white-haired lion with prayer beads spread on his chest.

“Did Dhiren behave well? she asked, nervous that her son had not come running.

“Yes, when he wasn’t pilfering honey from the shelf or climbing the cliffs after swallows’ nests,” said Sanjaya. “Wrap yourself in dry clothes from the chest, and then I’ll speak with you.”

Parini pulled a skirt and shawl from the chest in the inner room, brown with age along the folds. The same shawl with a silver border that had draped the shoulders of Sanjaya’s niece, dead long ago. Parini’s fingers fumbled as she tucked the skirt around her hips. Where was Dhiren? Something was wrong.

“Dhiren?” she asked, returning to the outer room.

“The rain has eased,” said Sanjaya. “There’s buttermilk cooling in the stream. Bring some and sit.”

Parini did as he asked, but was nauseous with worry. Sanjaya was preparing her for bad news. She lifted the half-submerged crock of buttermilk, filled two drinking bowls, and set the crock back in the water secured by a rope knotted around a banyan root.

“You are wondering about your son,” said Sanjaya. “Parini-ji, I must tell you that he’s no longer with me.”

“Where, then?” asked Parini, her head as numb as when the guards had marched her away to jail.

“He’s with your brother,” said Sanjaya, his deep eyes fixed on Parini’s face.

“With Hari?” Parini said, her voice rising to a squeak. “How could he be with Hari? I don’t even know where Hari is.”

“He came and took him,” said Sanjaya. “Brought me the goat. The child skipped off quite happily. Hari said they were going to search for treasure.”

“How did this happen?” groaned Parini, wanting to scream but holding back in the presence of the holy one. “Hari thinks only of treasure. That’s not a suitable life for a boy.”

“Hari acted correctly,” said Sanjaya. “He learned that you’d been jailed, and, as was his duty, took his nephew into his care.”

“You heard about the stealing?” asked Parini.

“Hari told me.”

“I don’t take much. Just what people don’t care about. And never from the big house where Dhiren’s father served. “

“Nonetheless, you must stop,” Sanjaya said.

“I know that,” said Parini, gazing at Sanjaya’s feet, her voice dull. “It’s thieving that’s lost me Dhiren.”

She rammed her fist into her palm.

“But I was never a no-good like my brother,” she cried. “You shouldn’t have let Dhiren go with him. He’ll make my sweet boy into a villain.”

“Parini-ji, you’re like a granddaughter to me,” said Sanjaya, “but we have no blood connection. After you, Hari has the first claim on Dhiren. It’s not for me to interfere.”

“Sanjaya-ji,” said Parini, thrusting out her chin, “when your sister took me as a ten-year-old servant, she cared only that I cost her nothing but my daily rice and lentils and a sleeping pallet. She had no idea that my father and his brothers thieved and robbed for a living, maybe even murdered. Or that I missed my mother, who sent me off to save me from them.

They trained my brother Hari to follow them. Now Hari will do the same to Dhiren."

She hunched over, her face in her hands.

"Then find Dhiren and take him back," said Sanjaya.

"How can I?" said Parini. "My brother disappears for months at a time."

"Don't give in to weakness," Sanjaya said. "You never did for all those years you served my scold of a sister. Hold your head high and gather your herbs and watch for your brother's return. He won't forget you. After all, he knew as soon as you entered the jail. And he brought your goat here to be cared for."

Parini caught her breath.

"Maybe he's the one who paid for my release," she said, then hung her head. "But I don't think so. He'd be waiting for me with his hand held out for me to pay him back."

She swallowed the last of her buttermilk and washed their empty bowls in the stream. Bundling up the damp clothes she had discarded, she folded her hands and bowed to Sanjaya, then led the goat up the cliff to her hut in the forest. Her sleep that night was fitful, the air in her hut lifeless and oppressive without Dhiren's chatter.

"I'm hungry," he would say, patting her cheek with his hand as she was falling asleep. "Just a *chapatti* with honey. Then I'll be quiet."

In the clear sun of morning, she walked with her knife and digging stick to the asoka tree near her cottage. Brushing aside the undergrowth beneath the drooping leaves, she dug through the hard earth, the raucous birdcalls blunted by the rasp of her breathing.. Her stick scraped on rock.

"Still here," she said aloud into the air.

She lifted the stone lid she had unearthed and squeezed her hand through the lip of the clay jar

beneath. Her golden jewellery and silver pieces were just as she had left them. Her brother had taken Dhiren but hadn't found her treasure.

Tying some of the silver into a corner of her shawl, she replaced the jar, scattering brush and leaves to disguise the hiding place. Back at her cottage, she baked *chapatti* on the brazier outside her door, then crouched on the hard-packed ground to eat one. She scratched the ears of the goat, who butted its head against her, gazed at the door frame she had painted blue and traced with red flowers, and set out toward the city, a basket filled with dried herbs and roots and cold *chapatti* slung across her back.

Dhiren loved the goat and the blue door. Would he see them again?

In the city, she came to a cross street milling with people, and laid her herb packets out on a cloth, crouching over the threadbare part where the blue and russet pattern had worn away. No Dhiren and

no thieving. Gathering herbs for the market place was her life from now on.

“Herbs and roots, herbs and roots, for health and beauty,” she called out.

A woman passed by, her hair twisted high on her head and her skirt pleated low on her hips.

”Flowers of the *pimpali* vine,” Parini cried, catching the woman’s eye. “Nothing better to smooth the skin.”

The woman slowed, then walked on.

An elderly man leaning on a staff hobbled close.

“Strengthening root of winter cherry,” she said to him, “dug deep from its sandy home, dried and chopped for your enjoyment.”

The man gestured to his servant, who placed a cowry shell on Parini’s blanket in return for one of the small packets.

“Sweet *vacha* root, cooled in forest streams to soothe the stomach and sharpen the brain. Bark of the mango tree, full of the brightness of the sun to brighten the dullest mood.”

By the time the sky clouded over and the rain poured down, her packets were sold and a handful of shells had been added to the silver coins tied in her shawl. She sheltered inside an abandoned hut until the rain eased.

Dilipa will be on duty by now, she thought. I can honour my debt.

She packed the faded blanket into the basket and set off for Mangat’s trading house, hanging back as she approached the building, wary of being seen by Mangat’s son Nikhi.

From behind a corner of the wall, she studied the courtyard entrance. Dilipa hovered outside his hut, his brazier as yet unlit. He waved a cart through the gate, the bullocks lumbering ahead at the touch of

the driver's stick, then another cart of large jars packed in straw, rattling with every wheel turn. Workers rushed to heave the goods into the warehouse, but there was no sign of Mangat or his sons.

She edged along the rough bricks of the wall to the thick wooden post at the side of the entrance.

"Dilipa," she hissed. "Dilipa. I need to speak with you."

Dilipa sauntered onto the street.

"I greet you, Parini-ji," he said, gazing importantly up the street, then down the street, pretending not to see her wedged in behind the gate post.

"For you," Parini said, taking his arm and pressing silver into his hand. "Real silver. You tried to help me the morning I was taken. I don't forget such things."

Dilipa glanced around him, then slipped the silver into his sash.

Another cart drew up. Dilipa beckoned it into the yard, then stood tall and stiff, his face expressionless, as the merchant Mangat and his sons swept from the warehouse into the courtyard.

“We rely on you, Dilipa-ji,” said Mangat, passing through the gate. His son Nikhii puffed air through his meaty lips and raised his eyebrows.

Dilipa bowed, his yellow turban tilted to one side.

“I must bar the gates now,” he told Parini when the family had disappeared around the corner. “Better not come here for a while. Nikhi hates you. Stay away from him.”

Parini came out from behind the post.

“What can Nikhi do to me?” said Parini. “I’m not his servant, and I took my punishment. And for what? I never did get those mats.”

“It’s not what he’ll do to you,” said Dilipa, murmuring close to Parini’s ear although the courtyard and street were empty. “It’s the boy.”

“My son?” asked Parini, her head pounding.

“Nikhi cares nothing for your son,” said Dilipa. “The servant boy Vik, I mean.”

“The little bead sorter?” said Parini.

“Perhaps you don’t know,” said Dilipa. “That little bead sorter has become your champion. And Mangat sahib’s great friend. And mean-eyed Nikhi’s enemy.”

“My champion?” asked Parini.

“You’re free now, aren’t you?” said Dilipa. “It’s all because of Vik.”

“Vik?” asked Parini.

“Yes,” said Dilipa, straightening his turban. “Because of Vik. After you were taken, Nikhi slunk off to the

warden and demanded strict punishment for you, and who was the warden to argue with the oldest son of a trading house. We all heard Nikhi boast about it, Vik along with the rest of us. And then a few days ago Vik marched up to Mangat sahib and said you'd taken nothing, only helped him with the beads, and it was unjust that you were thrown into jail."

"Vik did that?" said Parina. "Was Mangat sahib furious?"

"Not at all," said Dilipa. "He patted Vik on the head and called him a plucky boy. Then he went to the jail and paid your fine. Nikhi was the furious one, pushed aside by a servant boy."

Parini remembered Vik's serious face and frail arms, working through the night to help his ailing grandfather.

"Vik's a thousand times better than Nikhi," said Parini. "I must see him. He did me a great service."

“He’s here in the mornings. These days he sweeps the courtyard and cleans the stables. But be careful. We never know when Nikhi is lurking around.”

Dilipa bowed and backed into the courtyard, pulling shut the great wooden gates. From the street, Parini could hear the thud of the heavy bar as it fell into place.

Early the next day she stood once more behind the gatepost at Mangat’s warehouse. As the night sky lightened into the pearl of early morning, Vik’s small figure approached the gate, his sandals scraping the pavement, his shoulders hunched under his shawl.

“Vik-ji,” whispered Parini. “It’s Parini. Are you cold? You’re shivering.”

Vik gasped in surprise then smiled broadly, just as Dilipa scraped open the gates.

“Parini-ji,” Vik said. “You must leave. Nikhi Sahib is angry and very mean.”

Parini stood before him, folded her hands and bowed.

“I’ll leave as soon as I pay honour to you for your courage,” said Parini. “Dilipa told me how you defied Nikhi and went to Mangat-ji.”

Dilipa smiled his approval. Vik turned his head aside.

“I went to Mangat-ji,” he mumbled, “but I waited a long time before I did. So I wasn’t brave.”

“You were definitely brave,” said Parini. “So why is a brave boy like you cleaning stables instead of sorting beads?”

“I made Nikhi sahib very angry,” he said, his eyes downcast.

Then his head jerked up at the scrape of footsteps from around the corner.

“Nikhi sahib, come to check up on me,” he said, his eyelids fluttering in panic. Parini squeezed back behind the gate post.

Nikhi clumped up to the entrance and leaned over Vik, his thick lips flared, his breathing heavy. He glared at him, then slapped him on both cheeks.

“Loitering outside when you should be sweeping?” he shouted. “Not to be tolerated”

Vik turned into the courtyard, his eyes welling with tears.

“Make sure he does his work,” Nikhi said to Dilipa, turning back toward his home, his sandals scraping on the pavement.

In her hiding place behind the post, Parini listened, her head buzzing with fury.

“Dilipa,” she said, emerging from the shadows when Nikhi had gone. “Tell Vik I’ll find another post for him. Far away from Nikhi.”

She thought about Arnesh the merchant's house, many streets away, outside the city walls and surrounded by high brick walls of its own. Arnesh lived there with his wife Alaya, and looked kindly on Parini.

For Parini and her brother had brought the couple together and earned Arnesh's gratitude.

Parini had often walked to the big house beside her husband and his bullock cart, crouched by the wall or wandered on the stream bank while Rohan unloaded firewood or straw or charcoal into the storehouse. Perhaps Arnesh would listen to her request, remembering Rohan's faithfulness

"Rohan, old friend," Arnesh always said, throwing a braceleted arm around Rohan's shoulders, the gold fringe of his sash catching on Rohan's coarse *dhoti*. "Don't go without tasting some lemon water and fried cakes. And Parini-ji too."

When Rohan died, Arnesh stood with the mourners at the death rites, although she had not seen him since.

And Arnesh and his wife had a son the same age as Vik. Vik could be playmate and servant, for Banu as Rohan had been for Arnesh's cousin.

Her mind made up, she set out for Arnesh's house, trudging upward between walled courtyards. She wiped the sweat from her face with her shawl, and then, as the sky darkened and rain slammed down, mopped her dripping forehead.

Arnesh and Alaya came together to meet her inside the gate.

"It's reasonable, what she asks," said Alaya, her braid still thick and glossy. "Parini-ji was good to me. This small boy needs our help."

“We could use an extra boy,” Arnesh said, sucking in his cheeks, “but I have no wish to deprive Mangat-ji of his servant.”

“Arnesh-ji,” said Parini, “if you explain you need a companion for your son, Mangat-ji will agree. He’s a kind man. His son’s the bad one.”

Arnesh jutted out his chin, slapped his hands together.

“Leave it up to me,” he said. “I’ll arrange it.”

She was sad as she walked home. She had made a better life for Vik, but there was no help she could give to her own son. No way she could lay a wooden monkey puppet in his hand and watch his eyes sparkle, or laugh to see him leap with the goat around the yard, whooping with joy.

Parini returned to her life in the forest, carrying knotted sandals and roots and clusters of purple *jamun* fruit to sell in the city. But no more slipping

behind courtyard walls in search of scarves and sashes to add to her wares. She had been given a harsh lesson. Because of stealing she had lost Dhiren.

In the evenings she sat by her cottage door, chewing *chapatti* and lentils and longing for Dhiren's chatter. He must have grown taller. Did he think of her? Did he remember the blue doorframe and the goat? Hari would turn him into a vagabond and a thief.

Some nights, when her throat ached with loneliness and the silence of the empty cottage pressed on her ears, she left her mat and slept outside, curled against the rough bark of a *sal* tree.

She spoke little, except with customers who stopped by her blanket in the market. Several times she crossed the forest and slid down the cliff with fruit and greens for Sanjaya, and sometimes, when her market stock was cleaned out early, she stood outside Mangat the merchant's gate to chat with Dilipa the watchman.

“Just as you promised, Vik has left here,” Dilipa told her. “Gone to serve in the house on the hill. And Nikhi’s not so haughty any more. Mangat sahib is keeping a close eye on him.”

Months passed. The rainy season ended, and harvest time came, the market filled with cartloads of dates and melons and jungle fowl. Then the buds on the Asoka tree near Parini’s hut blossomed into feathery orange flowers, and their fragrance eased the heaviness in Parini’s heart.

“Parini-ji,” said Dilipa one afternoon. “It’s good you came. Vik was here. He had good news. Your son’s with him at the house on the hill.”

Parini sank to the pavement, her legs trembling.

“I don’t understand,” she said, staring at Dilipa.

“Your son,” said Dilipa. “He’s at the merchant Arnesh’s house.”

“My brother took him there? Why would he do that?”

“You must go there and find out,” said Dilipa.

The street was in shadow when she reached the house by the tiny stream. The gatekeeper sent for Arnesh, who came to her in the courtyard, the gold threads in his sash glinting in the glow of the brazier.

Parini’s mouth trembled as she bowed her greeting, her eyes wide with hope.

“Dhiren is here,” Arnesh said. “And what a tale he has to tell of how he got here.”

“Is my brother here?” asked Parini. “Is Dhiren in good health?”

“He’s fine, as you’ll see for yourself,” said Arnesh, the angles of his face softened by the firelight. “Alaya’s gone to wake him. He’s desperate for his house with the blue door, but no one knows where to find it.”

Arnesh's wife appeared on the stairway, a small boy hurtling ahead crying 'Mata-ji" and throwing himself at Parini.

"See, Dhiren," said Alaya. "Here's your mother. "At last you can see your goat."

Vik trailed behind, still scrawny and barely taller than Dhiren, his face beaming. Another boy hovered at his side.

"Parini-ji, we found him," he announced. "And this is my friend Banwalia. I live in his house now."

Parini patted Vik's head, and Banwalia's too, then stooped to crush Dhiren in her arms, to kiss his face, his head, his hands. The same Dhiren she had left with Sanjaya that hot morning before the rains. Taller, thinner, and his black hair long on his neck and in his eyes.

"My son, my son. Now my heart is happy," she murmured in his ear. "But where's your uncle?'

“Hari uncle couldn’t leave, so Captain-ji said he would take me.”

“A ship captain brought him down the coast,” Arnesh explained.

“I didn’t like the mountains,” said Dhiren, hiding his face against Parini.

“But how did you end up here?” asked Parini.

“This is where my father served,” said Dhiren. ‘You told me, Mata-ji. I wanted to go to the blue door, but the captain couldn’t find it so I said I’d wait at the house of Arnesh merchant.”

Parini’s eyes widened.

“He’s a very bright boy,” said Arnesh.

“Where is Captain-ji now?” asked Parini, shrugging at Arnesh and Alaya, drawing Dhiren onto her lap.

“Back at the harbour, well-paid and content,” said Arnesh.

“You paid him?” asked Parini.

Arnesh folded his hands and bowed.

“The gods protected you, my son,” said Parini, raising her hands to the sky. “How else could you have travelled so far unharmed.”

“It’s all thanks to Vik,” said Alaya, her hand on Vik’s shoulder. “The gods made Vik the protector, Parini-ji. It was his idea to track you down by seeking out the watchman Dilipa. He’s gone to Dilipa every day hoping for word.”

Vik looked down, brushing the pavement with his toe. Parini pulled him close, squashing him against Dhiren. Then she stood, setting both boys on their feet.

“Dhiren, my son,” she said. “Fold your hands and bow to Vik, for though he’s only ten years old, he’s our respected teacher. But for him, I’d still be in prison.”

She bowed to Vik, then helped Dhiren do the same, pressing his palms together for him.

Vik's eyes darted nervously.

Dhiren leaped across the courtyard, swinging his arms like a monkey, then landing on both feet in front of Vik. He took Vik's hand.

"If you come to my house, Vik-ji," he said, his face bright with excitement, "you can see my goat."

He bowed again.

Chapatti Flour

Our family was the opposite of the old stories about cruel stepmothers and foolish fathers. With us, it was our father Banwalia who disliked us and our stepmother who was kind. She tried her best to help, but what could she do when my father hated me, his firstborn son, and my little sister Devi?

One night our stepmother came into the room where Devi and I were sleeping. She loomed over me, her small-boned body huge in the shadow, the lamp she carried making me squint.

“Reena Ma!” I exclaimed. “What’s wrong?”

She hissed for me to be quiet.

“Don’t speak, Raju,” she whispered, holding up her lamp with one hand, gripping my shoulder with the other. Devi was curled in the blue-striped blanket sound asleep. “Let your father think I’m in the other room.”

Shouts rose up from the courtyard. Father and his friends were playing at dice. Their game had started just after sunset, five men crouched on a mat throwing down shells and laying wagers.

Earlier, as I had settled on the cot in the sleeping room, I had heard Father exhibiting the new baby.

“Come here, Reena,” he had called. “Let our guests see what a fine boy you’ve given me.”

The other men mumbled their approval.

“He’ll be tossing dice with us before you know it,” Father’s friend Manvir Uncle chuckled.

“It’s all due to Reena,” said Father. “The gods blessed me when they brought her to me.”

From upstairs in a room off the balcony, I couldn’t see the courtyard, but I was sure Reena Ma cringed. She mistrusted my father, and his praise most of all.

I fell asleep to raucous voices, hoots of laughter.

Now many cups of honey wine later, their laughter was harsh and tempers short.

“Mine,” I heard Father call.

“No, mine,” boomed another voice, accompanied by an uneasy growl from the group.

Manvir Uncle’s voice was the firmest.

“Let it be,” he threatened.

I pulled myself up on the bed. Reena pressed my shoulder. The baby whimpered from the next room. Reena gasped in alarm, then relaxed at the sound of the nursemaid’s soothing.

After a tense silence, the men sidestepped their quarrel, and the game resumed.

“It’s happened as we feared, Raju,” Reena Ma murmured, rubbing the back of her hand as she often did when she had something difficult to say. “Your father’s heart has hardened.”

“Devi?” I asked

Reena nodded.

“No more mixtures from the herbalist, he said tonight. And less food.”

Devi was frail, tinier than other five-year-olds. Her pointed chin, dark eyes, tangled curls, thin arms that hugged my neck in fleeting shows of affection, were all I had of our mother, who died when she was born. I wanted Devi with me as long as the gods would allow it but Reena Ma had warned me that Father disliked wasting milk and *chapatti* on a child with a crooked foot.

“She’s meant to leave us early,” I once heard him tell Reena Ma.

He was wrong, I was sure. A foot that didn’t grow properly didn’t mean her whole body was weak. But Father thought her life would be short.

“Why defy the will of the gods with pills and potions?” he said.

“You are wise,” Reena had replied. “My parents chose a worthy husband for me.”

She humoured him to keep him calm.

He wanted me gone too. He disliked Devi because her body was unsound, Reena explained, but his dislike of me was different. He was jealous of me, Reena said.

“You’re a handsome young man, Raju, and outshine your father,” she explained. “You’re tall for eleven years, your limbs are straight, your shoulders are strong.”

I had never thought it before, but it was true. Father's arms were scrawny, his legs bowed.

"Your mind is quick, like your mother's and your father never liked that in her. Watch him carefully," Reena Ma said.

After the baby came, Father grew more dangerous.

"I'm worried about you," Reena Ma said. "He has eyes only for this new son of a mother who delights him. He wants to put me in charge of his trading house so he can make merry with his friends all day. You're blocking his plan. Who knows what he has in mind for you?"

"Don't worry," I said. "I'll tell him you can have the company."

"But it's Devi that concerns me," she said. "She's too small to look out for herself."

Now Reena Ma stood by the bed, telling me the time had come.

“If I weren’t so ashamed for him, I would tell my parents how treacherous Banwalia my husband is. They would be furious.”

“Should I take Devi away?” I asked Reena.

“Whatever you think is wise,” said Reena, chafing her hand. “I must do as my husband says, so It’s out of my hands. But I brought you this”

She pulled a cloth bundle from a fold in her robe.

“Almonds, already shelled. Easy to eat,” she said.

Taking up the lamp, she glanced at Devi and glided out the door. Shouts from the dice-throwing muffled the slap of her sandals on the wood.

When she had gone, Devi raised her head. Her eyes gleamed in the faint light rising from the courtyard.

“Raju-ji,” she breathed.

“You’re awake,” I murmured.

“I wasn’t asleep. I was pretending,” she said. “Don’t worry if Reena Ma can’t feed me. I don’t need to eat a lot. I’m small.”

Her eyes pleaded with me to agree.

“We’re not staying here,” I said. “We’ll find someplace where you can eat whatever you want.”

I rolled the cotton bed covering around the packet of almonds and slipped the knot over my shoulder.

Devi’s face was solemn.

“I’ll carry you out,” I said, crouching on the edge of the bed so that Devi could climb on my back. “Hold on tight and say nothing. We’ll talk later.”

She clamped her arms around my chest, I hooked my arms under her knees, and staggered several steps until I found my balance. Devi’s breath brushed the side of my neck as I lurched along the balcony overhanging the courtyard. Reena Ma pushed aside her door curtain as we passed her room, tipping her

head in silent encouragement. Father and his friends were engrossed in their game, Father's thin frame hunched over the dice, the old servant Vik busy refilling clay bowls with wine. I hoped the darkness would hide us if they glanced up.

I set my foot down crookedly and stumbled.

The game below fell silent. I shrank back against the bricks of the wall.

"Who's there?" Father called out.

"It's the mother of your son," called out Reena. "He's restless. I'm trying to soothe him."

I limped the last few steps to the staircase, then stooped to help Devi off my shoulders. Holding her hand, I led her down the staircase, then peered out in to the courtyard from behind the curtain. The gods were on our side. Night was fading and the little knot of gamblers was staggering toward the street exit. Vik bustled off to bring their sandals as

they threw shawls around their shoulders, smoothed their wrinkled *dhotis.*

Manvir Uncle, wide-mouthed with laughter, flung his arm over Father's back, his generous belly bumping against Father's hip.

"Look at you, gloating after one successful night." he baited him. "Wait till next time. We'll drain your winnings into the gutter."

"Don't be bitter, good friend Manvir," said Father, "but next time will also be to my gain."

Vik, clutching his shawl across his hollow chest, rushed to unloop the rope closure and push the door open. Father waved off his guests and, tugging at his loincloth, turned toward the toilet.

I seized the chance, and pulled Devi across the corner of the courtyard to the heavy wooden door as Vik was drawing it shut. We locked eyes. I held my breath while he deliberated. Finally, his affection for

Devi won. He laid his hand on Devi's head and gestured for us to squeeze by.

"Can you walk to the city gate?" I asked Devi when we had turned the corner into the main street. "We can rest when we're out in the open."

"I'm very strong," she said, hobbling unevenly as she quickened her pace to support her words. "Where are we going?"

"To the forest," I said. "Away from Father who wants to hurt us both."

We passed along brick roads, through the gloom of pre-dawn and the mist of early morning. At first, we were alone, but people began to emerge from behind courtyard walls, and soon the streets were crowded with the slapping of sandals on brick, the creaking of carts, the twitching of bullocks' tails, the shouts of the drivers.

Bird calls filled the air, ducks flew black against the pearly grey of the sky, fat green pigeons hid in the leaves of a neem tree planted where the road opened into a market. A woman smiled and held out *chapattis* from behind a huge grill. Nervous of attracting attention, I hurried Devi along. The smell of hot bread reminded me of Father's courtyard and the breakfast we were missing.

We reached the city gate. Hoisting my bundled blanket, tightening my grip on Devi's hand, I passed by the guards by trailing a family of chattering children and an old man in a cart.

Along with the crowd, we walked beside the river, the sun-hardened riverbank as firm as the road beside it. The throng of travelers thinned, woodsmen and foragers turning off into the forest, fisher folk into the clustered fishing villages. Sweat dripped into my eyes as the sun rose higher. Devi was tiring. Several times we crouched by the water to drink from our hands and rest on the rocks.

Past a shallow place in the river, where red-headed cranes waded in the reeds, a stream flowed down from the forest. I waited for the road to clear. I lifted Devi by the arms to swing her across the stream and continue along the road, but then I changed my mind. I waited until a bullock cart loaded with clay jars creaked past, leaving the road deserted. I stepped over the flat rocks and turned into the forest.

“This way is safe,” I said. “There’s no one to see us. Just a little deeper into the trees, and we’ll make plans.”

Devi was limp with fatigue, her curls plastered to her forehead with sweat. I carried her on my shoulder the way I carried our baby half-brother at home, and barely able to see past her, I cut my feet on the stones of the rough path.

We came to a banyan tree, its grey roots in giant twists above the ground. It was cool under the wide

glossy leaves. I spread our blue-striped blanket in the shade. We drank from the stream and chewed on almonds from the pack Reena had given us.

“Where are we going, Raju-ji?” asked Devi when she had regained her strength.

“Somewhere safe,” I said. “Away from Father.”

“But he’ll be angry,” said Devi.

“We’ll be far away where he can’t hurt us,” I said. “He hates us. That’s why Reena Ma told us to leave.”

The sun was high in the sky. Drowsy from our long walk, we curled up on the ground beneath the tree.

I looked up at the patches of clear blue beyond the spreading leaves of the tree. The sky, the root pressing my spine, the bird whistles and monkey shrieks seemed make-believe. Father’s courtyard seemed the only real place. Perhaps we should return, no matter how dangerous it was. How would

we live here? What would we eat when the almonds were gone?

The air was hot, but I pulled the familiar cotton blanket over us for comfort. Devi rolled on her stomach, fast asleep. Fatigue overcame my fears, and I drowsed.

I awoke to Devi's voice breathing into my ear.

"Raju-ji," she said, "someone's here."

A woman's face hovered over us. I sprang to my feet, pulling Devi close.

"It's good you found shelter here," she said. "The tree has protected you."

Her hair sprang thick and red from her head, her face was boney, flat cheeks beneath sunken eyes, mouth almost hidden beneath the gold ring hanging from her nose.

We shrank against the tree, staring at her. I felt my mouth hanging open and snapped it shut.

“Whose children, are you?” she asked.

We said nothing.

“I’ll not force you to speak,” she said. “But sleeping in the open is not so wise once darkness falls. I have a hut nearby.”

She gestured toward the dense forest beyond the stream.

“There’s food and a warm room there if you wish.”

“We’re fine,” I said.

“Follow the path behind the red bush If you change your mind,” she said,

She tightened her rough grey skirt around her hips and walked off through the trees, her hair falling over the basket of leaves on her back.

“Can we go to her house?” asked Devi.

I yearned for the food the woman had promised, could almost taste hot soup slipping down my throat. But a stranger appearing from nowhere offering help we hadn't sought? What did she really intend?

"Not yet," I told Devi. We'll walk further along the bank. We'll probably find a cave or something for tonight."

Devi's face was solemn, but she came without protest. I gripped her hand, overwhelmed by the thinness of her wrist. She was too tiny to wander the forest. I had thoughtlessly brought her into danger.

We had walked only a short time when the light dimmed and a breeze cooled our faces. A flock of birds broke from the trees and wheeled above us in black swirls against the evening sky. Devi cried out and pulled away from my hand, flopping onto the ground.

“I don’t like caves,” she muttered, avoiding my eyes. “I want to go to that woman’s house.”

The gloom of dusk turned into foolishness my half-formed plans to eat berries and roots and sleep in caves.

“Come on, then,” I said, and turned back toward the banyan tree. Devi faltered after a few steps. Once again, I slung her over my shoulder.

A short walk into the forest behind the banyan tree, we came upon an *asoka* tree, blossoms glowing red in the fading light. Dangling leaves brushed my head as I circled the trunk, searching for the way the woman had described.

It was more a widening between the tree trunks than a path that led us to a tiny cottage tucked in the corner of a clearing. The door was blue as the sky, painted around the frame with garlands of leaves. Devi slid down to the ground and gasped in delight.

“Oh,” she breathed. “It’s beautiful. And there’s a goat.”

A brown goat with long droopy ears was tied to a post by the house. It looked up at us, then lowered its nose to the pile of leaves at its feet.

The woman was crouched by a brazier, stirring something in a fat clay pot. She lifted the pot to the side and straightened as we approached.

“So you came,” she said. “I expected you would. Come inside. It’ll be dark soon.”

She took our arms and guided us between the leaf-patterned doorposts. A butter lamp burned in a niche in the wall. A straw mat lay on the earth floor and clay jars and a chest stood by the wall.

“Sit,” she said, handing us bowls of milk.

I sat cross-legged on the mat. Devi pressed close, leaning on my knee.

“I’m called Parini,” the woman said. “What are you called?”

I swallowed a mouthful of warm milk.

“Raju,” I said, pointing to my chest. “And Devi’s my sister.”

“Walking is difficult for her,” she said.

“My foot is bent,” Devi spoke up, “but I’m very fast at walking.”

“Is there no one looking for you?” Parini asked.

I shrugged.

“I won’t force your secrets,” she said, “but I believe you’re Banwalia’s children.”

I stared at her in surprise.

“Say nothing if you’d rather not,” she said, untying the cloth from a basket, lifting out *chapatti.* “Cold and hard to chew,” she said, “but good for the teeth.”

Devi set her bowl on the floor, her head drooping.

“Too sleepy to eat,” said Parini.

She held the bowl to Devi’s lips, then softened a piece *chapatti* in the milk and slipped it in Devi’s mouth.

“Spread your blanket in the corner,” she said, “while I pen the goat for the night. Tomorrow if you’re still here, I’ll rub her foot with oil.”

I couldn’t think about the next day. I wanted only to sleep.

In the morning, we sat outside the door, drinking milk and chewing on *chapatti* fresh from the pan. Devi’s eyes shone as she studied the bright patterns on the wall, the brown goat nibbling grass behind the thorn fence.

“Is this place safe, Raju-ji?” she asked. “Is it far away enough?”

I looked at Parini, embarrassed.

“Yes, this place is safe, little one,” she said. “If your brother brings your blanket, you can lie here and I’ll tend to your foot.”

I spread the blanket over the brittle grass by the fence. Parini rubbed oil on Devi’s leg, pulled gently at the toes of her twisted foot.

“Now, Raju, you must tell me who’ll be angry with me for keeping you here.”

Could I trust her, I wondered. She had sheltered us, and was caring for Devi. Surely she meant it when she told Devi we were safe. I decided on the truth.

“Our father Banwalia is a cruel man,” I said. “He wants to starve Devi, and who knows what he wants to do to me.”

“You’re sure?” Parini asked.

“Sure,” I said. “He told our stepmother to stop giving her food.”

“And this stepmother agrees with him?” asked Parini.

“She doesn’t dare refuse him,” I said.

“Is this true, Devi?” asked Parini, massaging the sole of Devi’s foot. “What do you eat at home?”

“*Chapatti*,” said Devi. “Hard like the ones last night. But I can’t have milk, because the baby needs it.”

“You see?” I asked Parini. “It’s my father. He’s ordered it. Milk for his new son. Scraps for Devi.”

“Sometimes Father gives me sweets,” said Devi.

“Only in front of others,” I said.

“Do you like sweets,” Parini asked, still kneading Devi’s legs.

“Reena Ma takes them away,” said Devi.

She lifted her chin and rubbed the back of her hand, just as Reena Ma often did.

“Father will kill me, feeding things like that to a small child.”

She sounded like Reena Ma.

My insides slid to the ground. At least they seemed to. I was dizzy and my stomach churned.

“See, Devi,” I said. “Reena Ma looks after you.”

But my voice was thin and full of doubt.

Parini patted Devi’s foot and sat back, resting her hands on her knees.

“Raju,” she said, “is it possible you’ve misjudged your father?”

“No,” I said, pushing down my misgivings. “He’s bad. Reena Ma told me everything. A good father and businessman doesn’t waste time on honey wine and

gambling. And he hates Devi's foot and he hates me because I'm strong."

"Don't reject the fruit because of thorns," she said. "I knew your father years ago, and he wasn't a bad man. Stay here for a day or two while I think about what to do."

When Parini went into the forest to collect fodder for the goat, we went with her.

"Leave your sandals by the door," she said.

She wound our feet and ankles with layers of rags, which made it awkward to walk, but kept our feet safe from thorns and stones. Parini strode barefoot, heedless of the rough path, her wrinkled skirt hitched up to free her legs.

We filled the basket slung over her shoulder with leaves and broken shrubbery and the smaller basket tied at her hip with berries and roots. When Devi faltered, Parini and I took turns carrying her. Birds

flitted at our approach. Rows of monkeys watched us from tree branches.

Several days later, after we had crammed our mouths with yellow berries from a thorny bush, Parini led us to the edge of a stream. We were close to the river. I could hear the shouts of boatmen through the trees.

“Dig this, root and all,” she said, pointing to a spreading plant that covered the bank. “We’ll eat well tonight.”

As I slipped the pale root and drooping leaves into the food basket, my eye caught a flicker of movement in the trees.

Perhaps a monkey. But I was uneasy.

Parini pushed into the forest, peering behind tree trunks, running her hand over the ground.

“I saw it too,” she said.

At sunset, we sat outside the cottage near the brazier while Parini chopped and fried our evening meal. As we ate, heavy steps sounded in the forest. A man, wide-shouldered, large-bellied, appeared at the edge of the clearing,

“Manvir Uncle,” cried Devi, her eyes sparkling.

“Raju, Devi,” he called out, “I’ve come to take you to your father.”

“I intend no harm, Grandmother-ji,” he said, holding out his hands, palms up. “No knife, no club. Just send the children to me.”

“Do you want to go with this man?” Parini asked us.

“Manvir Uncle,” I called,” we’ll stay here. My father has no need of us.”

Parini laid her hands on our heads.

“I invite their father to come to my home,” she said. “Here we can talk of their future.”

“Why do that?” asked Manvir Uncle. “Come with me now, Raju. This is foolish.”

Parini drew us close.

“Take my invitation to their father. I have things to say to him,” she said.

He shrugged and lumbered from the clearing.

“Let us stay here,” I begged Parini after he had left.

Parini smiled and patted my shoulder, pinched Devi’s cheek.

Two days later, when we returned from foraging, Manvir Uncle was waiting outside the cottage, his feet planted apart, his arms crossed across his broad chest.

“You force us to do this, Grandmother-ji,” he said.

A man burst from the trees and seized Parini by the arms. Tiny, unresisting, she was hardly a danger to the muscled man who gripped her arms. Her red

hair flaming, skirt wrinkled, feet dirty, her dignity was untouched..

Devi whimpered from fright as a second man lifted her in his arms and a third clamped his hands on my shoulders. I recognized Father's dice companions.

"You can't take us like this," I shouted. "When Reena Ma finds out, you'll be sorry."

But I didn't believe my own words. If Devi was right, Reena Ma was as much to be feared as my father.

They walked us out of the forest to the river, Manvir Uncle carrying Devi, two men gripping Parini's arms. We sat at ease in a flat-bottomed riverboat to be poled back to the city.

The doorman Vik let us into the familiar courtyard.

"Good, good, you're back," he said, folding his hands to Manvir Uncle and his companions. He blinked at Parini's bound hands and Devi's and my roughly wrapped feet, then bowed us to the mat under the

neem tree, handing round cups of water. Parini's guards helped her sit and held a cup to her mouth so she could drink.

Father stepped heavily into the courtyard, his usually hearty voice subdued as he greeted his friends. He lifted Devi from Manvir Uncle's arms and, planting a loud kiss on her forehead, held her close.

He turned toward me, his eyes fierce.

"You're a disappointment, Raju," he said. "You put your sister in danger and worried your stepmother."

His words so distorted the truth I didn't know how to reply.

"As soon as she calms herself, she'll come to greet you."

Parini held up her bound wrists and cleared her throat.

“Banwalia Sahib, father of Raju,” she called out, “Is this your doing, this rope cutting my arms? This is not the proper way to answer my invitation.”

“Parini-ji,” Father said, “Once I thought better of you. But now I grind your invitation to dust under my feet. I answer you with rope, for how else should I answer your insolent demand for ransom?”

“Ransom?” I cried.

So Parini had betrayed us, pretending to care for us while holding us until Father paid for our return.

Parini threw back her head.

“Enlighten me, Banwalia Sahib,” she said. “When did I make this insolent ransom demand.”

“Perhaps not yet, but you will,” said Father.

“Like father, like son,” said Parini.

“Speak courteously,” ordered Manvir Uncle, his chest swelling.

“I speak the truth,” said Parini. “Like father, like son. Raju, you ran from your father not knowing how alike you are.”

“No,” I said. “Not alike. I’ll never hurt Devi.”

Father snarled, his lips flared back from his teeth, then drew Devi’s head to his shoulder.

“Of course, you won’t,” said Parini. “And neither will your father. “She’s dear to you both.”

Maybe she was right, I thought. Father and Devi looked content with each other.

“And you both come to conclusions too quickly,” she said. “You’re making *chapatti* without any flour.”

I squirmed under her gaze. Perhaps Parini was right.

“Raju, your father treasures you,” said Parini. “Who has made you think otherwise?”

Reena Ma stole out of the storeroom, where she must have been lurking. She glanced at us but said

nothing, slipping into the stairwell. I noticed her, but the other eyes were all fixed on me. Her movements seemed furtive, but Parini would probably say my *chapatti* had no flour.

“And you, Banwalia Sahib,” Parini said. “Why do you accuse me of kidnapping your children?”

Her eyes were defiant.

“He accuses you because I have told him so,” said Manvir Uncle. “I myself saw you restraining the children when they would have run to me.”

“It’s obvious,” said Father. “Your threat was disguised as an invitation. But whatever you hoped to gain from your plot is lost to you now.”

He tipped his head toward the front gate.

“In any case, it’s not for me to decide,” he said. “Take her to the magistrates.”

“But Father,” I cried. “It’s what Parini-ji said. You’ve made *chapatti* with no flour. Parini was looking after us, not holding us for ransom.”

Father looked at Manvir Uncle, who shuffled his feet in embarrassment.

“I saw what I saw,” Uncle mumbled.

A shadow flitted from the stairwell toward the courtyard gate. Reena Ma, muffled in a shawl.

“Reena Ma,” called Devi, her eye caught by the movement. “I’m back!”

Father followed Devi’s gaze.

“Reena, where are you going?” he shouted.

Ignoring him, Reena sprinted the last few steps to the gate.

“Vik, let me through,” she panted.

“Stop!” ordered Parini.

Vik, unsure whose order to obey, spread his arms to bar Reena's way and watched Father for direction.

Father walked with deliberate steps toward Reena, who turned to watch his approach.

"What have you bundled under the shawl?" he asked. "My son?"

"No, he's with the nursemaid," she said. "He's well looked after."

"Then what?" he asked.

She loosened her arms and a lumpy sack thumped to the floor.

"Empty it," Father told Vik.

Squatting, Vik drew out a red jeweled pendant and laid it reverently on his folded shawl. A golden necklace with dangling beads that shimmered in the lamplight. A belt of amber beads bound in silver.

Green and blue beaded ear ornaments, cascades of gold and silver bangles.

Reena Ma watched in silence as he arranged the treasure to his satisfaction, then sat back on his heels. Father's face was stern. Manvir Uncle signaled to the guards to unbind Parini's wrists. The rest of us craned our necks to examine the jewelry displayed on Vik's cotton shawl.

"My children's wealth," said Father. "Their dead mother's. Reena, you're stealing from children."

"What of it? It's time for me to leave this house," Reena declared, rubbing the back of her hand. "I expected wealth when I married, and see what I got. Two stepchildren with a fortune and a son who brings me nothing."

"But Reena Ma," I said. "Don't you remember? Father promised you will run the company. You'll have everything."

“Be quiet, Raju,” said Reena Ma. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

Father stepped toward her.

“I know what he’s saying, Reena, even if he’s not aware how deceitful you’ve shown yourself to be.”

Parini held out her hand.

“If I may speak, Banwalia Sahib, I can set out what has happened.”

Father bowed and folded his hands to her.

“For several days these brave children have lived in my cottage and eaten my *chapatti*,” said Parini. “In conversing with them, I’ve learned the truth. I’ll grind their truth into flour so you can bake an honest *chapatti*. The children feared for their lives and ran from their home. It was you they feared, Banwalia Sahib, because of this woman who plotted for her evil gain while she spoke sweet words and smiled. She starved Devi, and filled Raju’s head with false

tales dishonouring his father, all the time plotting to make her own son his father's only heir."

Reena Ma edged toward the gate.

"And now I'm forced to leave, because this old woman has spoiled everything," she sneered, spitting at Parini. "But I'm glad. In my parents' village, they treat me with respect and no one will call me a thief."

She gestured to Vik to open the gate.

"Wait," said Father. "Take this jewelry with you, out of my sight. Your touch has dulled it. I'll have more made for the children, your son included, who lies upstairs abandoned by you."

Vik slid the jewelry into the sack and offered it to Reena. She snatched it up and left.

We were all left staring at the gate.

Father broke the silence.

“Manvir my brother,” he called, his voice hearty, “bring the shells. We’ll game all night and shower this house with good fortune.”

He turned to Parini.

“I am in your debt, Parini-ji,” he said. “You opened my eyes. Sit and the servants will bring you food. “

“Just some water, and I’ll leave,” she said. “I must return to my goat.”

“As you wish,” said Father. “Raju and Devi, go and bathe. The forest has roughened you.”

He patted our heads as he walked to the corner of the courtyard where his friends were already squatting over the dice.

Devi and I put our arms around Parini as she settled herself under the neem tree, accepted a cup of water from Vik.

“Can we come to your pretty house again?” asked Devi.

“Of course,” said Parini. “To visit. Raju, you’re needed here. You’re the one with judgement. Devi and your baby brother need watching and your father needs a firm hand.”

I knew she was right. Father was like a child. And our stepmother was wicked. Just like the old stories after all.

But Devi and I would make different stories for ourselves. Vik would help.

The Treasure in the Well

The housekeeper ordered Nandini from task to task, saying a girl who was too pretty for her own good needed to be kept busy. When at last the housekeeper went to her chamber, Nandini leaned back against the courtyard wall, enveloped by the warmth of the watchman's fire, the whirring of crickets, the dancing of the stars above. A cloaked figure emerged from the dark, a woman of a prosperous house by her dainty walk.

"The family is sleeping," the gateman said, rising from his stool by the fire.

“Tell Malia that her friend Reena has need of her help,” she said, her voice muffled by her shawl.

The gatekeeper looked down at his feet.

“Perhaps come back tomorrow,” he said.

The woman jerked back, startled by the rejection, then tossed her head.

“I see the game you’re playing,” she said, unwrapping the covering from her face and fishing in the pouch at her waist.

Nandini recognized her now. It was Reena Rani, one of the women who gathered with Nandini’s mistress Malia to sip wine and gossip. All with the same sleek hair, smooth skin, skirts bound fashionably low on their hips.

The woman held up a bangle that glinted silver in the firelight, her nose high, her eyes half-closed.

“I’m sure you’ll fetch Malia for me now,” she said.

The boy who lay curled by the brazier looked up expectantly. The watchman prodded his shoulder with his foot

“Bring the housekeeper,” he said.

The boy ran through the courtyard. The watchman tied the bangle into a corner of his shawl. Nandini scurried to her sleeping pallet before she was caught wandering the house at night.

“Rest now,” she heard the housekeeper say as she showed Reena to a sleeping chamber. “You can see Malia Rani in the morning.”

The sun was bright before Nandini was sent to awaken the guest with a bowl of sweetened milk, followed through the curtain into the chamber by Malia, her mistress. Reena looked up groggily from the pillow.

“Reena,” exclaimed Malia. “Such a surprise! We must send word to Banwalia Sahib that you’re safe.”

“No need,” Reena said. “The less said the better. Don’t concern yourself with my husband. I’m leaving so there’s no need to inconvenience anybody.”

“You’ll eat something, of course, before you return home,” said Malia.

“Yes, I’ll eat,” Reena said.

The housekeeper brought spiced vegetables and wheat *rotis,* her thin face disapproving.

“I’ll leave you to eat while I bathe,” said Malia. “Nandini will serve you.”

Reena gulped down the vegetable, her mouth distorted by her haste, then crossed her arms and glared at Nandini.

“Are you to be trusted?” she demanded.

“Malia Rani says so,” said Nandini.

“Forget Malia,” said Reena. “I have a task for you, if you can be silent about it. Malia has no need to know.”

“I’m trustworthy,” said Nalini, eager to learn Reena’s secret.

“Then be quick,” said Reena. “Re-fasten my skirt and hide these *rotis* inside.”

Nandini wrapped the *rotis* in a cloth, then folded them into the waist of Reena’s skirt, arranging the pleats across the packet and over an embroidered pouch dangling from a cord.

“Pay no attention to the pouch,” Reena said, “although I may find something in it for you if you fix my hair properly and see me out of here.”

Reena ’s hair was lustrous and her figure firm, but her cheeks sagged in the morning light.

“Stop gloating,” said Reena. “Right now you have your youth and pretty face, but you’ll lose them soon like everyone else.”

Ducking her head to hide her smirk, Nandini pointed the way to the stairs.

“When you fold the blanket on the bed, you’ll find a comb made from shell. Be grateful,” said Reena.

She swept out of the chamber and was partway down the staircase when sandals clattered on the balcony and the housekeeper came rushing. Nandini drew back into the bed chamber so she could watch unseen.

“Do you need something, Reena Rani?” the housekeeper called out.

Reena swiveled at the sound, the *rotis* at her waist jerking free and sliding down the stairs.

Malia rushed from the bathing room, her hair dripping.

“You’re leaving?” she asked, then gasped when she saw the housekeeper on her knees gathering up scattered *rotis.* Malia and Reena stared at each other, stiff as clay figurines.

“You can’t leave,” said Malia, “until you tell me why you came in the middle of the night, why you’re leaving secretly, why you’re hiding food.”

“I’m returning to Mendak, my parents’ town,” said Reena. “It’s no surprise I need food for the journey. Why I’m going doesn’t matter.”

“You’re fleeing from your husband?” asked Malia, grasping Reena’s arm. “Have I risked Banwalia Sahib’s anger by sheltering you?”

The housekeeper approached her mistress with folded hands, chewing her lips from nervousness.

“May I speak, Malia Rani?” she said.

Nalini strained to hear from her hiding place as Malia tipped her head to listen. Reena tried to pull away, but Malia's grip held.

"The servant boy heard talk in the market," the housekeeper said. "They say this woman was caught stealing gold and silver from her stepchildren, and ran off, abandoning her own child. Now Banwalia Sahib has no interest where she stays or where she goes."

Reena's lip flared in anger.

"And did these tale bearers say that I took what should have been mine to begin with?" she asked. "Why should children have it all?"

The housekeeper looked away. Malia was silent.

"I'll be glad to leave this city," said Reena." "In Mendak they'll treat me properly. Give me the *rotis* and I'll be gone."

"You can't journey alone," said Malia."

“I won’t be alone,” said Reena. ”I’ll hire a boatman.”

Malia waved her hand toward the housekeeper.

“Fetch Nandini,” she said. “And make a bundle of food and whatever else they’ll need. I know my duty, Reena. Since you insist on leaving, Nandini will go with you.”

Nandini’s heart thumped. Her life was about to open up.

She listened obediently to Malia’s instructions, then trailed behind Reena through the gate, her eyes lowered and steps hesitant. But when they were well away from Malia’s house, Nandini’s demeanor changed.

She pulled ahead, balancing the bundle of food and clothing on her head, walking with a rhythm that sent her pleated skirt swirling.

“Follow me,” she said, her eyes bright, her cheeks rosy. “I know the safest way to the docks.”

They stopped in a city square to drink from the well.

“I’ll get a good price from the boatman,” said Nandini. “But how will you pay?”

“With bangles,” Reena said, tossing her head as she fingered the cord of the cotton sack dangling at her waist.

“Not here,” said Nandini, eying the vendor with his cart of fruit, the family slurping at chunks of melon in the shade of a neem tree, the red-haired woman setting out bunches of herbs on a blanket, the young man leaning against the wall twirling a stick between his fingers, throwing it in the air and catching it.

“I’m a worthless son in the eyes of the world,” Nandini heard the man mutter to the woman. “Do you worry how I’ll care for you in your old age?”

“Worthless, never,” the woman replied. “Be alert, my son, and your chance will come.”

Yes, thought Nandini. The chance of a heavy purse at the waist of a traveller.

“Keep your wealth hidden,” Nandini said to Reena. “I don’t trust that man.”

I don’t trust him, even though his skill is great, she thought, looking straight into his eyes, deep set under shaggy eyebrows. As skilled as a festival juggler, he was.

Nandini steered Reena away from the wall, sensing the man’s eyes on her back, but when she glanced back, he was spinning on the balls of his feet, tossing the stick from hand to hand.

“Here there’s no one,” Nandini said when they were hidden between the high walls of an alley. “Now give me the bangles.”

She tied the silver into her bundle, then led Reena through the streets to the river. By the time the midday sun beat down on them, they had passed the

city gate and were in a flat-bottomed boat being poled up the river to Mendak.

"My parents' house is on the hill overlooking Mendak," Reena told Nandini. "So high the townspeople crane their necks to gaze at us. As it should be."

After three days on the river, and two restless nights on the riverbank, they reached the wharves of Mendak town. As the two women stepped onto the platform, Nandini handed the boatman a bangle.

"Final payment, as we agreed," she said.

The boatman, busy roping the boat to a mooring pole, nodded his head. The wharf was rickety, the wooden boards splintered and gaping. Nandini was glad to place her feet on the solid river bank.

"Coil my hair properly so I can be seen in the town," Reena ordered Nandini. "Then return to Malia. Tell her I've done with your services."

“I’ll see you safely to your parents’ home on the hill, as I promised Malia Rani,” Nandini said, looking full in Reena’s face, her eyes narrowed in defiance.

“Mind your manners and wipe the pride from your face,” Reena said, her voice scornful. “You’re a servant, not a queen.”

She drew a gold ornament from the pouch she had carried from Sindhapur.

“Since you’re still here, fix this in my hair,” she said. “Then follow me. But you’re too bold. Lower your eyes as you should.”

Nandini threaded the cord through Reena’s hair, securing the gleaming disk with its red stone to Reena’s forehead. As she braided and tied, she thought she recognized a figure slipping from another boat roped by the wharf. The man in a dusty loincloth and shawl who had lounged near the well back in Sindhapur. The roughly cut hair she

remembered was covered by his shawl, but she recognized his bushy eyebrows.

I was right, thought Nandini. He's after Reena's jewellery. But what do I care? I'm only a servant.

Mendak town was shabby, the road rutted, the walls stained with mould. Reena flounced through the alleys like royalty although she was no more a queen than Nandini was, her shawl in elegant folds over her shoulder, her forehead with its gold ornament held high. Townspeople bowed with folded hands, then dissolved in whispers after she had passed. Nandini followed, her bundle on her head.

When their way opened into a square, Nandini half-expected to see the ragged man lounging by the wall, just as he had in Sindhapur. But except for two elderly men deep in conversation under a banyan tree, the square was empty.

As they approached the hill, the street took them along a crumbling wall that separated the town from

the forest. They were alone, except for birdcalls and monkey shrieks and the slap of their sandals. Then, with a sudden rush of feet pounding the hard earth, two men burst out of an alley and spurted toward them.

“Over here,” Nandini gasped, letting the bundle slip from her head, pulling Reena across tumbled bricks to a gap in the wall. “To the forest.” She raced blindly into the trees, Reena clutching her arm.

“My sandals!” cried Reena.

“Leave them,” panted Nandini, kicking off her own sandals to free her feet.

Reena tripped over a dead branch. Nandini hauled her to her feet, and still running, bent to pick up the branch. She glanced behind. The men had scrambled over the wall, their long legs gaining on them. She raised the stick above her shoulder and brandished it like a club. The men jeered at her without breaking stride. She shook the stick again.

”Watch out!” Reena called ahead of her. “You’ll fall in!”

Nandini stopped abruptly, her toes slamming into something hard. Dazed, she stared down at a low brick wall and a pool of water lying still and deep within its rim.

“An old well,” said Reena.

“Keep running,” said Nandini.

“What’s the point?” cried Reena, her hands over her face. “They’ll catch us, whatever we do.”

“Throw them your bag of jewellery,” urged Nandini. “Then they’ll leave us alone.”

“I can’t do that,” shouted Reena.

She tugged at the cord at her waist and raised the pouch high.

“They’ll never get it now,” she cried, and hurled it into the well.

The two outlaws skidded to a stop at the edge of the well and gazed at the ripples where the bag of jewellery had sunk.

“Fool,” snarled one, snapping his shawl and reaching out for Reena’s neck. “You’ve spoiled it for everyone.”

Nandini yelled with rage and smashed her stick across his head, knocking him to the ground.

“Find a stick for me, Nandini,” cried Reena. “I want to hit him too.”

Nandini and the remaining robber stopped in their tracks and stared at her in disbelief.

“Are you so helpless?” the robber snickered.

He wrenched the branch from Nandini’s grasp, prodding his fallen companion with his foot.

“You’ve rested enough, Chuha,” he said. “Use the branch and fish the loot out of the well.”

Reena raised her fists in triumph.

“You can’t,” she trilled. “It’s too deep.”

“Yes, Bhai. It’s too deep,” said Chuha, heaving himself to his feet.

Then warned by an angry screech of monkeys, all four swung their eyes to the trees beyond the well. A young man leaped from the forest, hefting a thick staff as long as he was, vaulting high in the air to land in front of Bhai.

“Ladies, move away,” he called as he slammed the pole against Bhai’s chest, then spun to send Chuha crashing down.

Bhai rushed toward his attacker, his fists raised. The man tilted the pole from side to side, blocking Bhai’s approach, then launched himself into the air, one leg poised behind him. He swiped the side of Chuha’s head as he alighted on the ground.

Two more heavy thwacks, and the robbers turned on their heels and streaked back toward the town.

Breathing heavily, the young man planted his staff on the ground. His chin was high, his eyes bold under thick brows.

“You’re the man from the square in Sindhapur,” said Nandini.

“What if I am?” he said.

“You followed us here,” Nandini said. “To rob us?”

His arms were thin and his chest scrawny above his dirt-stained loincloth, but his shoulders were knotted and strong.

“Anyway, you’re too late,” cried Reena. “I’ve thrown my wealth into the well. There’s nothing left.” Her voice rose in a wail.

“Whatever your purpose,” said Nandini, “you ran off our attackers, and we’re grateful.”

“What do you want from us?” asked Reena. “You’re a thief?”

He raised his eyebrows and shrugged.

“Not a thief,” he said. “Perhaps I was drawn by your dancing eyes.”

Reena preened, then remembered herself and bristled. Nandini blushed, understanding from the man’s glance that Reena’s eyes were not the eyes that had drawn him.

“Don’t mock me, clod,” said Reena. “In my parents’ house on the hill there are men with glittering helmets and pointed spears who’ll make you regret it.”

“I am Dhiren, son of Rohan and Parini, and I’ll mock where I wish,” said the boy, “though I wasn’t mocking then.”

He hefted his weapon, sprang into the air, spun, and landed lightly on his feet.

“What of your riches lying deep in the well?” he taunted. “How can they help you now in your house on the hill.?

Reena’s face collapsed as the arrogance drained out of her.

“My jewels!” she cried, the red stone lopsided on her forehead. “Why did you come so late? I wouldn’t have thrown them if I’d known.”

“Reena Rani,’ said Nandini, “the forest is full of wild animals. Forget the jewels and let’s get to your house.”

“Keep your place, Nandini,” said Reena, her haughtiness returning. “You were sent to serve, not advise me. If I return to my parents, it’ll be with the jewels or not at all.”

“Ah,” said Dhiren. “It’s my services you need. And here I am, ready to bargain with you.”

Nandini thought how handsome he was, leaning against his fighting stick, one hip thrust out. Handsome in spite of his ragged loincloth and dirty face

Dhiren stamped his stick on the ground, catching Nandini's glance.

"Reena Rani," he said, speaking to Reena but still holding Nandini's eye. "I have understood. It's the jewels your parents will receive with open arms, not their daughter. And I tell you I'm able to fetch your purse so they'll welcome you."

Reena pulled away from Nandini, her face lifting with hope.

"You can fetch it?" she asked Dhiren.

"Do you think you're a fish then?" asked Nandini.

"Not a fish, but a man who can swim," said Dhiren with a smirk, staring directly at Nandini. "I'll dive deep and find the sack."

“The sack is mine,” said Reena, her chin high, her eyes narrowed. “It’s not yours to take.”

“Without doubt it’s yours,” said Dhiren, “but useless to you while it lies in the mud at the bottom of the well.”

“Then,” said Reena, “what’s in your mind that I should give you? A silver bangle?”

“No. Not a silver bangle,” said Dhiren. “Not two bangles. Not three.”

He stiffened his spine, stretched his feet apart, and planted his fighting stick at his side like a spear.

“Not even the jewel gracing your forehead,” he said. “What I ask is the chance to make my mother proud. Those men in your house on the hill with glittering helmets and pointed spears- “

“What of them?” asked Reena.

“Make me one of them,” said Dhiren, “and I’ll restore your sack of jewels to you.”

“Fool,” said Reena. “You’ll dive into the water for the sake of a shiny hat? Then do so. I’ll commend you to my father.”

“You do me great honour,” said Dhiren. “I will be your father’s bravest guard.”

“Just bring my jewels,” said Reena.

Dhiren lay down his stick, then folded his hands and bowed, the picture of humility except for the mocking lift to his eyebrows. He strode to the low wall that encircled the pool and tugged at the rope attached there. He inspected the frayed end, then tossed the rope back in the water.

“The well pot’s long gone,’ he said.

Pulling away the vines that flourished over the brick, he balanced himself on the wall, arms crossed on his chest. He looked down at the water, the smooth

surface patched with reflected tree trunks and the gleam of the sun where it broke through the forest.

“Show me where it sank,” he ordered.

Nandini pointed toward the centre.

“Bring my weapon,” he said.

Nandini lifted the stick with both hands and carried it to him.

“You’re foolish to trust her,” she murmured. “She’ll forget her promise as soon as she has her jewellery. And foolish to go into that well, where no doubt there are snakes and other biting things.”

“I do this for you and not for her,” he said, looking her full in the face.

He plunged the stick into the pool, feeling for the bottom, then flourished it in the air and flung it to the ground.

“Reena Rani,” he shouted, striking a pose on the wall. ”I vow I’ll return your treasure to your hands safe once again, or I’ll disappear forever in these dangerous depths.”

Nandini was uneasy. Was he as good a swimmer as he claimed, or was he about to drown for the sake of showing off?

But Reena had no reservations.

“Don’t delay,” she said.

Dhiren bowed with folded hands. When Reena turned away to peer into the pool, he grinned at Nandini.

“Remember me,” he called out, then lifted himself on his toes and dove into the water.

Nandini held her breath as his head, his shoulders his thighs, his feet slipped away. Reena patted her hair, straightened her shawl and her hair ornament.

Dhiren's bushy eyebrows broke the surface, his mouth gulping for air, his hair dripping. He arched his back and dove again. And again.

After the first few times, Nandini stopped catching her breath at every dive and grew bored. But Reena drew closer and closer to the pool, hand pressed to her mouth.

At last Dhiren appeared with the bag clamped in his jaw.

Swimming to the edge, he tossed the bag on the wall.

"Take this to your mistress," he said to Nandini.

Reena stood haughty and aloof to receive Nandini's soggy offering, then turned her back on Dhiren and Nandini, dropping to the ground to examine her spoils.

Dhiren clambered over the wall, dripping water and plant tendrils.

“So you’re back,” Nandini said.

“I’m back, and you’re glad,” Dhiren murmured. “I saw the fear in your eyes when I dove.”

”And I saw the fear beneath your swagger,” Nandini said.

Reena looked up from her jewellery.

“It’s all here. Nothing damaged,” she called.

“Now, Reena Rani, you can go safely to your parents’ home,” said Dhiren. “Those thugs have run far from my reach and won’t bother you again. I’ll find my pack in the forest, then follow you to claim the spear and shield and helmet that I’ve earned.”

He folded his hands in farewell and faded into the thick of the forest.

Smiling with triumph and caressing the jewellery bag hidden under her shawl, Reena set off for the road they had fled ahead of the robbers. Nandini

followed, her head filled with the image of Dhiren poised to dive into the well.

But, once they were on solid pavement again, her daydream soured.

“He won’t be so foolish as to come,” Reena said, looking back at Nandini as she walked.

“Who?” asked Nandini, not understanding.

“That Dhiren person, who else?” said Reena.

Nandini’s breath caught in her throat.

“Aren’t you grateful that he fetched your jewels?” she asked. “Such a brave fighter, whirling through the air, crashing into those brigands. And dreaming of making his mother proud.”

Reena tossed her head.

“Of course, I’m grateful, but that’s over and done with,” she said, the evening sun glinting off the jewel on her forehead. “I don’t plan on living in the past.”

Nandini jerked to a stop, her heart thumping.

“I’m sure he’ll come,” she said, speaking slowly to hide her trembling. “You promised him a spear and a helmet.”

“Does he even know how to hold a spear?” Reena giggled. “He’s just a market performer.”

Nandini said no more.

The road roughened as it sloped upward, the bricks tilted where weeds had pushed through. They walked between walls that hid courtyards and people, the fragrance of sizzling spices and hot *chapatti*, the evening chatter of the families within. They had eaten nothing since they stepped from the boat before midday, and Nandini longed for hot food in her stomach and a glowing brazier at her feet.

The way ended at an entrance where an old man huddled cross-legged against the jamb. He peered up at them, then lurched to his feet.

“Is it you, Reena Rani?” he stuttered. “Aisha Rani, Aisha Rani,” he called into the gloom. “Reena Rani has come.”

A woman hurried to the gate, her embroidered shawl glowing in the dingy courtyard, her tiny eyes accusing.

“Reena?” she said. “Why are you here? Your place is in Sindhapur now.

Reena’s face fell, but then hardened.

“When you see what I’ve brought with me, Mother, you’ll be glad I’m here,” said Reena.

“I can see what you’ve brought,” her mother said. “A jeweled chain on your forehead and one servant girl. Where’s my wealthy son-in-law and the baggage train he should provide you with?”

“Offer me food and drink and a warm bed, and I’ll show you something worth a thousand baggage trains,” said Reena.

“A thousand!” exclaimed Aisha, her eyes brightening, leading her daughter into the courtyard. Nandini trailed behind.

A man, tall and bald with a curling white moustache, descended the stairs from the upper rooms, a boy with a lamp lighting his way through the shadows.

“Aisha, what is this?” he growled to his wife who had settled with her daughter by the courtyard fire. “This daughter’s causing trouble again?”

“She says she’s come to bring us gifts, Chander,” said Aisha, craning her neck to watch Reena tugging at the pouch at her waist.

“Reena,” said her father, ”I know you well. If you’ve left Sindhapur, it must be you’re no longer welcome there. What have you done?”

Reena tossed her head.

“Father, you didn’t realise, but Banwalia is a cruel husband,” she said.

That was a lie, Nandini thought. Banwalia indulged his wife and children. The whole of Sindhapur knew it.

“I’ve escaped from him while I still had strength to do so,” she said. “He poisoned my stepchildren against me and ripped my baby son from me. My heart cries for my child every minute, but be grateful, Father, that I’m unhurt.”

Nandini’s mouth fell open at the boldness of the lies.

“You let him take my grandson?” cried Aisha.

Chander’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I see a different truth on your servant’s face,” he said.

“This servant is a lazy good-for-nothing, and I’ll be glad to send her back to Sindhapur,” said Reena. “But you’ll be pleased I came to you when you see what’s in this sack. This jeweled head piece on my forehead’s only a small part of it.”

Gold and silver shimmered in the firelight as Reena spilled the sack onto her lap. She held up a piece of the treasure, a golden belt studded with red enameled flowers.

Chander spluttered in confusion, but Aisha extended her hand for the belt, draping it over her wrist, twisting it to catch the firelight.

“Well done, Reena,” she beamed.

“Give it back so I can keep it safe,” said Reena. “Now let’s eat and sleep.”

“Something’s not right,” said Chander, but in spite of his misgivings, he ate rice and okra and hot pickle, belched with satisfaction, and climbed the stairs after Aisha and Reena to the sleeping chambers.

“Reena Rani,” said Nandini as she spread a coverlet of fine cotton over Reena’s bedstead. “It’s my duty to warn you. The less you speak of Banwalia, the less you’ll have to answer for. Here in Mendak you’re

not so far from Sindhapur, and I must remind you that there they tell a different tale of you and Banwalia. There they say you ran off with your stepchildren's gold and abandoned your child by choice."

Nandini bent over the bed, her eyes averted. Reena raised her arm to slap the side of Nandini's head, her face twisted in anger. She pulled back just before she struck, throwing her hands apart.

"Why bother to beat you? You're not my concern anymore," she said. "Tomorrow you'll be on your way back to Malia in Sindhapur. Leave the bed alone now and fetch me another pillow. This puny yellow one's not enough. My mother knows I need at least two."

Nandini left the room in search of Aisha

"Has she kept the jewels somewhere safe?" Aisha asked as she handed Nandini a pillow sewn with red flowers.

"I'm sure she will," said Nandini.

"Let me know where she puts them," Aisha said, tiny eyes glittering in her puffy face. "Gold like that's too much responsibility for a young girl. You and I need to look out for her."

Slipping back into the room, Nandini found Reena curled half asleep on the bed, clutching the yellow pillow to her midriff. Part of the embroidered edge gaped slightly, where it had been picked loose.

For a moment, Nandini's heart was moved. Reena looked innocent, like a child who had swallowed stolen sweets without guilt.

But Nandini's compassion was short-lived.

"Good," mumbled Reena when she saw the extra pillow. "Put it under my head."

She thinks I'm too stupid to work out her hiding place, thought Nandini, settling on her pallet by the

door. And her mother doesn't fool me. She'd steal from her own daughter in a blink of her beady eyes.

In the morning, Nandini brought Reena hot milk from the kitchen.

"How do you wish me to travel?" she asked her.

"Travel where?" asked Reena. "You know you need my permission."

"It was your order, Reena Rani," said Nandini. "I'm to return today to Sindhapur."

"Forget that," said Reena. "I need you here. Serve me well and keep your ideas to yourself and you'll have a bangle for your arm. Maybe even a gold one."

Nandini pressed her palms together and bowed, then rolled her eyes when Reena turned away.

"Leave it," said Reena, her voice sharp, when Nandini pulled at the coverlets to fold them. "I'll

arrange my bed the way I like it. Fetch a comb and coil my hair.”

Nandini left the room to find oil and a comb, thinking of the slack edge of the yellow pillow. I could take her precious gold in an instant, she thought, but even a thief has a right to what’s hers.

In the heat of the afternoon, raised voices outside the gate the family as they sipped lemon water in the shade of the courtyard.

“Stand back,” they heard the gatekeeper declare. “Betu, run for Chander- ji.”

A small boy scurried through the entrance and drew up in front of Reena’s father, who was already rising to his feet, moustache thrust forward.

“What’s this?” asked Chander, throwing his shawl over his shoulder as he strode to the gateway, Reena and her mother at his heels.

“Stay here,” Reena scowled at Nandini when she tried to follow. “This is none of your business.”

Nandini stole up behind her anyway.

In the dust outside the entrance, Dhiren stood straight and proud, fighting stick balanced on the ground, hair oiled and curling on his neck, loincloth draped in crisp white folds.

“Chander-ji,” said the gate keeper stretching his arms wide to block Dhiren’s approach. “This stranger is ill-behaved and he carries a weapon.”

Dhiren lay his stick at his feet and spread his hands.

“Chander-ji,” he called out, bowing with his palms together. “I have come as your daughter must have told you I would. All I ask is a spear and shield and I’ll fight your enemies to the death, or die myself.”

The doorkeeper’s mouth fell open. Reena giggled. Chander cleared his throat.

”Young man, I’m sure you’re very brave,” he said, “but I have no enemies.”

The door keeper narrowed his eyes.

“At least, none with spears,” said Chander.

“Chander-ji,” said Dhiren. “Of course you must test me before you trust me.”

He plucked up his stick, sprang away to jam it into the ground, and vaulted high, spinning in the air and landing on his feet with a bow.

Aisha sucked in her breath and the doorman’s eyes popped wide. Nandini’s heart sang with pride.

Chander’s bald head nodded in approval.

“Impressive, but I have no need of you,” he said. “There’s a watchman at our gate and two men with cudgels to run by the women’s sedan chair when they go to market. We don’t need anyone else. But take this for your trouble.”

He held out a piece of silver.

Dhiren's face lost its glow.

"But Chander-ji," he pleaded, "please ask your esteemed daughter. She'll explain. We have an agreement."

"What's he saying, Reena?" asked Chander.

"I have no idea," Reena sniffed. "I've never seen him before."

Nandini gasped.

"He's too bold," said Reena, "to claim such things about me."

"Ask Nandini," Reena's mother said suddenly. "She and that man must have some plot."

"Young man, you must go," said Chander, turning away into his courtyard. "Nandini, give the man this silver he's reluctant to take, then come inside."

Nandini was filled with a cold rage, and her back stiffened with resolve. This time Reena had pushed too far, pretending not to recognize Dhiren. Moving close to Dhiren, Nandini pressed the coin in his hand.

She sucked in her breath.

“By the well in the forest tonight,” she murmured.

Dhiren cocked his head to one side, his eyebrows raised, his eyes understanding. Folding his hands and bowing, he walked away, swinging his fighting stick with a flourish, cheerful for one who had just been denied a shining helmet and spear.

Late that night, when Reena’s arms had fallen slack in sleep, Nandini slid away the yellow pillow. She felt for the jewellery stuffed inside and, satisfied, bound the cushion to her waist with her shawl. As she crept out of the room, she remembered the jeweled hair ornament Reena wore every day and went back to slip it off the shelf where it lay with Reena’s combs.

The gate keeper was snoring in his blanket, and hardly stirred when Nandini lit a clay lamp from his fire. She watched him lying there unaware and thought of Reena curled on her bed dreaming of her treasure, then waking bereft. Nandini pulled the golden hair ornament from her shawl and lay it by the fire.

Either the gate keeper returned it to Reena, or he didn't, she thought. It wasn't her concern any more.

She headed down the street to the break in the wall and the forest, her lamp high and her skirt swinging. The jewellery in its cushion was snug against her. She smiled. Dhiren was waiting, and would be far happier with her than with a sword and a glittering helmet. And his red-haired mother would be, too.

The Prince of Kashara

A prince walked in the forest. His sandals pressed the leaves along the path, and his shawl brushed the rough bark of the *sal* trees. His grey-bearded servant strode behind, a bundle swinging from the stick on his shoulder.

The servant hurried to catch up.

“Please rest for a time, Yuvraj-ji,” he said, spreading his hands in entreaty. “I’ll bring water from the stream. I didn’t leave my grandchildren and a kind wife in Kashara to watch you collapse on the plains.”

“Might as well,” said the prince, slumping down against a tree trunk, dead leaves caught in his hair.

“This journey’s fruitless. I haven’t any more to offer my father now than when I left.”

This was not the usual kind of prince, with a waxed moustache and a golden breastplate. This was Hamir, son of Tej, raja of the kingdom of Kashara. The raja of Kashara was poor, with no wealth to spend on barbers or goldsmiths. So, as Hamir walked through the forest, the threads of his once fine shawl were fraying, the drape of his *dhoti* was flattened by the coarse cotton, the jewels had fallen from his sandals, leaving only strips of leather tied round his feet. And his servant Chinata carrying water to him in a chipped bowl had only a cudgel to protect his crown prince, his *yuvraj*.

Hamir had left his father’s kingdom in the hills to search for wealth.

“Go to the plains,” Tej, raja of Kashara, had said, reclining against threadbare cushions. “This house is too poor to provide the life a prince should have.

On the plains, you need not spend your days walking with sheep herders in the hills. On the plains there will be renown to win, kings to rescue, treasures to unearth."

"I'm not very good at winning," Hamir had reminded his father, thinking of the wrestling matches he had lost. Or won, only because his opponent held back.

"Of course, you can win," said Tej, his heavy cheeks quivering with enthusiasm. "You're the Yuvraj of Kashara. Our people work hard just for food and firewood, but the plains are full of luxuries. Think of the fountains, the carvings, the magnificent pavements that will spring up with the wealth you bring back,"

"As you wish, Father-ji," said Hamir. "I'll do my best."

"Go with him, Chinata," said Tej. "Keep him safe, for he's my only son, and more than riches, I want him back."

Chinata, who had been standing nearby fingering his beard, snapped to attention and bowed. His wife Veera, who sat by the wall spinning thread on a wooden spindle, opened her mouth to protest, then lowered her head at a look from Chinata, thin shoulders stiff with anger.

“I’ll keep both of us safe,” said Chinata, gazing ruefully at Veera.

So Hamir and Chinata trudged across the land, shivering through the cool season, then breathing in the blossoms of spring. Sometimes, a branch lying on the ground reminded Chinata that Hamir’s fighting skills needed work, and they would spar for a while, or at least Chinata would hold up his cudgel while Hamir whacked it with the branch. Whenever they visited a royal court, their gifts of nuts and dried fruit were received graciously, and they were entertained with feasts and musicians and puppet shows, but Hamir’s offers to assist with quests or treasure hunts were courteously ignored.

Good fortune eluded Hamir, and there was little left in the bundle on Chinata's shoulder but ragged *dhotis* and sashes and a few packets of walnuts. He gulped the water Chinata brought him, drops catching on his chin, then splashed the rest over his head. Chinata crouched on his haunches beside him.

Leaning back against the *sal* tree, Hamir gazed at a doe and her brown-spotted fawn watching him from the forest shadow. He held his breath as the deer locked eyes with his.

In an instant, the scene changed. The birds fell silent. The deer bounded away between the tree trunks, the image of their startled eyes hanging in the air. Two women broke through the trees, staring in surprise when they saw the men.

One was young, gauzy shawl edged in gold, embroidered skirt, gleaming hair. And not at all haughty, but with eyes as soft and gentle as the

deer's had been. One hand clutched her companion's elbow, one held a bunch of leafy stems with dangling roots.

The other woman was older, silver streaking the bright red hair that sprang above her forehead, a thick gold ring hanging from one nostril, a basket of bundled plants on her back.

Hamir stood and bowed, Chinata beside him.

"Have you journeyed far?" asked the older woman.

Hamir was drawn to her eyes, deep and wise above the gold ring in her nose.

"We come from Kashara," said Hamir.

"This royal person is my prince," said Chinata, "Hamir, *Yuvraj* of Kashara, and I am Chinata his servant."

The woman bowed, not at all flustered to be speaking with a prince.

“I am Parini,” she said, adjusting the basket tied to her back, “and with me is Devi of Sindhapur.”

She took a step toward Chinata. Devi moved with her, leaning against Parini’s elbow. Her walk was uneven, one of her feet turned under, crammed awkwardly into her sandal. Hamir smoothed back the wet curls that hung over his forehead, wiping his hands on the sash of his *dhoti.*

“Are you on your way to Sindhapur?” Devi asked. “It’s close by. Just follow the river.”

“Not Sindhapur, for there’s no raja there,” said Chinata. “At the bidding of his father, the raja of Kashara, Hamir-ji is looking for a prince to serve.”

Devi’s eyes were serious.

“There are priests and a merchants’ council in Sindhapur,” she said. “My father Banwalia is on the council. I think he would welcome the service of a prince.”

Chinata drew up his shoulders and thrust out his chin.

“That cannot not be,” he said, his voice almost a growl. “A prince can serve only a prince.”

Devi’s face fell. She looked away, grasping Parini’s arm with both hands and crushing the plants she carried.

“Don’t be angry, Chinata,” said the prince. “Devi-ji was most gracious to help.”

“Forgive my foolish idea,” said Devi, speaking from behind Parini’s shoulder.

“Chinata forgets that a prince is only a man,” said Hamir, gazing at Devi.

“Hamir-ji, our river city offers much, but if it’s a raja you seek you must go to the hills,” said Parini.

She tugged Devi away toward the river and Sindhapur, her words softened by her twinkling eyes. Hamir was thoughtful as he watched them go.

The two men followed her advice, turning away from Sindhapur and passing through the forest to the seashore, sleeping under trees, eating fruit and tubers and the occasional chapatti from huts along the way. One hot day, as they sweated up a rocky slope, the sound of clashing weapons floated over the brow of the hill. On a plateau high above the sea, they came upon a cluster of onlookers and two young men swinging at each other with stone-tipped clubs.

The fighters whirled, sashes flew, stone clashed against stone, but no club thudded onto leather helmets or outstretched thighs. This was a display, Hamir realized, not a struggle to the death.

“Their teacher will be pleased,” said Chinata. “They’ve learned their moves well.”

Hamir glanced across the field at the stern face of an older man whose eyes were fierce beneath his coiled hair. If he was pleased, his expression revealed nothing.

The session over, the teacher dismissed his students with a wave.

“Go now,” he said. “Be grateful you’ve been given the duty to serve our esteemed raja-ji.”

Raja, thought Hamir. Perhaps his search was over. Ignoring Chinata’s hiss of disapproval, he hurried toward the teacher, slowing respectfully as he came near and falling at his feet. The students stopped short and turned to watch.

“Master-ji,” he said, “if you find me worthy, I also wish to serve your raja.”

Master-ji looked down in surprise. Hamir looked up, his face dusty from the grit he had stirred up.

“I have been sent by my father Tej, raja of Kashara, to assist any royal house that has need of me,” he said, his voice muffled by the awkward angle of his neck.

“Young man, what skills do you have?” asked the master.

“Only stick fighting, for my father’s house is poor,” said Hamir.

From nearby, Chinata sucked in his breath.

“But under your guidance I will learn,” Hamir said.

The master raised his eyebrows, as did Chinata, who stood smoothing the side of his beard with his thumb. The two older men locked eyes, the master finally tipping his head and gesturing for Hamir to stand.

“Our raja welcomes warriors,” said the master. “Chiku, bring two sticks.”

One of the students came running, handing a stick as long as his arm to Hamir, swinging another above his shoulder.

“Hamir sahib, defend yourself,” said the master, his back straight, his arms across his chest.

Hamir twisted to follow his opponent’s twirling weapon and sliding feet, too confused to wield the stick dangling from his hands.

“Enough,” said the master. “You’re correct. You need training. Practise for a year and return.”

The students were silent, hiding their amusement. Hamir, after all, was a raja’s son. And as a raja’s son, Hamir mustered his dignity, threw his shawl over his shoulder, and bowed deeply to the master.

“I am grateful for your teachings,” he said. “The gods grant you good health.”

Chinata bowed and followed him down the cliff away from the plateau.

“What use am I if I have no warrior skills?” Hamir asked Chinata as they entered the forest again. “In one thing after another, I disappoint my father. But before we return to Kashara, I want to see once again the forest by Sindhapur.”

Chinata narrowed his eyes, about to protest. Hamir stared back.

“As you wish,” Chinata said finally, smoothing his beard.

Once again they walked in the *sal* tree grove near Sindhapur, and rested against the rough trunks. And after a few days, the red-haired woman with a basket on her back and the gentle-eyed girl with the crooked foot and embroidered shawl broke through the trees.

“Prince-ji, you’ve returned,” said Devi. “Did you find a raja to serve?”

“My quest has changed,” said Hamir. “You spoke of your father and the merchants’ council. I will come to Sindhapur to meet him.”

Devi’s eyes danced. Hamir tipped his head. Parini smiled. Chinata cleared his throat.

“This is not the way, Yuvraj-ji,” Chinata said. “We must return to Kashara and your father. Leave merchants’ work for merchants.”

“You’re a loyal friend and a respected elder, Chinata-ji,” said Hamir. “But I am the Yuvraj. It’s for me to decide.”

Chinata bowed and was silent. Devi glanced at Parini, who tipped her head in encouragement.

“Hamir-ji, you’re welcome in Banwalia’s house,” said Devi after a nervous pause.

“Tonight Devi-ji stays in my hut to help me sort herbs,” said Parini, reaching to tap the basket of

green leaves on her back. “Tomorrow she’ll return to Sindhapur and tell her father of your coming.”

“Please excuse me, my yuvraj, but this is foolishness,” said Chinata after the women had left, Devi’s bright clothing still flashing after Parini’s wrinkled grey skirt had faded into the trees. “If you’re not destined to win renown or wealth, still you must act as a prince. Surely you don’t mean to sit in a warehouse counting beads or clay pots.”

“Let me see what Devi-ji’s father will offer me,” said Hamir.

He set off on the path Devi and Parini had taken.

“Return to Kashara and your grandchildren, Chinata-ji, if you feel dishonoured. I release you. Or if you’re willing, come with me, for I’ll be glad of your company.”

Chinata looked back toward Kashara then clenched his jaw, hefted his club, and followed Hamir.

“We must be stealthy,” said Hamir. “I intend to spy out where Parini lives so I can find her tomorrow after Devi-ji has left. Parini knows things and will give useful advice.”

Chinata’s face twisted but, saying nothing, he moved soundlessly along the path through the trees and along a wide river bank. In time they came to a fast-flowing rivulet narrow enough to step across.

“Watch the thorns,” Chinata called out, as Hamir’s shoulder brushed a branch of the acacia tree growing by the stream.

A strip of grey cloth fluttered from one of the long thorns. Further up the stream, another strip was knotted around some reeds on the bank.

“It’s a message from Parini,” said Hamir. “I recognize the colour. She’s torn these bits of cloth from her sash to show us the way.”

“If that’s true, then I am uneasy,” said Chinata. “Why would she do such a thing?”

“I’ve told you,” said Hamir. “There’s wisdom in her eyes.”

They turned from the river and climbed the rocks by the stream, their effort soothed by the murmur of water. Frayed grey markers directed them back into the forest and around a tree with dangling leaves that brushed their heads.

Chinata stopped suddenly, pulling Hamir back into the trees, but not before two brown goats penned at the side of a tiny cottage turned to watch them, long ears flopping.

Devi was there, sitting cross-legged by the door, the embroidery on her shawl and the blue of the cottage door gleaming in the evening sun. She pulled leaves from Parini’s basket and spread them on a cloth.

Parini crouched over a stone mortar grinding herbs, shifting sometimes to stir the pot set over the nearby fire. Her eyes flickered past the tree where Hamir and Chinata hid, but she said nothing.

The men slid away into the forest

Hamir slept well that night, even though their spot among the trees was bumpy with roots. In the morning he and Chinata searched until they found a jujube tree. Chinata made a small basket from leaves and twigs for the fruit, which was brown and wrinkled and at its sweetest.

Near the end of the day, when Devi was sure to have gone, they returned to Parini's cottage. They watched from behind their tree until Parini appeared from the forest, a basket of forage on her back.

"I've come seeking your wisdom, Parini-ji," said Hamir. "Please accept this fruit."

“Sit,” said Parini, pointing to the ground. She stooped through the low door of her cottage, and then returned with two bowls of milk.

“Drink,” she said, sitting down beside them, “and then tell me why you’ve come.”

Hamir put down his bowl.

“Parini-ji, I’d be grateful for any news you can give of Devi-ji’s family.”

Chinata sucked in his breath, his lips flaring

“It’s in the prince’s mind to serve a merchant’s family,” he said. “That’s where this is leading. He doesn’t grasp that counting and tallying are not for a prince.”

“Excuse me, Chinata-ji,” said Hamir. “You don’t know everything in my heart. You’re correct that I wish to serve Devi-ji’s father Banwalia. But, if the gods smile on me, I will serve him as his son-in-law.”

Hamir's eyes were wide with resolve. Chinata reared up, his mouth wobbling, his shocked protests garbled. Parini waited, watching them both,

"I was afraid of this," said Chinata, his face sagging like an old man's. "I've failed your father. He entrusted me with your welfare and look where I've allowed you to stray."

"And, Hamir-ji, what of Devi-ji?" asked Parini. "Would she, of a merchant family, wish to wed a prince?"

"Exactly," said Chinata.

"That's why I've come to you," said Hamir. "I see she's dear to you. Perhaps you know what's in her heart."

"I can tell you she looks on you with kindness," said Parini, "but understand there's another who wishes to be her husband. For all I know, arrangements have been made."

“So that’s that,” said Chinata.

“Look here,” said Parini, gesturing for them to enter her cottage and pointing to a carved box and a pair of red embroidered sandals set in the corner. “You see my preparations,” said Parini. “A marriage gift. Herbs for the health of her new family and shoes she can wear on her wedding day if she wishes.”

“It’s certain then,” said Hamir, his voice flat.

“It’s not my place to know that,” said Parini, “but these are ready for when the time comes.”

“May I examine the sandals?” asked Chinata. “The design is unfamiliar to me. One side is thickly padded.”

“Yes,” said Parini. “To cradle her bent foot so she can walk in comfort.”

“Parini-ji, you say she looks on me with kindness,” said Hamir. “At least I must try. Tomorrow I’ll go to her house as I promised.”

The next day, Hamir and Chinata followed the river to Sindhapur, passing through the gates and along the streets as Parini had directed them. Hamir's black curls had been smoothed with oil from Parini's hut, his *dhoti* was freshly washed and bleached white in the sun, his best sash, the gold edging mostly unbroken, had been shaken out from Chinata's pack and wound around his hips.

"Prince-ji," said Chinata. "Listen to an old man's wisdom. I know how full a young man's heart can be, and I also know how passion can fade like the red blossoms on a flame tree. Hasty promises today can cost you dearly tomorrow."

"Chinata-ji, I'm grateful for your advice, but my intention is firm," said Hamir.

An elderly gatekeeper with a hollow stomach and stooped shoulders ushered them into the court yard.

"Banwalia Sahib is expecting you," he said.

“Feel at home, Prince-ji,” a voice boomed from under a neem tree. “My daughter said you would honour us with a visit.”

Banwalia‘s face was plump and cheerful under his crooked turban, his belly bulging, his hands spread in welcome, then folded in respect. Two other men stood under the tree, palms together, one tall and thin, dressed in a simple white *dhoti*, the other as round and solid as Banwalia but with a sour line to his mouth.

“My son Raju,” said Banwalia, pressing the thin man’s shoulder, “and Uddiyan my soon-to-be son-in-law,” drawing the other man toward him. Raju pressed his palms together and bowed politely. Uddiyan’s bow was halfhearted, the gold rings at his ears so thick they barely moved.

Son-in-law. The arrangements were made. Hamir felt drained of breath as if he had been punched in the stomach. When the doorman scurried up with

cushions, Hamir lowered his body to sit, forcing himself to move gracefully and not collapse in an untidy heap. Chinata, standing behind like an attendant, bent to adjust a cushion and muttered in his ear, “It’s better this way.”

Is this the husband Devi wants? thought Hamir, studying Uddiyan. A younger version of her father, but with rich clothes and a sneer on his lip. Uddiyan’s yellow *dhoti* fell in silken folds, his turban was smooth, his shawl heavy with gold banding. A fat money pouch hung at his waist.

A young servant carried a tray from inside and set out cups of honeyed lemon water, dishes of puffed grain and spiced nuts.

“Our house is honoured by your presence,” said Devi’s father. “We’re eager to serve you in any way you wish.”

I don't think so, thought Hamir. The only service I want is permission to marry his daughter, and I see now he's not about to grant that. Chinata was right.

Banwalia and the two younger men watched him, waiting for his answer.

"I thank you but I need nothing," said Hamir.

Banwalia waited for him to continue.

Devi's brother unfolded his long legs and stood to pass round the painted dish of nuts. Hamir raised his hand to refuse.

"Eat something," said Banwalia.

Hamir took an almond from the plate, tipping his head in thanks. The others watched in silence while he chewed.

"Yuvraj-ji," said Chinata, "Perhaps Banwalia sahib wonders why a royal prince of Kashara has sought out his merchant house."

"Ah, yes," said Hamir, gathering his thoughts. "In accordance with my father's command, I have travelled the mountains and plains to offer a helping hand to anyone who needs it. You're a leading council man of this city. You can tell me if there's any way I can be of help to Sindhapur."

Banwalia clasped his hands together, cleared his throat.

"Your offer is most gracious, but surely there are other places that have more need," he said.

Uddiyan sniffed.

"My father-in-law is correct," he said, pausing to throw back his head and toss a walnut into his mouth. "We have our own customs here. We merchants look after all Sindhapur's needs."

This Uddiyan's a puffed-up fool, thought Hamir. But he's not a son-in-law yet. There's still time to win Devi away from him.

And where was Devi? He swept his eyes over the doors opening off the courtyard. Maybe she was watching from behind a curtain.

Once again Banwalia waited for Hamir to speak. Chinata broke the silence.

“Yuvraj-ji,” he said, “it seems we must take our leave and seek somewhere else to offer your services.”

“Of course,” said Hamir, helpless as his chance to see Devi slipped away. “You’ve entertained us graciously, Banwalia Sahib, and my father the raja of Kashara will be grateful.”

The gatekeeper bowed Hamir and Chinata into the lane, his face beaming.

“That gate man is pleased about something,” said Hamir. “Is he so happy we’re leaving?”

Moments later, footsteps padded behind them in the empty street. Chinata whirled around, raising his fist, then letting it fall slack.

“Doorkeeper-ji?” said Chinata.

The doorkeeper drew up beside them, his shoulders bent over his stick, his breathing ragged.

“My name is Vik, Prince-ji. Please forgive my sly approach,” he said. “I’ve come with a message from the daughter of the house.”

Hamir’s despair evaporated as if it had never been.

“Follow me, and I’ll take you to her,” said the doorkeeper.

Without hesitation, Hamir followed him into an alley between high brick walls that turned into other deserted alleys and finally, into an open path. They waited for a boy and a cow with spreading horns to sway pass, then slipped through a gate into a back courtyard.

Devi was standing by the cowshed. For a moment her eyes brightened, then she glanced away, biting

her lower lip. The doorkeeper bowed to Hamir and gestured for him to approach Devi.

“Devi-ji…” Hamir began, but Devi held up her hand.

“I can’t stay long, so I must speak bluntly,” she said. “My father thinks it was to serve him that you arrived today. But I know it’s for my sake that you came.”

“I’ve never hidden my heart from you,” said Hamir.

“But I’ve called you to me by this cowshed to tell you that you mustn’t see me again.”

“But, Devi-ji,” said Hamir, his voice assertive, “you can’t hide from what’s in your heart, for I’m sure you look on me as I look on you.”

He pushed close to Devi, shaking off Chinata’s restraining hand.

“You know I’m right,” he said.

Devi stepped back.

“Perhaps,” she said, “but it makes no difference. I’ll be a merchant’s wife to Uddiyan, as intended. And you’ll be husband to a princess, as is meant to be.”

She bowed politely to Chinata, then turned away, the doorman following her.

“Devi-ji,” Hamir called out, but her footsteps didn’t falter.

As Hamir gazed after her, a man stepped out from behind the cowshed, making blood rush to his head. Devi’s brother, who had served him almonds in the courtyard.

“Our house has been honoured by your visit,” said Raju, “but please respect my sister. My father has arranged well for her, and now her duty is to grace Uddiyan’s household.”

“Of course,” said Hamir, his back stiff and his shoulders throw back. “Accept my blessings for your family on this joyous occasion.”

“Don’t grieve,” Chinata told Hamir as they passed back through the gate onto the rutted cow track. “Devi-ji has set both of you on the proper path.”

“She was crying, Chinata-ji,” said Hamir. “I saw tears in her eyes. Too easily she’s given herself up to a life of sadness.”

“What life of sadness?” said Chinata. “Hamir-ji, there are facts you must face. This Uddiyan is obviously a wealthy man, and a favourite of her father’s. Bathed and oiled prince of Kashara though you are, you can never shower her with jewels like those that pour from Uddiyan’s hands.”

“These plains are not a happy place for me,” said Hamir. “It’s time to return to my father.”

“A good plan,” said Chinata. “Your spirits will revive there,” said Chinata, “and I’ll be finished with wandering.”

At home in Kashara, Chinata sighed with contentment as he lowered himself to the courtyard bench, his rosy-cheeked grandchildren playing at his feet with the spinning tops he had brought them from the plains. Veera, wrapped in a shawl so fine it was almost transparent, listened fondly as Chinata recounted how he had won it in a rousing night of gambling in a resthouse on their journey home.

Hamir slipped back into his old life.

“So you won no riches or renown,” said Tej raja, his father. “But what does it matter? I dreamed of bequeathing you a wealthy kingdom, but since that’s not to be, why dwell on it? We have food to eat and, if we’re cautious, enough in our money pouch to gamble when we wish. What more do we need?”

Hamir wandered the hills with Kashara’s shepherds, drank goat milk by the fire while his father told tales of their glorious ancestors, cast stones with the princes of Panidas when they visited from their

kingdom over the mountain. He pushed memories of Devi from his head, except in the evenings, when the trill of the shepherds' pipes floated down from the hills and filled him with melancholy.

One day, when the rainy time was drawing to a close, a stranger climbed the hill to the palace gate.

"I've come from Parini," he announced.

Parini's image sprang before Hamir's eyes, her red hair threaded with grey, the gold ring in her nose. He realized that she and Devi had never stopped hovering in his head.

"She asks you to come," the messenger said. "You're needed to help Devi-ji."

"Is she hurt?" exclaimed Hamir.

"Parini will explain," said the messenger.

"Off you go," said Hamir's father, handing him a pouch of silver that Hamir knew would leave the

treasury almost bare. “It’s a prince’s duty to respond. Chinata, your grandchildren will be fine without you for a while.”

Chinata glanced at Veera, raising his eyebrows in apology. Veera shrugged in resignation.

Weeks later, Hamir and Chinata reached the cottage with the blue-door in the forest.

“Where is Devi-ji?” Hamir called out.

“I’ll explain everything,” said Parini. “But first sit and drink.”

Hamir and Chinata sat cross-legged on the hard earth outside the hut while Parini dipped water into two bowls. She took her time to speak.

“Devi is far away,” she said, when the bowls were empty and she had refilled them. “Across the sea in the land of Dilmun.”

“How did that happen?” cried Hamir, jumping up.

“Yuvraj-ji, don’t distress yourself,” said Chinata. “Allow Parini to speak.”

“She is with her husband, of course,” said Parini. “Uddiyan was sent to Dilmun where his brother keeps a branch of their trading house.”

“So far away, and so many dangers,” said Hamir. “She may never see her home again.”

“Further than her father imagined when he picked Uddiyan for his son-in-law,” said Parini. “But now you must voyage there yourself, for she has sent me a message.”

“I’d gladly journey wherever she is,” said Hamir, “but she has forbidden me. And her brother Raju too.”

“This is not the time to be bound by promises,” said Parini. “See what was delivered to me.”

She held out her hand, her fingers clenched around a sandal.

“Do you recognize this?” she asked.

Hamir took the sandal from her, ran his thumb over the strange padding on the sole, the red flowers embroidered on the strap.

“I remember,” he said. “You made this for her wedding, padded to support her foot.”

“Yes,” said Parini,” and she was pleased to have it. And now a sailor’s come, rushing from the port to bring it to me as soon as his ship docked.”

“Were there no words with it?” asked Hamir.

“Only the sandal,” said Parini. “The sandal with the padding so I knew at once whose it was. It’s clear that whatever she fears, she trusts no-one in Dilmun to help her.”

“I’ll leave immediately,” said Hamir.

Chinata cleared his throat.

“Of course the prince’s valour presses him to go,” he said, “but he mustn’t push in where he’s not wanted. Devi-ji has a brother. Surely it’s his duty to travel to Dilmun.”

“Her brother Raju is loyal to his sister and would rush to Devi without hesitation. If he knew. But he doesn’t know. Devi-ji sent the sandal to me, and I say it’s the prince who must go.”

Chinata shrugged.

“Then, Prince-ji, we must go quickly,” said Chinata. “The winds will change soon, and our chance for a ship to Dilmun will be lost.”

Another long journey.

First the Sindhapur docks and a riverman to pole them down the Sindhu to the seaport. The river trip was peaceful, the river calm, its distant banks fresh with waving yellow mustard flowers and the new green of grain crops, but Hamir was too impatient to

enjoy it. Once at the port, Hamir sat in the courtyard of a rest house drinking weak wine and chewing on pastries while Chinata searched for a captain who would give them passage to Dilmun.

“A prince can’t rub shoulders with the ruffians who overrun the docks,” said Chinata.

Chinata reappeared in the evening.

“It’s arranged,” he said, “though I’m uneasy about this whole venture. But if it’s still your wish, this Captain Eroch I’ve found will give us space. He seems a trustworthy man.”

Before dawn the next morning, they boarded the *Seabird* and settled under a striped canopy while two grunting deckhands secured bundles of rosewood, bales of cloth, and crates of squawking chickens below the deck.

“The crossing will be easy,” said Eroch, once the ship had set sail, his teeth flashing behind his flowing

moustache. “But beware of the alleys of Dilmun, once you disembark.”

“All cities have rough quarters,” said Chinata. “I have a strong shoulder and a cudgel.”

“There’s no rough quarter in Dilmun,” said Eroch. “The whole city is a brawling drunken thieves’ den. And those who approach you with a smile are the worst, hiding treachery behind sunny faces.”

“Say nothing of Devi-ji,” Chinata murmured later to Hamir. “From what Eroch tells us, Dilmun is a place where hopes are best kept secret.”

Ten days later, before they stepped onto the wharves of Dilmun, Hamir pulled the red-embroidered sandal from Chinata’s pack and bound it to his hip under his *dhoti,* out of the reach of pickpockets. Chinata did the same with their purse of silver, lighter than when they left Kashara but still hefty.

"The winds will turn in a few days," said Eroch, "and the *Seabird* will be riding them. Whatever your quest, don't delay, for we won't wait for you."

The sea shone behind them and mountains towered ahead as they entered the town. They tightened their shawls against hands that fluttered in secret alleys, eyes that followed them, shoulders that brushed them, and they squeezed to the wall whenever, bells jangling, a string of camels passed them on the way to the harbor. Twisting through a maze of plastered walls and mud houses, they found a landlord who was glad to take their silver and provide directions to the trading house of Uddiyan's family.

Rumpled brown goats watched them as they picked their way over stony ground to a compound overlooked by a line of palm trees. They strolled past the gate, then loitered by a nearby well, the haphazard angles of neighbouring walls shielding them from the gatekeeper's notice. They saw a man

reclining in a palanquin admitted, and others, dressed simply, turned away.

“Foreign country this may be, with strange pointed helmets on the guards and streets that go nowhere,“ said Chinata, “but the people are the same. Wealth has power. That young guard holds his nose in the air like a royal treasurer, too haughty for our needs,” said Chinata. “Wait to see who replaces him.”

They wandered through the bazaar for an hour, glad to be sheltered from the sun, then returned, Chinata with a packet of sweet pastries hidden in his *dhoti*. A different guard stood at the gate, arms folded across his leather vest, a club hanging at his side.

“A man with hopes,” said Chinata. “See his eyes roll up as he daydreams? I can work with him.”

He sauntered toward the entrance, gesturing for Hamir to follow him.

“Forgive me for disturbing you,” he said to the guard, “but is this not the house of the great merchant Uddiyan?”

“Your question shows your ignorance,” said the guard, lisping through broken teeth. “Strangers aren’t welcome in this house.”

“We’ve no wish to enter, but would welcome news of the household,” said Chinata, holding the guard’s eye while he fingered the folds of his *dhoti.*

“News given freely can be dangerous,” said the guard.

Chinata withdrew the sweets from his *dhoti,* the fragrance of rose syrup seeping through the leaf wrappings.

“We have a message for the illustrious Uddiyan,” said Chinata, sliding a silver piece into the packet.

“I regret to tell you the Uddiyan you seek is dead,” said the guard, his eyes on the sweets. “Murdered in the street for his golden earrings.”

Hamir gasped.

“But what of Devi-ji?” he blurted out.

Then fell silent at Chinata’s hiss.

The guard smirked.

“So that’s how it is,” he said. “She’s gone.”

Chinata slid a second piece of silver into the packet.

“Sent off by the family, to be married, no doubt. And I’d gladly earn another of your bits of silver to tell you where, but don’t know. Only that they took her heavily guarded in a palanquin. In Dilmun we don’t take safety for granted.”

Chinata stuck the packet of sweets in the guard’s vest and led Hamir away.

“Obstacle after obstacle,” groaned Hamir. “I didn’t wish Uddiyan dead, but of course my heart leaped to hear Devi-ji was free. And now she’s who knows where and to be married again, out of reach once more.”

“Why give up now, when you’ve come so far?” said Chinata. “We’ll supply ourselves in the markets and then inquire door to door. Simple pedlars looking for a reward won’t rouse suspicion.”

For two days they shuffled through the streets dressed in ragged *dhotis,* shivering in the chilly wind that seemed to be shifting toward the harbour, baskets of eggplant and melons and cucumbers on their backs. Some they even managed to sell.

“Fresh-picked from the garden,” Chinata said to gatekeeper after gatekeeper, and to the cooks or kitchen boys they called from inside.

Then Hamir would unwrap the red sandal and hold it out for inspection.

“Discovered near the docks, dropped no doubt by a careless thief,” Chinata would say. “Perhaps there’s a lady within who would be glad to have her sandal returned.”

“No one here has such a sandal,” said a young boy kicking a ball at the gates of a large house.

“Do you think I’m so foolish as to buy an unmatched shoe?” a cook asked.

“You probably stole it yourself to claim a reward,” said a sour-faced housekeeper.

An irritable guard threatened them with prison.

Most just waved them away.

“The wind’s turning back across the sea,” said Chinata. “Even if we find her, it will soon be too late.”

On the morning of the third day, Chinata offered a handful of tiny purple eggplants to a watchman and his son squatting by a freshly-plastered wall.

“Don’t need anything here,” said the man, tightening the quilt around his shoulders and leaning closer to the firepot near his feet.

Hamir held out the red-embroidered sandal.

The boy leaped to his feet,

“Papa, that’s the very one!” he cried.

“Quiet, my son,” said the watchman. “We can’t be sure.”

“I’m completely sure,” said the boy. “I’ll get her. She said to tell her right away.”

He sped off behind the high walls.

“Stand back,” the watchman warned, raising his club as Hamir leaned forward.

The boy reappeared, running ahead of a knot of people emerging into the courtyard.

Two burly guards with polished leather vests and gleaming helmets, two women wrapped in bright shawls supporting the arms of a third shawl-wrapped woman who limped.

Devi at last.

Hamir looked away to hide his excitement.

“Minu, bring the shoe to me,” Devi ordered, passing blank eyes over Hamir and Chinata, tossing her head at the blue-shawled woman beside her.

The guards’ glances were wary, Minu’s knuckles tight on Devi’s arm as she passed her the shoe. Hamir and Chinata kept their eyes lowered. Devi gave no sign that she recognized Hamir and Chinata, although through the shawl, Hamir could see her breath had quickened.

“You see,” said Devi, displaying the sandal to her companions. “A match with the one I’ve shown you. I was afraid it was lost, but now it’s returned to me, just as I hoped.”

Hamir was speechless. Chinata cleared his throat, shaking him out of his daze.

“W-we’re pleased to find the shoe’s owner,” Hamir stuttered, his mind a turmoil of half-formed plans.

“My host will want to reward you for your service, but he won’t return until sundown,” said Devi. “Come back later with your vegetables or fruit or whatever you have. There’ll be something here for you.”

“As you say,” said Hamir, bowing and turning away.

“Send a message to me when they return,” Devi called to the doorkeeper as she re-entered the courtyard, followed by her servants.

Hamir and Chinata hurried through the town.

“Back to Eroch’s ship,” said Hamir, striding toward the waterfront, a wide grin on his face. “We need Eroch to help us.”

“Don’t look so pleased,” said Chinata. “There’s little Eroch can do until you break Devi out of that house.

“Devi has a plan,” said Hamir. “That’s what she was trying to tell us. We just need to be there with a plan of our own.”

They found Eroch at a resthouse near the *Seabird ‘s* mooring place, drops of wine glistening on his forked beard.

“Just a few of your men who know how to wield cudgels,” Hamir said.

“No,” said Eroch. “If you have the lady aboard tonight, I’ll smuggle her away with the tide, for who’s to know, but I’ll not send my seamen where they’ll be recognized. I have a reputation to protect.”

“Then we’ll find another way,” said Hamir.

“We can’t round up a band of fighters in a foreign city at a moment’s notice,” said Chinata, as the two men wandered through the bazaar. “Perhaps this rescue is not meant to be.”

“Chinata,” said Hamir. “Three days ago, you said ‘Why give up when we’ve come so far?’ Don’t back away now when we’re almost there. It’s true I’m no good with sticks and clubs, and you can’t fight so many alone. But I have other weapons in mind.”

As the sun was setting, Hamir and Chinata arrived at the entrance of the house where Devi was held. Two white bullocks with curved horns followed them, pulling a cart with huge red wheels.

“Stop,” said the driver, and the bullocks stood still, the brightly decorated wheels creaking to a stop, bundles of straw tumbling together in the cart.

The watchman huddling by the firepot had changed, but the small boy who had fetched Devi earlier was still there, peering around the wall.

“We’ve come for the reward promised us,” said Hamir, “and payment for this load of straw as well.”

“I’ll let them know,” called the boy, running off.

“Bring the cart closer,” Chinata ordered, “so I can unload the straw.”

The driver, his thin face expressionless, steered the cart against the entrance, almost blocking it.

A woman, a helmeted guard beside her, crossed the courtyard to the gate. Hamir recognized the servant Minu by the blue shawl that veiled her. Then he noticed the red sandals flashing under her skirt and the careful way she was walking.

“Straw, not cucumbers this evening?” asked the woman, her voice muffled.

“Chinata,” murmured Hamir, but Chinata had noticed too, and was already scooping an armful of straw from the cart.

“I’ll set this here, where it can be collected later,” he said, stumbling over the watchman’s firepot and dumping the straw and some oil he had hidden in his *dhoti* on the glowing charcoal. The straw burst into flames. The watchman covered his head and rolled away.

“My mistake,” Chinata cried out. “I’ve ruined the straw but don’t worry. We won’t charge you for it.”

The guard beat at the fire with his cudgel. Behind his back, Hamir helped Devi scramble onto the cart, snatching away her shawl and heaping straw over her.

“Get that cart out of here,” the guard shouted, still attacking the flames. “It’s blocking the way. Only a fool would leave it there.”

The white bullocks trotted off in the dusk while Chinata and Hamir sprinted away in the other direction, Hamir with the blue shawl wrapped around his head and torso.

“Where’s Minu?” they heard the guard ask.

“She ran off,” said the watchman. “I saw her shawl in the lantern light.”

Hamir threw the shawl over a wall, then he and Chinata zigzagged from lane to lane toward the waterfront. Once, when the shouts of the guard sounded close, they bolted behind an open gate, pulling the watchman with them.

“Silver if you keep quiet,” murmured Chinata, an arm across the man’s throat, a hand over his mouth, while a guard pounded by, several colleagues straggling behind.

“May your good deed return to you,” said Hamir as Chinata pressed a silver piece into the watchman’s hand before the two dashed out the gate.

The cart driver was waiting for them near the wharf.

“Came straight here. No problem,” he said. “She’s safe aboard the ship.”

Chinata handed him the pouch he had carried from Kashara, depleted but still weighted with silver.

“For your services,” said Hamir. “Stay out of sight for a few days, in case the guard recognizes you.”

“They’ll not find me,” said the driver, turning back into the town. “I’m just one scrawny driver among many, and my cart looks like any other, for my sons are busy right now scraping red paint off the wheels and white off my bullocks.”

Devi was settled under the striped canopy when they climbed aboard the *Seabird*. Her face glowed in the soft light of the oil lamp. Hamir gazed at her, biting his lip. Devi gazed back, wide-eyed.

“It’s almost time to cast off. We’re not the only ship sailing this dawn,” said Eroch. “Who’s to say I’m taking anything from Dilmun but a great cargo of copper ingots? Right, Chinata-ji?”

Chinata nodded, his eye on Hamir.

“It’s good you sent the sandal to Parini,” Hamir finally said to Devi.“

“A chance came and I took it. A boy in Uddiyan’s house. Or rather, Uddiyan’s brother’s house. I learned the boy longed to run away and I persuaded him to go. He took the sandal for me.”

”What kind of land is this, that the only way to leave is to run away?” said Chinata.

“Not the land but the man,” said Devi. “My husband was an honest man, but his brother buys children to slave in his kitchens and sells widows to friends as wicked as he is”.

Hamir gasped.

“You can see it’s true,” said Devi. “You found me under guard, the intended wife of Jumban the merchant. Jumban gloats over his Sindhapuri bride and Uddiyan’s brother gloats over the new gold in his treasure chest.”

“They had no right!” Hamir said, his fists clenched. Chinata’s face was grim.

“At least we’ve spared you that, Devi-ji,” said Eroch as he left them for the deck, calling out orders to his seamen. The *Seabird* shivered as the ship eased away from the shore.

“Devi-ji,” said Chinata,”allow me to ask. How did you evade your servant guards, when you came to the gate wrapped in the servant’s shawl?”

“Parini’s wooden chest of herbs,” grinned Devi. “I pressed a sleeping herb into their pickled vegetables. And Parini’s padded shoe evened my steps, though it was the most painful walk I’ve ever made.”

“Parini’s had her hand in this from the beginning,” said Hamir.

The conversation dwindled as the wind caught the ship, the silence under the striped canopy filled with

seamen's shouts and the creak of ropes. Hamir cleared his throat as if to speak but said nothing.

Devi shrugged her shoulders and turned to Hamir.

"What now, Hamir-ji?" she said. "Should we go together to Kashara?"

Hamir took her hand, his face breaking into a wide grin.

"Exactly my thought," he said. "This is a wonderful ending to my quest. I'm returning to my father without riches or renown, but with Devi-ji of Sindhapur, a treasure far greater. Kashara will be pleased."

Devi smiled. Chinata smoothed his beard.

The Wooden Bird

I am Barun, son of Reena and Banwalia. I barely knew my father until I was twelve and my grandfather sent me back to live in Sindhapur.

My mother was furious.

“Barun in that miserable place?” she cried. ”Where they crouch in their courtyards and sneer and tell evil tales of each other? He’s better off here.”

“The tales you call evil are no doubt the ones about you,” my grandfather said, smoothing his

moustache, “although it’s not pleasant to know this of my own daughter.

“How cruel!” my mother muttered, her face in her hands.

“You’re her father,” said my grandmother, stroking my mother’s arm. “Reena is your daughter. A father should protect his child.”

“Exactly why Barun must go to Sindhapur,” said my grandfather. “It’s his father’s responsibility to guide his son. His future isn’t here in Mendak.”

“Cruel, cruel,” said my mother. “To bring my child to me, then take him away.”

For now that I was twelve, my father expected me back in Sindhapur.

“But if you must go, take care,” said my mother. “Your father Banwalia acts affectionate, but he’ll turn on you in an instant. And that son of his, Raju, your half-brother, he’s all high-minded on the

outside but thinks his dead mother a goddess and me a poor replacement."

So I left the house in Mendak for my father's faraway house. As I stepped onto the boat, my grandmother sobbed on the dock, my mother seethed alone in the house, and my grandfather pressed my head against his chest, saying "Make your family proud."

After days on the river, I entered the Sindhapur house washed and combed, tied into a fresh loincloth, and with my stomach in knots. I knew my mother imagined things, but maybe she was right about my Sindhapuri family.,

My father Banwalia stood in the courtyard, his legs curved outward, thin arms draped over a heavy belly, smaller than I remembered him.

"Barun," his voice boomed. "You seem strong and healthy. Your grandfather has raised you well. You should be fine here."

I recognized my father, and the old neem tree rising out of the brick, and the stone wall that circled it, but little else. I was only three when I was sent to my mother in Mendak.

“Here is your elder brother Raju, and your sister-in-law Sibby,” said my father, kissing my forehead, tousling my hair, guiding me toward the man and woman beside him. “Don’t feel strange. You’ll soon be kicking stones in the street and running in the forest as if you’ve always lived here.”

I barely remembered my half-brother, Raju. He was tall and thin-faced, pressing me to his side and releasing me at almost the same time. Sibby was tiny and smiling, her hair parted smoothly at the middle of her forehead, her ears weighted with gold. She embraced me and patted my shoulder, looking me full in the eyes.

“I can see you’re a good boy,” she said. “You’ll be a great help to your father and brother.”

How, I wondered.

In Mendak, I had passed my days loitering by the docks and roaming through the streets with the boys of the town, returning to the house on the hill when I was hungry.

In Sindhapur, I spent the mornings with a tutor, reciting lists of sums and weights and measures, river names and distant tribes. Sagar-ji had slicked-back hair that hung to his shoulders and long thin fingers that tapped sharply on my knee in rhythm with my chanting.

In the afternoons I went to the warehouse with my father and brother to count bales of rugs and bolts of cloth, and weigh pouches of shells and coloured stones. The jute bags I helped stamp with my father's seal were just like the ones my friends and I had seen unloaded on the Sendak docks.

One day as I worked at the scales, Father brought me a carved wooden box lined in red with a set of weights pressed into the padding.

“A merchant’s son should have his own weights,” he said, his face stern. “Take care of them.”

Then he grinned and pulled me against his side.

“Your skill is small now, but in time, you’ll be a full Sindhapuri merchant,” he said. “Along with your brother Raju. I’m getting old. It’s time for you young people to take responsibility and for me to sit and dream in the courtyard.”

Or gamble with his friends. Or hold council meetings, which often ended in gambling sessions. My father was too busy laughing to spend much time dreaming.

True to his word, he left more and more of the running of his trading house to Raju, but his responsibility as head of the family he took seriously.

“You’re a good son,” he said to Raju as we ate our evening rice with spiced eggplant and mango pickle by the brazier in the courtyard. “But you’re failing in one important thing, Raju. Where are the grandchildren I’m waiting for? A small grandson, jolly like me, or perhaps solemn like you. And a granddaughter, brave and beautiful like my Devi, whom I’ll likely never see again.”

“Your wish is also my wish,” said Raju. “Many entreaties the gods have heard from us, and many offerings they’ve accepted, but still there’s no child. Even now Sibby is lying weak on her bed, fasting in hope that an infant will be born.”

“Who is Devi?” I asked.

“Such a sadness in my heart,” said my father. “You must remember her. She’s your half-sister, gone far to the north to be a princess. Children are our greatest joy and our greatest pain. At least, Barun, I have you back again.”

He seized my face in both hands and planted loud kisses on my forehead. Life with my father was safe and comfortable.

Several weeks later I heard Sibby and Raju arguing quietly.

I was out of sight in the storeroom, searching for a treat after another morning of Sagar-ji's finger nails in my knee. I peeked past the door hanging. Sibby and Raju sat on cushions under the neem tree, drinking honey water. Sibby's eyes were fiery, Raju's solemn face was soft with affection.

"Please don't," Sibby said. "She makes me uneasy. "Don't bring her here."

"When you know her better, you'll like her," said Raju, laying a gentle hand on Sibby's shoulder. "She's helped our family before. My sister's happy in Kashara because of her …"

He glanced around the courtyard and lowered his voice. “And I’ve told you how she kept us safe from Barun’s mother.”

I stiffened, my hand clutching a chunk of sweet jaggery I had just dug out from the crock. What did Raju mean about my mother? And who was this woman he wanted to bring to Banwalia’s house?”

Sibby folded Raju’s hand in both of hers.

“Since she means so much to you, bring her,” she said, “but I’m uneasy about it.”

Raju withdrew his hand and patted her arm. Sibby lowered her head, but I could see her lips clamped in a stubborn line.

Several mornings later, Father’s old gatekeeper Vik called out in excitement.

“Parini-ji! You have come!” he cried, folding his hands and bowing an old woman into the courtyard.

His face was bright with happiness, his sunken chest somehow fuller as he gazed at her.

From the corner of the courtyard where I sat cross-legged with Sagar-ji, I strained to watch, my recitation faltering.

“Pay attention,” said Sagar, jabbing his fingers into my knee. “Your business is here, not there.”

The woman was barefoot, wrapped in drab grey cloth, her hair springing around her face in twisted strands of red and silver, bright in the sun that beamed down into the courtyard. A broad gold ring hung from a nostril.

“Parini-ji,” said my father, rising from his cushion under the neem tree. “Welcome to this house. It’s seldom you come to my courtyard.”

“Raju-ji has summoned me,” she said.

Vik continued to stand with folded hands, his mouth stretched in a grin, his eyes fixed on the woman.

“Return to your post, Vik,” my father said, waving him toward the entrance.

“And you to your studies,” Sagar-ji muttered to me in our corner, prodding my folded knee.

Raju slipped down the stairs from the upper apartments and bowed, his long thin body awkward.

“Parini-ji,” he said, his severe face flushed with emotion.

Servants glided from the kitchen, set out a cushion and water for Parini and offered her trays of sweets.

“Reena’s boy, I think,” she said, tipping her head toward me.

“Sagar-ji,” called my father across the courtyard. “For once, excuse your pupil from his studies and bring him to greet our respected Parini-ji. Even I obey her.”

I folded my hands to Parini.

“Your mother kept her word and sent you back,” she said.

Sagar-ji sat by the others, accepting walnuts and dried apricots from the servant. I sank down beside Raju, away from Sagar-ji’s sharp fingernails.

“Raju has placed his hope in you, Parini-ji,” said my father. “Sagar-ji, Parini has played a great part in this household.”

Sagar-ji tipped his head, his oiled hair brushing his shoulder, and looked down at his hands.

“You see how Vik honours her,” said my father. “She rescued him from near-slavery and brought him here to be our gatekeeper.

“And my children are alive because of her. When their stepmother would have ended their lives, Parini plucked them to safety.

My head jerked up. Raju's stepmother had tried to kill him? My mother was a murderer? I blinked in confusion. Raju pressed my shoulder.

"Later," he muttered.

"And when my daughter Devi escaped from a cruel suitor," my father said, "Parini's hand was in the affair."

"And now, Parini-ji," he said, "I ask for your help once more. This courtyard should be filled with children. Gold I can give you, or whatever offering that pleases you, if you can use your powers and grant me a grandchild."

"Banwalia-ji, offering or no offering, you're asking what I cannot give," said Parini.

My father glanced around the group.

"Where's my daughter-in-law?" he asked. "Sibby should be here."

Raju leaped to his feet and hurried up the stairs.

“Parini-ji,” my father continued, “whatever you say, with your blessing the gods will grant me a grandchild. And Sagar-ji, you should seek Parini-ji’s blessing too. Right now your only children are the ones you teach for other people.”

Sagar-ji folded his hands and bowed to Parini, his mouth working. I could tell he was offended. I was still raw from my father’s blunt reference to my mother, and I understood.

Raju came back down the stairs, Sibby behind him.

“Good, Sibby. Come close to Parini-ji,” my father said. “Let’s see what she makes of you.”

Sibby was smiling as always, but her eyes were dull, her delicate face strained. She crouched down so that Parini could lay her hand on her head.

“You need rest, “Parini said. “Raju, take her back up.

Sibby's face relaxed as she and Raju retreated to the stairs.

"Banwalia-ji," said Parini when they had left, "you're asking for what you already have. Sibby's expecting a child. Can you not see it?"

Sagar-ji looked down in embarrassment. My father's eyes flashed with astonishment.

"This is your doing, Parini-ji," he boomed. "Once again we owe you our greatest gratitude."

"I've given you nothing but good wishes," said Parini, standing to straighten her skirt and cross the courtyard. Vik grinned and folded his hands as she passed through the gate to the street.

The next months were filled with mornings at lessons and afternoons at the trading house. As the time for the baby's birth approached, Raju and my father went off each day alone and left me at home to watch over Sibby.

“She needs a family member with her now,” my father said, “and the warehouse can do without you for a few days. Send the servants for the midwife if Sibby requests it. The kitchen servants, not the gatekeeper. Vik is too old now to run fast.”

“Rest and be happy, my wife,” Raju said to her every afternoon as he set out for the warehouse.

Sibby always smiled and tossed her head, leaning against cushions in the courtyard or reclining on the blue and red striped covers of the cot upstairs

I fetched beans and lentils for her to sort, and wool for her to wind on her spindle, and cool drinks from the kitchen when she was thirsty. And sometimes we talked.

“Barun, I’m not a nice person,” she said one day. “They think I’m sweet and obedient, but I confess to you I just pretend. I’m furious inside when I see them fawning over that Parini.”

“She looks pretty bedraggled,” I said.

“I don’t care about that,“ said Sibby. “It’s the way she fascinates them. They think it’s because of her powers that this baby ‘s coming, and I hate that.”

“Why do they dislike my mother so much?” I asked her. “Is it true she’s a murderer?”

“About your mother I don’t really know,” she said, her eyes wide with sympathy. “Raju told me she sent him and your half-sister to the forest to starve or be eaten. But you should ask your mother herself.”

“If I ever get the chance,” I said. “She’s far away in Mendak now.”

“You miss your mother, of course, but don’t worry too much about the past. You can be proud of yourself, such a great help to your father and half-brother.”

I looked at her, my eyes pleading.

“And to me,” she said, rumpling my hair.

In time, the baby came. They named her Jasmine. She had a tiny face, just like Sibby’s, red cheeks, and a clump of black hair cresting above her forehead.

She was always in someone’s arms. Sibby rocked her and sang. Raju settled her in the curve of his knee when he sat under the neem tree. My father tickled her stomach until she gurgled with laughter. I played peek-a-boo, hiding her wooden dog behind me, then waving it in front of her with a flourish. Vik cooed to her whenever Sibby passed her to him for a moment, and even Sagar-ji held out his finger for her to clutch, his eyes lighting up when she smiled.

When she took her first steps, the whole household called out encouragement.

“She’s a year old now,” said Sibby. “We should call a priest for a feast to offer thanks.”

Friends and neighbours came in their laundered and starched best. Jasmine was dressed in pleated cotton, gold at her ears and around her waist. Sibby, draped in a fine-woven shawl that billowed around her as she moved, gleamed with stones of carnelian set in gold at the part of her hair and on her arms. Raju and my father had oiled hair, my father's a fringe at the back of his head, my brother's thick and glossy, and gold pendants on their chests. I was given a gold chain to hang around my neck.

While the priests intoned solemn chants, Jasmine wobbled on chubby feet from mother to father to grandfather to me, the silver bells around her ankles jingling.

Then came the blessings. Guests stroked her arm and patted her head, exclaiming with approval when the baby babbled or smiled or hid her face against her mother. Such a sweet face! Such lustrous hair! Such rosy cheeks! They brought gold trinkets, beaded bangles, a miniature cart with wheels that

turned and a small clay bullock to pull it. Sagar-ji, his eyes oddly soft, laid a length of embroidered cloth at her feet. Vik held out a wooden bird with bright painted eyes and a cord that made its wings flap. Jasmine clapped her hands and crowed with laughter.

“Bird!” she said. “Bird.”

Sibby and Raju beamed at the praise heaped on their daughter, but as I wove through the crowd with a jug of lemon water, I saw malice hidden behind the smiles of some of the guests.

“Look at Banwalia,” hissed a thin man with a scrawny neck. “So what if he’s head of the council. No reason to lord it over us, decking out his daughter-in-law and granddaughter in gold.”

It was Pritam, the one who had given Jasmine the toy cart.

“It’s your own fault,” said his wife. “With a little sense, you could have become head yourself.”

Pritam sucked in his breath.

“It’s not so easy, Rupi,” he muttered. “Banwalia acts like a prince and the town treats him like one.”

Rupi turned to her neighbour.

“Banwalia should be touching our feet instead of displaying his granddaughter like a princess,” she said, a smug smile narrowing her eyes. “He’s an ill-bred nobody. His mother was a servant from the hills slithering her way into a rich house.”

“His mother was a servant but his wife was worse,” their neighbor murmured from behind her heavily-ringed hand. “Sent back to her parents in their ramshackle village, disowned for thieving. My grandmother knew the whole story.“

“Not now, Neela,” said Rupi. “Here he comes.”

“Pritam sahib,” Banwalia called out, the vigour of his walk eclipsing his sagging belly and gnarled legs. “Sit and eat. Don’t go hungry in my house.”

He clapped his arm around Pritam’s shoulder and drew him toward the cushions set out for the feast.

“Neela-ji, Rupi-ji, sit here,” he said, beckoning to the servants balancing trays of food.”

The three settled down, swallowing mouthfuls of *chapatt*i dipped in vegetables and lentils, and

chatting happily with their fellow guests.

A rush of activity signaled a new arrival.

“Parini-ji,” Vik announced, his gaunt body bent over his folded hands.

Parini swept into the courtyard, wrapped in her wrinkled grey skirt and shawl, red-grey hair springing above her forehead.

Guests stared as she strode toward Sibby and Raju. She held out her hands for the baby. Sibby hesitated, then settled Jasmine in Parini's arms.

"A healthy child," Parini said. "That's good."

"Our house is filled with joy, thanks to you," said my father.

"Banwalia-ji," said Parini, "listen to me. Joy comes and goes. Sadness comes and goes. It has nothing to do with me."

After the guests left, I played in the courtyard with Jasmine, holding her new bird while she flapped its wings, hiding it under cushions to make her cry "Bird!"

"Did you hear her?" said Sibby, her voice rising in a shriek. "Parini. She threatened us. 'Joy comes and goes,' she said. That's a threat. She means to harm Jasmine."

“She wouldn’t,” said Raju. “I know her. She’s not like that.”

“No good will come from her,” said Sibby.

“Anyway,” said my father. “Jasmine’s safe here. No one unwelcome can get through the gate. Vik sees to that.”

Vik snapped to attention, as much as his bent shoulders would allow, and bowed.

One afternoon as I walked down the sloping road to the warehouse, a face peered at me from an alley, then disappeared. When the face appeared again the next day, I pushed into the alley, but found nothing.

Several days later, a voice from the alley hissed my name.

“Barun, it’s your mother. It’s Reena. Come and greet me. I’ve come a long way to see you.”

I stepped between the buildings to find my mother hovering in the shadows, wrapped in a shawl with only her face showing. Even in the dim light, I realized she was beautiful. I had never noticed before. A noble face, with wide eyes, graceful eyebrows, arching nose.

She clutched me to her, then inspected me at arm's length.

"You're taller," she said.

"Why are you hiding?" I asked.

"I doubt I'm welcome in your father's city," she said, "and I've no wish to run into him or his friends. I'm here out of duty, and you must do something for me as a son helps his mother."

"What do I have to do?" I asked.

"Listen, Barun," she said. "Is it true? I heard your half-brother Raju has a child."

“Jasmine,” I said.

A young woman watched closely through the gloom, tattered shawl around her thin shoulders.

“I was close to Raju once,” Reena said. “I’m his stepmother, after all. It would be a joy to hold his child. My grandchild.”

The young woman’s dark eyes blinked at the word ‘grandchild’.

“Holding her is not to be,” said Reena. “But I want you to give the child this, and tell them I’ve sent it.”

She handed me a cloth pouch.

“There’s a silver bangle inside,” she said. “It belonged to Banwalia’s mother-in-law, who’s long dead. The grandmother’s silver should go to the grandchild. Who knows? Maybe they will think kindly of me now.”

“I’ll do it,” I said.

“Good,” she said, kissing my forehead and slipping deeper into the alley. “Don’t follow me.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“To the charcoal burners,” she said, waving her hand toward the woman in the shadows. “Then back to Mendak. Gina’s family looks after me. They came here from Mendak years ago.”

The two disappeared down the alley.

At the warehouse, I tucked the little jewelry pouch in the folds of my *dhoti* while I counted crocks of oil and sacks of grain. That evening, I approached my father and Raju as they sat under the neem tree drinking buttermilk.

“My mother came today,” I said, handing Father the pouch. “She gave me this for Jasmine.”

“Your mother?” said Father. “She’s not welcome here.”

“She knows,” I said, “but she said it was her duty to give this to the baby. She said you would be pleased.”

“Open it, Raju, and see what she’s sent,” my father said.

Raju held up a silver bracelet inset with small blue stones.

“By the gods, this woman has no shame,” my father cried out. “She stole a coffer of jewels from this house and now returns the least as a gift?”

”Where did you see her?” Raju asked me.

“Not far from the warehouse,” I said, afraid of causing trouble for my mother by saying too much. “She was waiting for me.”

“And hiding from me, I have no doubt,” said my father. “She fears imprisonment if she shows me her face. It was only to shield you from shame, Barun, that I let her leave in the first place.”

I opened my mouth with questions, then closed it when Raju pressed my shoulder to hold me back.

The next morning, while I waited for Sagar-ji, Sibby called me to her room to watch over Jasmine.

“Barun,” said Sibby as she folded clothes into a chest, “if you have questions about your mother, I’ll answer them for you.”

I darted after Jasmine, who was toddling toward the stairway.

“There’s stuff I need to know,” I said, returning with the squirming baby, “but no one wants to tell me. What did my mother do wrong?”

Once again I hurried after Jasmine. When I returned, Sibby set aside her task and took the baby on her lap.

“Your brother said to explain everything,” she said. “Your father and brother don’t like talking about it. Your father married your mother Reena after Raju’s

mother died. She pretended to care for Raju and your half-sister Devl, but all the time she plotted to kill them and take their property for herself. When she saw she'd been found out, she stole their mother's jewelry, claiming she had a right to it, and tried to run off. Your father let her go, but told her never to come back."

Sibby's tale didn't shock me. Most of it I had worked out for myself, and I was used to my mother's habit of twisting the truth.

"What about me?" I asked.

"To tell the truth, she left without you." Said Sibby. "I'm sorry to tell you that. But your father took pity on your grandparents and sent you to be with them in Mendak. Until you turned twelve. That was the agreement."

"My mother treated Raju-ji badly," I said. "He must hate me."

“Never,” said Sibby. “We’re all angry with your mother, of course, but her deceit has nothing to do with you.”

“I’m sorry my mother did that,” I said.

“You’re here now,” Sibby said, drawing me to her so that both Jasmine and I were caught in her embrace. “Don’t worry about your mother. Here. Take Jasmine. I must finish my task.”

I hung my head. I didn’t care about my mother’s misdeeds. I missed her. She didn’t hug me much, but she was proud of me, draping me in silk and jewels, smiling as she showed me off to the town. And she was mine.

I carried the baby downstairs and trailed after her as she tottered around the courtyard with her wooden bird. I remembered my mother’s face, peering from the dark alley, and I felt like a traitor, helpless against the bitterness toward her in my father’s house.

Weeks later, catastrophe came to Banwalia's house.

One moment the courtyard was peaceful, drowsing in the hot afternoon. I was lounging under the neem tree, relieved to be home from the sultry air of the warehouse. Sibby fell asleep against her cushions as soon as I offered to watch the baby, Jasmine babbled beside her, and even Vik dozed on his stool by the gate, his head drooping over his boney chest.

Two men burst through the gate, knocked Vik to the pavement, snatched Jasmine from Sibby's arms, and ran off.

Sibby screamed, huddled on the cushions, almost drowning out the pounding of feet and Jasmine's fading cry of "Bird! Bird!".

Vik struggled up and staggered out the gate. I sprinted behind him shouting "stop thief" but there was no one in the lane, thief or otherwise, to hear me.

Vik held his head where he had been clubbed.

“Gone” he sobbed. “All my responsibility.”

The kitchen servants shot down the lane in different directions.

My eye was caught by Jasmine’s wooden bird lying further along the base of the wall.

“That way,” I pointed, and bent to pick up the toy.

The servants raced away, then returned, dragging their feet.

“No one,” they said.

My father and Raju arrived home.

“They must be caught,” Raju said, pacing back and forth. “We need to know who sent them.”

“Can you at least describe these brigands?” my father said.

Their image was pressed onto my brain. Feet bound with strips of cloth, clubs, thick shoulders, faces shrouded with shawls.

“We’ll set the watch after them, but they can’t do much with that description,” said my father.

Sibby had fallen silent, sitting rigid by the neem tree. Suddenly she spoke.

“It was that Parini,” she said, her voice low and menacing, “with her red hair and dirty feet. She as much as warned us at the birthday. She’s taken her away just as she said she would.”

“You’re mistaken,” said Raju. “Not Parini.”

“Stop protecting her,” said Sibby, her voice rising to a shriek. “Joy comes and goes, she said. I knew right then she was planning something evil. It’s your fault, Raju, for bringing her here.”

Raju turned away, his face set.

I fidgeted with Jasmine's bird, trying to escape the adults' anger, pulling the cord that flapped the wings.

"I see your mother's hand in this, Barun," my father said, returned from giving directions to the city guards clustered at the gate. "Stop playing with that toy. This is serious. Explain to me where you saw Reena."

"She was watching for me near the warehouse," I said," but I think she's gone back to Mendak."

"Her intentions are never good," said my father. "I'll send the guard to the alleys near the warehouse in any case."

"She knows some charcoal burners," I added.

Vik stood before my father, his hands folded.

"I take the blame for this," he said. "It was my duty to defend the entrance. I was careless."

“There’s a child to find now,” said my father. “Put your mind to that.”

“Yes, Banwalia-ji, I will search,” said Vik, gazing at the toy bird he had given Jasmine as he brushed tears from his cheek.

Raju eyed Vik with narrowed eyes.

“You’re always attentive, Vik,” he said. “Why not this afternoon?”

Sibby reared up from her cushion.

“Don’t accuse Vik,” she said. “We all become sleepy in the afternoon. Put the blame where it belongs. On Parini. You’re wasting time here. Go after her.”

Raju kneaded his forehead.

“It’s not Parini, I promise you,” he said.

Raju stayed home from the trading house the next morning, and the next and the next.

“Do what you can to find her,” said my father. “This house is a desert without my granddaughter.”

Raju accosted people in the streets. He questioned and re-questioned Vik. He urged the city guard to track down his child, then accused them of sloppiness when they found nothing. He trudged three times through the forest to Parini’s cabin, finally finding her home, but gained little, just a warning that he was wasting his time suspecting people who loved the house of Banwalia. He visited the charcoal burners deep on the other side the forest, where he discovered the villagers nursing my mother, bedridden with fever but passionate in denying any knowledge of Jasmine.

Each evening Raju wandered home to sit grim-faced in the courtyard. In all his days of searching, he found nothing to give us hope.

Sibby kept to her room, curled listlessly on her bed.

My father spent his days at the trading house, and his evenings at home in a courtyard barren of his generous laugh and gambling parties.

Friends and neighbours came to offer comfort, the same ones who had celebrated Jasmine's birthday a month before.

"Anything you need, just ask," Pritam told Banwalia. "She's like our own daughter. We won't rest until she's safe."

Pritam, who had hidden his dislike of my father behind a toy cart with spinning wheels for Jasmine.

"If you feel this Parini stole your child, it must be true," said Pritam's wife Rupi. "A mother always knows."

I don't trust you, Pritam and Rupi, I thought. Maybe it was you who stole Jasmine away.

Vik's face was shriveled with worry.

”Your brother Raju-ji was my good friend,” he told me one morning as I waited for Sagar-ji at the entrance. “Now I’ve become the one who let his child be taken.”

“He’ll come to see you’re innocent,” I said. “I’m pretty sure it was Pritam-ji. He hates my father. Or maybe it was Sagar-ji. He’s mean and he pinches, and I think he’s jealous that Raju has a child and he has none.”

“You mean well, Barun-ji, but look inside yourself,” said Vik. “You don’t like your tutor, so you want him to be guilty.”

But when Sagar-ji came through the entrance and took my arm, his nails pinching the skin, Vik eyed him closely until Sagar-ji looked away.

The next morning, Sagar-ji sent word that he was ill and I was to study on my own until he returned.

“You see, Vik,” I said. “He’s afraid to show his face.”

Two days later, he had not returned.

“Your tutor is ill,” my father said. “It’s your duty to visit him.”

Vik went with me, carrying a cloth bundle of mangoes and candied sesame.

“Vik-ji, check his house for Jasmine, while I keep him busy,” I said.

Sagar-ji lived in the lower town, in a quarter I had never visited. The lanes were narrow, the entrances crammed together. An old woman kneading dough by a brazier pointed out Sagar’s house, one of several opening off the cramped courtyard.

“Sagar-ji,” Vik called through the door.

A young woman appeared, a baby in her arms. Not Jasmine. Jasmine was bigger.

“You’re Barun, looking for my uncle-in-law?” she asked. “I’m Meenu.”

She led us across the room to a stairway, past another woman who leaped to her feet, smiling and bowing, another woman on a cot nursing a baby that looked newborn, two small boys staring up from their row of clay animals.

“Our home is busy,” Meenu said. “My mother-in-law has three sons who serve at the temple and many grandchildren. And of course, her brother, who is a great scholar as you know, for he is your tutor.”

She gestured for us to climb the stairs, calling “Bitti, bring milk” to a girl whose head popped out of the kitchen

“So you’re Barun, come to see my brother,” said an older woman at the top of the stairs. “Sagar-ji,” she called out, “your favourite pupil is here for you.”

Favourite? Vik caught my arm as I stumbled on the stairs.

Sagar was reclining against cushions, swathed in blankets, a toddler curled up beside him asleep. Not Jasmine. A small boy with thin cheeks and a top knot of hair.

“My grandson,” said the woman.

Sagar propped himself up on his arm and pushed the blankets aside when he saw us.

“No, brother,” said the woman, pressing his shoulder down, “you’re to rest for another day. Your student understands.”

Sagar-ji lay back, his slicked-back hair roughened by the pillows, his boney fingers gentle as he adjusted the blanket over the sleeping child.

“You’re my healer so I must obey you,” he said to his sister with a smile I was unused to seeing on his narrow face. “Just until tomorrow.”

Folding my hands and bowing, I took the bundle of fruit and sweets from Vik and placed it on Sagar's cot.

"May your health return quickly," I said.

"Are you studying every day as I requested?" he said, grabbing my arm, his nails digging into the skin. "We shall see, when I return to your courtyard."

His gentleness did not extend to his student.

We drank hot milk, wished the household good health, and set off back home.

"I was wrong, Vik-ji," I said. "Sagar-ji is ill, not just pretending, and besides, Jasmine couldn't be anywhere in that house."

"You're correct, Barun-ji," said Vik. "Those rooms don't have space even for an extra mouse."

So if not Sagar-ji, who had taken Jasmine?

Parini, just as Sibby thought? Had she imprisoned Jasmine somewhere in the forest?

Vik? After all, he had let the abductors burst through the gate. But he had been my father's trusted watchman for years.

My mother? I hoped not. I wanted her evil to stay in the past. And she must have recovered by now and returned to Mendak.

Perhaps it was Vik after all.

"If you care to give it to me, I'd be happy to have Jasmine-ji's bird," he said one day.

I fetched it from the shelf upstairs for him, and he took it reverently, winding the string to keep it from tangling. Had he hidden Jasmine somewhere, hoping to soothe her with the bird?

A few days later the fragrance of flowers wafted from Vik's shelter. He gestured me inside. The toy

hung on the wall, garlanded with white jasmine petals.

“It brings the joy of her laugh to me,” he said, his eyes glistening.

Definitely not Vik, I thought.

Sibby complained every day that Parini was the guilty one and Raju was protecting her. Raju finally exploded in anger.

“I’ve questioned her and I tell you she had no part in this,” he shouted, slamming his fist into the trunk of the neem tree.

The courtyard fell silent. Sibby’s mouth snapped open, the servant stooped motionless over his tray, my father’s hand hung in the air, his cup halfway to his mouth.

Raju looked down in embarrassment, clearing his throat.

“I’ll bring Parini here and you can ask her yourself,” he said, his voice strained but calm.

Two days later, Parini strode through the entrance, her gnarled walking stick clicking on the pavement, her red hair flashing in the sun. As Raju bowed her to the cushions by the neem tree, Sibby appeared, creeping slowly down the stairs with glaring eyes.

“Give me back my daughter,” she snarled, her hand pointing at Parini, her chest heaving.

“I don’t have your daughter, Sibby-ji, nor any knowledge of where she is,” said Parini.

“Of course you deny it,” shrieked Sibby, “but I can still hear what you threatened the day of Jasmine’s birthday. Joy goes, you said. And well you knew it, with your plot already ripe to rip our daughter from our arms.”

Sibby choked back a sob, her chest heaving. Parini's face was calm as she waited for Sibby's harsh breathing to slow.

"Sibby-ji," she said, "I'll tell you the same thing I've already told Raju-ji. Stop suspecting those who cherish you."

She heaved herself to her feet and left the courtyard, planting her stick into the stones as she walked.

"What use was that?" muttered Sibby.

Raju laid his hand on her shoulder, but she shook it off and climbed the stairs to her room.

Raju's eyes followed her, clouded with despair.

The next day Sagar-ji returned, and my mornings with him and afternoons at the warehouse re-commenced. One evening a great boatload of pottery arrived from upriver. We were already behind in preparing shipments for the south.

“I’ll be here all night organizing these bowls and platters,” said my father. “You must come early tomorrow, Barun, before your lessons, to get a start with the beads.”

The next morning, the sky was still pale, the sun barely up, when I set out. The street, usually noisy with the bawling of oxen and the shouts of vendors, was fresh and empty, so that I could hear the twitter of birds and the laughter of children from behind the walls.

A woman stepped into my path. Dark eyes stared beneath the drapery of her shawl.

“You’re Reena’s son,” she said, sinking to her knees, pressing my feet. “I’m Gina. I was with your mother that day.”

I remembered. The woman in the alley when my mother gave me the bangle for Jasmine.

“You must take me to the red-haired woman,” she said, her voice trembling. “She’ll know what to do. Parini I trust, your mother said. It’s Parini we must fetch, or Reena-ji will be angry with me.”

“For what?” I said. “Parini’s far off in the forest.”

“We must fetch her and take her to my village. She knows everything, your mother says. We must do what Reena-ji wishes.’”

“I can’t come,” I said. “My father’s expecting me.”

“No, we mustn’t delay,” said Gina, grasping my feet, her eyes pleading. ”She’s sick. Very sick. Everything’s going wrong. Parini will know what to do.”

My mother needed my help.

“Wait here,” I told Gina. I ran back to Banwalia’s courtyard and up the staircase.

Raju jerked awake.

“My mother is sick in the charcoal burners’ village,” I told him. “I have to get Parini and take her there.”

“Let him go,” said Sibby, propping herself on one elbow. “It’s his mother, after all. And when he fetches Parini, he can check her hut once more for the baby.”

So a servant was sent to help my father at the warehouse, and Raju and I set off to seek out Parini.

“Go back to your village and tell them we’re coming,” Raju told Gina.

Gina’s face broke into a smile, her eyes still anxious. She bowed to Raju, then tied her shawl around her waist and ran off, thin legs flashing.

We found Parini sweeping the packed earth outside her cottage.

“Now that she needs me, Reena has decided to like me,” she said.

“She trusts your skill,” I said.

Parini tied a pouch of herbs at her waist and strode into the forest, her callused feet sturdy beneath her sagging skirt. Raju and I stumbled to follow her.

The sun was high before we reached the village. The fumes from the smouldering charcoal tickled our nostrils and scratched our throats as we passed the mud-coated kilns and crossed the clearing to a tumbled cluster of huts. Children stared at us, mouths open in grubby faces, tangled hair grey with ash, arms slung around each other. From habit, I checked for Jasmine, but her bright face was not among the little ones clutched to the hips of the older ones.

“The lady is here,” a small boy called out, sprinting toward a hut. Gina’s head appeared in the low doorway.

“Grant it’s not too late,” Gina said.

Parini crawled inside and stooped over the huddled blankets on the floor. I hovered at the door with Raju, barely noticing the activity in the village around me. A woman slapped mud on a kiln, a man and woman broke open another kiln and scooped charcoal into reed baskets. My eyes strained through the gloom to watch as Gina crouched by my mother, hands folded in prayer.

Parini smoothed the blanket and laid her hand on my mother's forehead.

"Barun, you're needed," she called.

Gina slid aside to let me crouch near my mother.

"Reena, my herbs are useless here," Parini said. "Barun has come. It's time to give him your blessing."

My mother was dying. I held her inflamed hand, gazed at her face still beautiful behind flushed cheeks and eyes clouded with suffering. I searched

my heart for the grief a son should feel, but could find only pity.

“The gods made me weak,” she said, her voice thin and toneless, her eyes half-closed. “I’m weak. I’m not a good mother. But you’re a good son, Barun.”

Her words faded.

Through the afternoon and into the night we sat, Parini, Gina, Raju and I. Villagers came and went, solemn and respectful, setting lamps, water, and fruit beside us, chanting prayers.

A wail from Gina jerked me out of my drowse.

“The soul has left her body,” said Parini, laying her hand on Gina’s arm. “Let her go in peace.”

I was relieved it was over.

Gina pulled away from Parini and pressed her hands to her face, her sobs growing louder.

“It was all for nothing,” she cried. “She’ll never know now.”

Parini drew her out of the hut while village women came to prepare my mother’s body.

“I meant her to be happy, and now it’s too late,” moaned Gina. “She wanted to hold her grandchild. She’d have been so happy when she saw I’d brought the child to her. Like her grandchild, she said. Now she’ll never know what I did for her.”

Across the yard, a grey dove landed on the ground, pecking at crumbs the children scattered. Two more fluttered down, murmuring softly.

“Bird,” a voice came, clear and sweet. “Bird!”

Jasmine’s voice.

From a child wiggling in the arms of an older girl, a small child with the dirt-stained face, eyes circled with black ash and rough-cut hair of all the others.

“It’s all fallen apart,” Gina wailed.

“Jasmine!” Raju cried, rushing toward his daughter.

Jasmine stretched out her arms. The smiling face I remembered shone through the unfamiliar dirt.

“Gina, you have not acted well,” said Parini.

Within a day, Jasmine was back in her mother’s arms. And in her father’s and grandfather’s, all three vying for the chance to hold her. Jasmine was cranky, her skin raw from being scrubbed, but her smile returned when Vik brought the toy bird.

Sibby sent word that she wanted to see Parini.

“I misjudged you,” she said, when Parini’s silver- red hair and knobby feet swept through the gate. “It’s as Raju told me. You’re a friend of our family. I should have respected you.”

Parini accepted a bowl of buttermilk and sat with the rest of us under the neem tree.

“Barun, we’ll return your mother’s ashes to her parents’ house, where I think she was happy,” my father said. “Let the young woman who stole a baby for her carry them to Mendak. And let her stay there so we need not see her again.”

“And what of the villagers who ripped my daughter from my arms and hid her away for so long?” asked Sibby.

“They will pay,” said my father.

“But without hardship,” said Raju. “With charcoal. They can pay by keeping this house in charcoal.”

Sibby clamped her lips together in irritation.

“Not harsh enough,” she said. “They kidnapped a child.”

“Sibby-j,” said Parini. “Will you let me speak as a friend of the family?”

Sibby stared in surprise.

“The welfare of the village is in your hands,” said Parini. “Why ruin them? Don’t cloud your child’s return with bitterness and ill will. Let them pay for their crime, but let it be with wood and charcoal. They’ll be grateful and your household will have fuel.”

Sibby hesitated. She kissed the top of Jasmine’s head, glancing at Raju, who gazed back with pleading in his eyes.

“Parini-ji” she said, “I misjudged you once, but this time I’ll trust your wisdom. Leave the village in peace.”

Raju sighed in relief at Sibby’s sudden change of mind. Sibby’s eyes were defiant, daring the others to challenge her.

“Because of the children there,” she said.

Raju rubbed his chin, Sibby smoothed Jasmine’s hair, my father shrugged. Impatient with the growing

silence, I pulled the cord on the bird, the clack of its wooden wings filling the courtyard.

“Bird! Bird!” said Jasmine.

Parini nodded, then strode across the courtyard to the thump of her walking stick. She waved farewell as Vik bowed her out the gate.

The *Asoka* Tree

"The *asoka* tree, Harit," my grandfather said, stretching his staff above his shoulders. "Find the *asoka* tree and find your future."

He was bald with wrinkled cheeks, but his chest was muscled and his eyes piercing beneath bushy white brows. Planting his staff on the ground, he swung his legs high, then curved back to earth, landing with graceful feet. His days as Dhiren the acrobat were past, but his body was lithe from the leaps and twists he worked through every day.

“Your great grandmother looked out for us all,” he told me. “She saved up bits of wealth whenever she could and kept it hidden under the *asoka* tree. All Sindhapur knew Parini, with her tiny hut and ragged skirt, squatting in the marketplace selling herbs. No one but me knew about the precious things she buried in the dirt. Now the time is right for you to unearth them.”

“Why now?” I asked, placing a tray of fried melon chips on the veranda step. “Weren’t they always yours to use?”

“Listen, grandson,” my grandfather said, tossing a chip into his mouth. “I had no need of gold. We lived well without it. I never had to use Parini’s hoard to give your grandmother and father everything they needed.”

“Then why do you need it now?” I repeated.

“I don’t,” said my grandfather. “It’s you, Harit, who needs it. I am Dhiren the acrobat. I had performance

skills to provide for myself. I made sure your father had too. But your parents made a different plan for you. And anyway, it's meant for you. You have the same red hair she had."

He wedged his staff against the ground and swung himself into the air.

"What a life we had!" said my grandfather, stepping lightly back on the earth. "Our little troupe of acrobats. We were dazzling. Stick battles, somersaults, hand walking. Your father juggling and tumbling beside me. Your mother tossing her head and trilling on her flute, your grandmother, my dear Nandini, flicking her shawl, collecting coins from the crowd.

His eyes gazed into the distance, remembering.

"Then your father died. Your mother placed you with Hamet the trader as soon as you were big enough to hold a bullock's leading rope and stir milk

over a fire. And you never learned the tumbling skills I would have taught you."

"Yes, Grandfather-ji," I said. "But there's wealth to be made in trade," I said. "And pleasure in roasting eggplant over a fire and boiling milk after a day pulling bullocks over mountain tracks.

"You're a man now, Harit," said my grandfather, "and you've seen none of that wealth, for all your plodding through mud and rattling over mountains. That's why you need to travel downriver. Find the *asoka* tree near my mother's cottage, or what's left of it. There's treasure there."

"That was a long time ago," I said. "Someone must have taken it by now."

"No one knows about it," my grandfather said. "It'll still be there. Even I had no inkling until I was well away from Sindhapur and the cottage. Nandini and I went back just once, slipping through secret forest ways, your father slung in a shawl on Nandini's hip.

Nandini danced and I twirled my walking stick and Parini rocked your father and blessed him and told me about the treasure she'd put aside. Then she praised me.

" 'My son Dhiren,' she said. 'A stick fighter and acrobat. Such a dashing son from a simple father and mother.' "

"My great grandparents were simple people?" I asked.

"I hardly remember my father," said my grandfather, "but Parini was anything but simple. She called herself an herb gatherer, but people knew her for a healer and an arranger of people's lives. And she's left a treasure to help arrange yours."

"She had no idea I'd even be born," I protested."

"Don't question her wisdom. What you can do with such a legacy! In the Sindhapur cattle yards you can trade it for a string of bullocks. You'll find the best

quality there. Think of it. Carts loaded with silks and beads, and you, Harit, striding ahead, swinging a carved staff, urging the drivers on."

He grinned and flourished his fighting stick over his head, eyes glinting from under bristling eyebrows. I was excited at the picture he painted of me. A respected trader, with guards and drivers rushing to obey me, and customers flocking to exclaim over the goods piled on my carts.

Excited but awkward. Wielding a stick over people did not feel comfortable to me.

"Use Parini's treasure to make yourself into a real trader," my grandfather said. "No more loading and hauling and cooking for other people. Travel to Sindhapur. Follow the rivulet just outside the city gates to the old banyan tree, then go deep into the forest to the *asoka* tree and Parini's cottage. Half a century ago, that was the way. Probably still is."

“Come with me, Grandfather-ji,” I said. “Return to the place where you were a child. You understand how to find this treasure better than I do.”

“Not a good idea, Harit,” he said. “I’m not remembered well in Sindhapur. And Parini was tolerated only because she stayed well away in the forest. It’s often so with those who dance to their own flute. And the thieving I did from time to time didn’t help. The dealers would run you out of the bullock pens if I came with you to bargain. So listen to me, Harit. In Sindhapur, say nothing of your connections with Parini and Dhiren.”.

“After all this time?” I asked.

“Parini will be remembered,” he said.

Shouldering a bundle containing the strings of shells my grandfather could spare and pouches of dried fruit and roasted chickpeas, pleating a wide blue sash around my waist, I set off for Sindhapur. When I left the river days later and toiled up the stream to

the banyan tree, my face was running with sweat, the ends of my sash snagged with burrs.

The *asoka* tree was thick with leaves and lacy red blooms. As my grandfather promised, the jar was buried in the earth beneath. I tugged it out with hands skinned and stinging from digging. Crusted and rough from age, clogged with dirt and pebbles, the jar was solid in my hands, rounded sides still firm. My fingers brushed away a clot of soil, revealing a network of black lines spiraling gracefully over the cream surface.

Spreading my shawl over the ground, brushing aside the fallen red blossoms, I shook out the jar's contents, and slipped in my hand to scrape out material that had hardened with age. I sifted through clumps of soil and leaves and felt for the treasures my grandfather had described. My fingers teased out blackened pieces of silver and grit-covered carnelian beads and shell bangles. Finally, caught in a clump of root fibres, a golden neck chain knotted around dirt-

dulled ear drops. And bangles squashed into odd shapes but still whole, ankle bracelets with broken gaps, and the delicate twists of gold that were meant to dangle from them.

I breathed in the fragrance of the asoka blooms and gazed at the jumble of grubby gold and silver. I filled the jar from the nearby stream and slid in the coins and jewellery. The swirl of water was cool on my scraped fingers as the debris of fifty years floated to the top. The water drops sparkled on the cleaned pieces as I piled them back onto my shawl.

The treasure that had brought me questing to Sindhapur. I bundled it in the shawl and tied it into the waist of my *dhoti*. I had done as my grandfather had asked, but how was I to turn my great grandmother's treasure into a trade caravan?

Although it was empty, I pushed the pot back into the hole and covered it with earth. The sun was low, and birds were sweeping across the sky in evening flight.

Too late to make my way back to the city, I slurped water from the stream and splashed some on my sweaty body, munched almonds and apricots, then settled under the *asoka* tree, head on my bundle of clothing.

The next morning the rush of Sindhapur churned around me as I entered the bazaar. Vendors called to passers-by, singing out the delights of their wares, taunting their rivals. Pedestrians streamed past the stalls, bumping into my shoulders, knocking me off balance as I stood bewildered.

The smell of spices and frying bread drew me to the food stalls. I traded several cowrie shells for a ladle of roasted eggplant smeared between two *chapatti*. Tasty, but fiery with chilis. Upriver, our preparations were gentler. I chewed quickly, hunched over by a pile of mint leaves, anxious to find the cattle merchants and be on my way back to my grandfather.

“Nearer the river,” the vendor told me, grinding the leaves in a stone mortar with muscled arms out of proportion to his thin body. “You’ll hear them bawling before you get there. Such as there are.”

He dropped some chutney on the last of my *chapatti.*

“Come back for a real meal when you’re finished,” he grinned.

Indeed I heard and smelled the animals before I reached the pens. Two spotted goats, ears flopping over their faces, tended by a scrawny boy. A line of humped bullocks with sweeping horns, their noses in the hay spread on the ground, their watchful owners squatting nearby. A two-wheeled cart, sides of woven reeds, yoked to a single brown bullock.

This was what the Sindhapur bazaar had to offer?

I fingered the pouch of jewellery and silver pieces tied into my sash. One cart was better than none, I thought.

A young woman stood up from her stool.

“Young and healthy,” she said, patting the bullock on the flank. “He’s strong and pulls well.”

I held out my palm spread with some of the silver.

She tossed her head.

I fished more coins from the pouch.

“For such a noble animal?” she sniffed, sitting back on her stool.

“I have nothing left to offer,” I said.

It was either the silver bits she had rejected, or my great grandmother’s jewellery. A thick bangle worked into golden suns. An earring layered with clustered beads. Battered but meant to adorn a princess, too valuable to exchange for a bullock cart.

Bowing to the woman, I turned back into the market. I wandered until I found myself by the food vendor who had spooned chutney on my *chapatti*.

“No luck?” he asked, forearms bulging as he pounded a ball of *chapatti* dough.

“I’m looking for more than a single cart, or a few boney bullocks,” I said, stroking the pouch at my waist. “I have a whole caravan in mind.”

“Come back in the fall,” he said. “Cattle pens will be full. There’ll be plenty to choose from then. Another *chapatti*?”

“And a splash of your chutney,” I said. “What gives it that tang? Is it walnuts?”

“Your tongue is discerning,” he said. “Taste this mango drink as well. Cooling in the heat.”

He beat mint leaves into a bowl of liquid and passed the foaming mixture to me.

I shouldered my pack and trudged toward the river. Time to go home. No string of bullocks to please my grandfather, but his mother’s treasure safely at my waist.

The way was long, and I reeled from the heat, stubbing my toes on the hot bricks. The top of my head burned, my eyes ached in the glare. Passing through the gates, I caught the eye of my vendor friend, chatting by the wall. He grinned and gave me a cheeky wave when he saw me.

I approached the wharfs. The vendor's mango drink burned inside my stomach. I gagged and stumbled behind a stand of tamarisk trees, curling down on the ground with relief, my fingers clutching the pouch of shells and silver and jewellery.

I awoke suddenly in the dark, my heart thumping, my ears straining. I shrank back against the tree, watchful for danger. A frog chirped, the river lapped, a dove murmured, a peaceful night. Still uneasy, I gave into a looming headache and fell back asleep.

It was dawn when I woke again, damp from dew, but safe.

Shouts came from the rivermen poling into the current. I felt for my bargaining shells, ready to arrange for a boat to take me back up the river to Mendak.

The pouch was gone.

Unbelieving, I patted the folds of my *dhoti*, ran my hands over the ground where I had lain. I tugged open my clothing bundle and shook out my extra shawl and *dhoti.*

Nothing but a few of the shells I had brought with me from Mendak. not enough for my passage home.

The pouch had been secure at my waist when I fell asleep. The food vendor's face flashed in my mind. Had he followed me as I passed out of the city? I remembered his impudent wave.

Playing with me, planning his robbery as he spooned chutney on my food, tricking me into breaking my grandfather's trust.

I trudged once more into the city, determined to confront the vendor, but knowing there was little chance of getting back my gold. Needing time to pluck up my, courage, I traded some of my remaining shells for rounds of fried bread and a bowl of buttermilk. I gulped down my breakfast, shoved some in my pack for later, and, nodding to the elderly proprietor, pushed through the market to find the dishonest chutney grinder with the bulging forearms.

His stall was empty, the brazier cold, the stone chopping block scraped smooth. Of course, I thought. He would be curled up safely, gloating over his spoils.

“You’re looking for that scoundrel Biku?” a voice called, full and deep in the shrill market noise.

I glanced at the next stall.

A young woman, gold discs in her ear lobes and dark kohl ringing her eyes, smiled at me as she arranged sweets in neat mounds on a platform. Her slight body seemed incapable of producing such a rich voice.

“You spoke, my sister?” I asked, careful not to be bold.

“Not I,” she said, her voice light and clear, pointing behind her with her chin. “My mother.”

In the dimness of the stall, a straw mat swung to one side, and a woman swayed to the platform. Her hair was thick and black, her cheeks were plump, and her vast yellow skirt bulged over her stomach.

“Something to sit on, Vancha,” she ordered, then eased herself down on the cushion the young woman thrust beneath her.

“What’s Biku to you?” the older woman demanded, pushing her face toward me. her powerful voice turning heads in neighbouring stalls.

“Nothing,” I said, “but if he’s a scoundrel to you, he is to me too. He came in the night and robbed me of my great grandmother’s treasure.”

“There’s no point watching for him here,” the woman said. “He won’t dare show up in this place now.”

“He stole from you too?” I asked.

“He defied me,” she said, spreading her arms wide. “I am Monika. No one defies Monika without regretting it.”

She folded her arms, nostrils flaring. I waited.

“Tell him, Vancha,” she said. “I see he’s curious.”

The young woman smiled from behind her sweets display.

“Biku didn’t show up for work this morning and is nowhere to be found,” she said.

Monika interrupted, slapping her fist on her knee.

“Selfish. Ungrateful,” she said. “My own nephew. Not trustworthy. That smile of his is too much like a sneer.”

“My mother built the stall for him,” said Vancha. “We gave him cooking pots and a brazier and sent customers his way.”

“And charged him only a few shells a day,” said Monika.

“He’s not grateful, so let him go,” said Vancha, tossing her head so that the gold at her ears flashed. “There are others who’ll be glad to cook for you.”

Monika was silent. She stared ahead, lips quivering in her heavy face. She dabbed at her nose with the end of her shawl.

“Do you think it’s that easy?” she said, her voice reduced to a monotone. “How can I replace Biku? The flavour of his lentils filling the mouth like nobody else’s, his fried gourds, soft on the teeth like butter and chewy at the same time. And his buttermilk, so cooling, so peppery. No one has his skill.”

Vancha patted her mother's shoulder. I thought of the meals I had served up on trading trips through the mountains. A few days' cooking would earn me enough for my boat fare home.

"I'm willing to help you," I said. "I'm Harit, trained caravan cook."

Monika thrust out her arm.

"Listen, Harit, or whoever you are," she said, the strength of her voice restored. "I work to high standards. My reputation must be maintained. I won't hand over my booth to a market vagabond."

"I'm no vagabond," I protested. "I have a good bed and a roof in Mendak. I'm in Sindhapur on an errand for my grandfather, but usually I travel with Hamet the trader. He praises my cooking. Give me something to prepare and I'll show you."

"My pots aren't for you to touch," said Monika. "Nor my food for you to spoil. I have others I can call on."

Her rejection blotted out my flash of hope, leaving me friendless and impoverished in a strange city. I turned to the gate and the river track that led to Parini's *asoka* tree.

Hot and despondent, I sprawled among the fallen blossoms, running my fingers aimlessly over the disturbed earth where I had reburied the pot.

Somewhere nearby must be the remains of the hut where my grandfather had grown up. Across a small clearing an overgrown track led into the forest. I stepped carefully into the brush, nervous about snakes, and picked my way to another clearing and an ancient hut. Rickety, but with a solid doorframe stained with remnants of blue.

It was bright inside the hut, the sun burning through the broken roof onto the leaf-sprinkled floor. A crumpled mat, chewed into tatters by rats or other animals, lay in a corner. By one wall, a pile of old firewood tumbled on the floor. On another wall, a

brittle curtain which split when I pulled it aside. Behind was a shelf littered with broken pottery, two small jars standing untouched in the debris.

The jars were smooth against my palm, their red surfaces still lustrous under the grit. I tugged out the stone wedged in one of the openings. Inside was ginger root, dry and shrivelled but sweet smelling. From inside the other, the fragrance of cinnamon wafted up as I pulled away the stone. My mood lightened as I breathed in the sweetness and pungency of the spice.

An image took shape in my mind.

An offering to Monika. A perfectly cooked dish, passed from my hands to hers. Her nod of approval as she received it. My place in her food stall assured.

The ginger and the cinnamon had inspired me, but the few shells in my pack were not enough to trade for supplies. I sat outside in the weeds and chewed on the hardened bread left from my breakfast. I

thought through my resources. Ginger and cinnamon I had, and the rusted brazier overturned in the dirt was solid enough to hold a cooking fire.

And of course I had a cooking pot. I had almost forgotten. I scuffed through the weeds back to the *asoka* tree. The dirt where I had dug up Parini's treasure was still loose, and soon I hefted the old pot. A soak and a scrub in the nearby stream, and its great rounded sides sparkled in the sunlight, the swirling black lines precise despite the years in the ground. There were scratches on the surface, and the rim and base were chipped, but the inside was smooth on my finger tips.

I ripped up a patch of weeds and leveled the earth beneath. I turned the brazier upright, supporting its broken leg on a rock and balancing the pot on top. I carried the old wood from the hut and stacked it neatly to the side of the brazier. With loose bricks from the hut floor, I made a platform for the two small spice jars, then crouched back on my heels,

gazing at my little sunlit kitchen. I sighed with pleasure at the elegant scrolls on the pot, the gleaming red of the jars.

I had lost my great grandmother's gold and destroyed my grandfather's dream of having a rich trader for a grandson, but Parini had still provided for me. I had no idea what I could cook, but the sight of the pot poised over the brazier made me determined.

Harit, I said to myself, you can do this.

And then I realised Parini had bequeathed me even more. Mustard leaves. And *bathua* leaves. I had been treading over the ground between the tree and Parini's old cottage, barely noticing the frilled mustard with its tiny bottom lobes and the goose-foot shaped *bathua* nestled among the dusty leaves. I thought of Parini collecting greens and selling them in the market.

My handful of shells was meagre, but large enough for the extras I needed to make a dish to dazzle Monika. The cinnamon would be my secret ingredient.

I munched dried mango and roasted chickpeas and curled up under the *asoka* tree, thankful that my fevered night behind the tamarisk tree by the gate was in the past.

Before dawn, I walked to the city, and the sun was barely up by the time I had bargained for twists of sea salt and golden turmeric powder folded into leaf packets, a head of garlic, a small clay cup of ghee.

“This young fellow’s not going to make me rich,” the stall-keeper said to another customer, who was filling his servant’s basket with bulging hemp bags. “Are you sure you can carry such a heavy load?” he asked, grinning as I balanced the jar of ghee in one hand and tucked the other purchases into my sash.

I traded with a wood carver for a long-handled spoon, a potter for a small clay jar, a basket maker for a tiny straw basket with a curved handle.

At the food stand by the gate, I wheedled some glowing embers from the vendor's brazier and set them into the jar, then into the basket.

My kitchen was ready.

I followed the river back to Parini's clearing, and settled to my preparations.

Peeling off my garments down to my loincloth, I picked the burrs off the shawl and *dhoti*, scrubbed them in the stream and spread them in the sun. I gathered an armful of mustard and *bathua*, rinsed it in the stream and bundled the leaves to drain in my blue sash. I slipped the embers into the brazier with clumps of dry grass and chunks of wood, blowing until they glowed, my eyes smarting from the smoke. Cross-legged nearby so I could coax the fire along, I picked apart the ginger root I had found in the red

jar and shredded it with my finger nail. I peeled the garlic and ground it between two stones.

Without the proper tools, I worked slowly, but by early afternoon I was ready to set Parini's black and cream pot on the opening above the fire. Garlic and ginger sizzled in the ghee, tickling my nose and spattering the sides of the pot. I stirred the spoon vigorously, twisting away from the splashing fat, and swirling the vegetables into a fragrant mass. A last sprinkle of cinnamon, and the dish was ready. I breathed it in, its aroma wholesome and nourishing.

My clothes were clean and sun-fresh. Wrapping my body in the *dhoti* and the warm pot in my shawl, I hurried down the track to the river.

It was early evening by the time I reached the market. People clustered around the food stalls and lounged in the gardens of the nearby park, their heads bent over hunks of roast fowl and rich-smelling mixtures wrapped in chapatti. Vancha was

folding honey-smeared sweets into *sal* leaves and passing the packets to eager customers. The stall where Biku had chopped mint and plotted to cheat me was still dark.

Vancha ducked her head when she noticed me, then smiled, her eyes lowered.

“I have a gift for Monika-ji,” I said, clutching the shawl-wrapped pot to my abdomen, “if she’ll agree to receive it.”

“I’ll take it,” said Vancha, her voice as clear as I remembered it.

“If Monika-ji is here, I could present it myself,” I said.

The mat swayed and Monika hobbled toward me, her yellow skirt of the day before replaced by shimmering green. Breathing heavily, she sank onto her cushion.

“So, Harit, you’re back again,” she said. “What do you have for me?”

My moment had come.

“I’ve brought you a taste of my cooking,” I said.

I uncovered the pot and set it on the platform, watching Monika for her reaction.

“Still warm,” I said. “Mustard greens and *bhatua*, fresh-picked.”

I scooped vegetable into the bowl Vancha handed me. Monika tipped it from side to side, eying the silky green leaves and the golden sauce, her nostrils flaring at the fragrance. She placed a clump of the greens in her mouth, rolling her tongue and sucking in her cheeks, her eyes thoughtful.

“So, Harit,” she said, “You’ve done well. You’ve given it a richness. I can’t quite place the flavour.”

“Cinnamon,” I said, grinning at my success. “Just a sprinkle.”

Monika tipped her chin and nodded.

“It’s settled then,” she said. “You can take Biku’s place in the booth.”

Next morning, I began my career as market vendor.

And eventually, after several years of putting aside the shells I earned for my eggplant and mustard greens and spiced melon, as stall owner.

And as joint owner of the sweets stand, when Monika turned over her business to Vancha, and accepted me as her son-in-law.

The summer after we were married, Vancha and I travelled up the river to Mendak and my grandfather. Dhiren was still leaping and tumbling, his eyes fiery under towering white eyebrows, though his face sagged with wrinkles.

“I’ve brought you no trading caravan, Grandfather-ji,” I said. “I failed to carry out your request.”

“You lost my mother’s gold,” Dhiren said, “but no matter. You’ve done well in Sindhapur, and brought me a fine new granddaughter-in-law.”

Vancha smiled and bowed her head, the gold at her ears flashing in the sun.

“As I told you,” my grandfather said, “Parini was wise. After all, it was the old cooking pot she left that gave you your start. An old pot. More valuable than gold.”