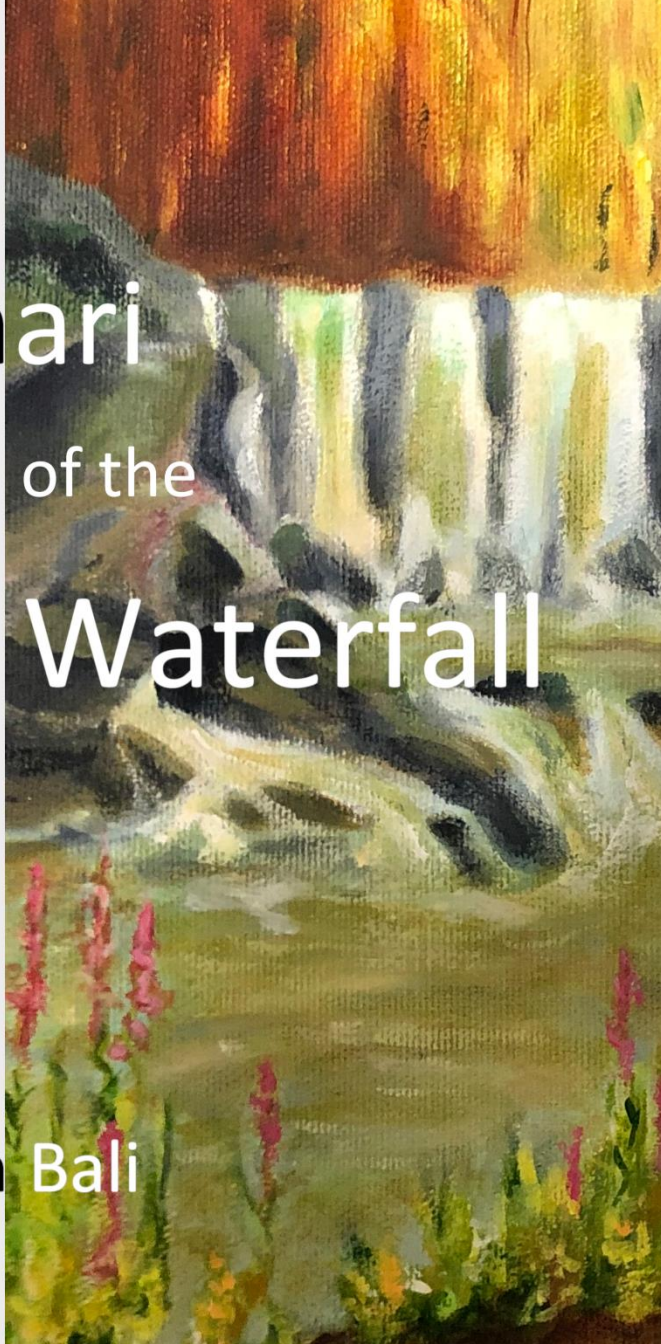
The Kumari of the Waterfall



Judith Bali

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1. An Ordinary Morning

I am Chandu of Sindhapur. I am a merchant in a merchant family, and sometimes I am a story teller. Stories can save lives and can lead to deaths, for stories have power. People flee from naked truth, but love truth when it is robed and jewelled and perfumed with the story teller's words.

This story begins in a clearing where I was chopping wood for Baba-ji's *ashram*. I straightened my back to rest, then stiffened at the twang of a bow behind me. A powerful tug at my ear threw me face down on the ground. A voice floated toward me.

"Oh no, Inder. You've hit him. Is he dead?"

I lifted my head, spitting out crumbled leaves and dirt, and pushed up with my arms to see behind me.

“He’s fine. Don’t turn everything into a drama, Mira,” said another voice.

With a final push, I stood up, facing the speaker, a boy with sinewy legs and a large curved bow in his hand. He was older than I was, for the hair on his upper lip was thick and his face dark with stubble. I felt awkward, angry at being hit and shy to confront him. I brushed twigs and leaf bits off the skin of my midriff.

A girl stood behind him. Ringlets of dark hair loose from her braid sprang behind her ears. Her nose arched between dark eyes, her face was round, her cheeks rosy. She smiled as if she had a secret that would please us both.

“There’s blood on you everywhere,” she said.

I grabbed at my arm, my shoulder, my neck. Blood dripped onto my hand.

Who were these people? Who was I to stand covered in blood before two strangers?

“It’s your ear,” the girl said.

I touched the edge of my cheek.

“My earring!” I cried, and stooped to the ground, scrabbling through the grass.

“Inder, you’ve shot his ear,” said the girl.

“Apologies,” said the boy.

I looked up at him from where I squatted on the ground. His face was thin, his cheeks hollow under high bones. My breath caught when I realized jewelled chains draped his thin chest and a silken

dhoti wrapped his waist. The quiver hanging at his shoulder was of chased gold, banded by a snake with ruby eyes. His legs were hard with muscle. It was no ordinary boy who had shot the earring off my ear. A son of a great house for sure.

My ear was pulsing with hurt. Even if he was powerful, he could have been more careful, I thought.

"I'm told there's a holy man nearby," he said. "Take us if you can. My sister and I will visit him."

"What's the name of the holy one you seek?" I asked.

Was he asking about Baba-ji's *ashram*, a short walk up the stream? What business would a lord of the cities have with a holy man who served tribespeople and litter bearers and a few friends like my parents?

“I see from your eyes you know who I mean,” said Inder. “Take us quickly. My sister’s had enough of sleeping under trees.”

His sister’s head jerked, but she was silent, draped in her silk and gold. I bent to tie up my bundle of sticks. The boy cleared his throat to protest, but his sister spoke first.

“Let him do his work,” she said.

Careful of my injured ear, where the blood had crusted, I heaved the bundle onto my shoulder, balancing it with one arm. My missing earring would have to stay lost until I made time to come back and search. I gestured toward the stream and started to walk.

“Now you move too quickly,” called the boy. “You’re forgetting our pack. It’s over there.” He swept his arm behind him.

I stopped and held up my free hand in protest. For a moment we stood still. I looked at them. They looked at me.

“I’ll get it,” said the girl. “I know where it is.”

The boy crossed his arms over his chest while we waited. When the girl returned, we set out again, this time with their sack dangling behind my shoulder from one end of the firewood.

I walked ahead, skirting the stream in silence, my feet moving in rhythm with the pounding of my ear lobe. I was angry with the boy for his haughtiness, with the girl for the sympathy she showed me, with myself for feeling inferior. I turned to ford the stream where the rocks clustered in a rough pathway.

“Be careful here. It’s slippery,” I said.

“It’d be easy for you to lead us astray,” Inder said. “You might have friends who like the look of gold.”

He stopped on the stream bank, his bow thrust ahead, eyes darting from side to side. I groped for words, but none came.

“Inder, it wasn’t his idea to lead us through the trees. It was ours,” said the girl. “Cross over the rocks.”

Fury pushed words into my mouth.

“I care nothing for your gold” I said. “I am Chandu son of the merchant Simi and the merchant Raju. You asked for my help, and I gave it freely. It’s up to you whether you take it.”

I walked away into the trees. I heard them help each other across the rocks and up the bank behind me.

When we reached the thatched huts in the clearing, Baba-ji was cross-legged on his verandah, his back against the wall, his hands draped over his knees. He rose as we came close, a delighted smile on his face, his tiny frame dwarfed by his staff and his knobby feet planted on the floor.

Inder bowed to the ground, then stood before Baba-ji, hands folded. His sister did the same.

“I am Inder, rightful king of Palwar, son of the great Basho,” he said. “I bring greetings from Chetu the litter bearer, who ran with you in the forest when you were children.”

“Welcome, Inder Raj,” said Baba-ji. “I remember Chetu.”

A king, I thought. No wonder he acted as if he owned the world. Baba-ji was unsurprised.

And who are you, daughter?" he asked.

"She's Mira, sister to the rightful king of Palwar," said Inder.

"Inder and Mira," said Baba-ji, "king and princess of Palwar. If you are here on my porch you must have a story to tell. Be seated and refresh yourselves."

He tipped his head toward the door where Anja-ma appeared, clutching the silky black hair that slid over her face as she passed through the low opening. She waited while Inder and Mira lowered themselves against the wall, then set a plate of dried fruit at their knees. She crouched by Baba-ji, straightening his shawl where it sagged over his shoulder.

I carried my load of firewood behind the hut and returned to the porch. Anja-ma stood with a jug of water.

“Chandu, you are needed,” said Baba-ji. “It seems our guests’ water jars are tied to your sticks.”

I fetched the bundle that had swung behind me all the way home. Anja-ma filled the jars unwrapped by Mira and then pressed me ahead of her through the door of the hut.

“What happened, Chandu?” she asked in the dimness of the tiny room, while she bathed the torn ear lobe and smeared it with ointment.

“That Inder Raj person shot me with an arrow, by accident I guess. My earring’s gone.”

I fingered my other ear, where a gold ornament still hung.

“The wound will heal, Chandu,” said Anja, knotting her hair behind her neck. “Your anger, too, in time.”

“Who are these people?” I asked.

“Baba-ji knows about them, I think,” she said. “The Palwari kings are friends with our city. If they feel safe here, I’m happy. It makes me feel safe too.”

Anja-ma worried about safety. She had been stolen by raiders when she was a child.

“They should be a little humble if they want help,” I said.

“Chandu,” said Anja-ma, “a king’s world is not yours. For a king, everyone is either an enemy or a servant. Kings learn arrogance first. Later they can learn humility.”

“Are we certain he’s really a king?” I asked.

We returned to the porch, where Baba-ji entertained his two guests.

“If a simple life is to your taste, you’ll be happy here,” he told them.

Anja-ma caught Baba-ji’s eye and tapped the side of her chin. Baba-ji’s forehead wrinkled, then smoothed in comprehension. He pulled at the beard that sprang to the side of his face.

Anja-ma shook her head and tapped the other side of her chin. Baba-ji felt across his face and removed a chunk of fruit caught in the hair. Anja-ma tipped her head in approval.

“We’re grateful for the shelter,” said Inder.

The quiet scene on the verandah erupted. Inder leaped to his feet, snatching bow and quiver from the wall where they leaned. He snapped an arrow to the bow and drew back his arm.

“Come no further,” he shouted. “or you commit sacrilege. This is a holy place.”

It was Ruk and Ganda he threatened, two tribespeople who approached the *ashram.*
They stopped at the clearing’s edge. Ruk’s hand hung fixed in the air on its way to pluck an arrow from his quiver.

“Peace, Inder Raj” commanded Baba-ji. “These men are my friends. Friends to you too. They’re of Chetu’s tribe. Chetu the litter bearer, who brought you here.”

In silence we watched Inder lower his bow.

“I regret if I’ve offended,’ he told Baba-ji. “In Palwar, we are suspicious of men who dress for war and approach with bows.”

I looked at the tribesmen as Inder and Mira must see them. Faces painted in jagged lines, hair bound back from their foreheads with sweat-stained bands, bodies muscular and naked except for ragged loincloths.

“Come closer, friends,” said Baba-ji. “Did they pay well for your honey?”

“Yes, Baba-ji. Many shells,” they answered together.

“Did they speak to you with respect?”

“Yes, Baba-ji,” they said, teeth flashing.

“You see, Inder Raj,” said Baba-ji, “when these two go into Sindhapur to trade, they leave their weapons outside, hidden in trees, so they can pass through the gate. So they paint themselves red and black and yellow and finger their bone necklaces, and few dare

to cheat them. What people see is what they think. Am I correct?"

"Yes, Baba-ji," said Inder

"So, Inder Raj," said Baba-ji. "Sometimes a king may learn from a tribesman. Do you agree?"

"Yes, Baba-ji," Inder said again, but his eyes turned away as he spoke.

2. An Old Story

Anja-ma took Mira off to bathe. They were easy with each other by the time they returned through the trees, chatting and smiling on the verandah, combing out each other's hair.

Inder and I were together for the rest of the day. He was silent, bow and golden quiver always in reach, eyes gliding from side to side as we walked to the bathing place. He stooped on the bank and sluiced water over himself while I splashed and floated in the stream.

“You should build a stairway here,” he said, pushing a toe through the water, “and call the stone workers to smooth the rock. In Palwar, we require it.”

I could have told him of the bathing pool in Sindhapur, the broad steps and lapping water, the sunny gardens, the cool pillared recesses, more beautiful surely than anything in Palwar. But I took pleasure in his ignorance. I cared not a bit that I knew nothing of Palwar except that it lay far to the northwest.

I scrubbed his silk *dhot*i along with my thin cotton – he expected it – and spread them on tamarisk bushes in the sun He sat on a rock, his knees drawn up, gazing at the forest until the cloths were dry enough to wind back on.

In the evening, he picked at his food. Mira ate steadily, then settled to sleep where the verandah had been curtained off for her. I devoured every

mouthful of *chapatti* and vegetable Anja-ma served out. While I scoured the cooking pot and carried wood to the stove for morning, Inder slumped against the lean-to where we had been sent to sleep. I spread bedding for both of us on the floor and curled up on my side.

“The gods be with you,” I said.

He made no reply.

My injured ear started to throb. I said nothing more.

In the morning I set out to fetch water.

“I’ll come with you,” said Mira when she saw me tying water jars to the pole. “Inder,” she called to her brother, once more slouched against the lean-to, “come with us.”

Inder shook his head and turned his face away.

“You’ll become weak, just sitting,” Mira said.

Inder pushed himself up, clutching his bow. I slung the water pole over my shoulder and led the way through the trees. Inder stalked behind, a warrior on alert. Mira walked beside me on the narrow path.

“Anja-ma says you’re a friend and you serve them from love,” she said.

“I never thought of it like that, but I guess it’s true,” I said.

“How do you think of it, then?” Mira asked.

“My parents sent me,” I said.

“Why?” she asked.

“My mother says Baba-ji’s so holy he forgets to eat or sleep if no-one reminds him,” I said.

“Can’t his wife do that?” asked Mira.

“I guess so, but my parents like to have me here safe and serving the gods. There are pirates on the coast threatening Sindhapuri ships. If the raiders come down the river, Sindhapur itself will be in danger.

Mira fell silent, stepping over the roots twisted across the path.

“Now you should tell why you’re here,” I said.

“We can’t,” she said, glancing back at Inder.

“Have you at least told Baba-ji?” I asked.

“A little,” she said.

“This is not your concern, water carrier,” said Inder.

“Inder, maybe he should know. Who can tell? He might help us,” said Mira.

Inder stopped in the path.

“Then listen, water boy or student or servant or whatever you are,” he said. “Here’s what I’ll tell you. Watch for strangers. Trust none of them. I’ll deal with them. Speak to no one about my sister and me.”

I hesitated for a moment.

“I should trust no one but I should trust you?” I asked him.

Anger flared in his eyes, but Mira dismissed it with a sweep of her hand.

“It’s like this,” she said, hands on her hips. “We’re the children of Basho Raj of Palwar. Our father died.

Our mother died. Probably Lal the counsellor killed them, which is sad, because he was my father's sworn protector from the time they were boys hunting eagles together. Or maybe his son Stana did it, but I hope not, because everyone says how brave Stana is."

"Enough," said Inder.

"I'm almost finished," said Mira. "We were afraid they'd do the same to Inder, so we gave gold to Chetu to help us escape. We're hoping Lal will think we're dead."

"Now you know our tale," said Inder. "Don't betray us"

"I pledged my help yesterday," I said. "I can't withdraw it now, even if I wanted to."

As we returned to Baba-ji's clearing, I heard the bustle of my parents' arrival from the city. Inder and Mira slipped into the lean-to.

First Onkar, my father's clerk, high-stepped backwards into view, gesturing to the line of drivers, even though after many trips they knew where to stack the sacks of grain and jars of oil unloaded from their donkeys' backs. Seeing Onkar's long sad face made me grin. So earnest about his duties, so tall and thin, so attentive to my parents. Folds of skin hung like jowls from his cheeks, unexpected on his slender body. Only a few years older than I was, but those few years meant he was a man and I was a boy.

"Careful, careful," he called to the drivers, clapping his hands to capture their attention.

Then came the litters.

First, my father. Two bearers supported his arms as he heaved himself to the ground. and tumbled against the cushioned stool brought from the litter. His white *dhoti* flaring, he pulled me close, the great wheel of his wheat-coloured turban hovering over me.

“The pirates?” I asked him.

“No news,” he said.

Onkar arranged pillows around him, then rushed to do the same for my mother.

“You know I don’t need to be carried in a litter like an invalid,” she said. “I suffer that stuffy ride just to humour your father.”

She rumpled my hair, bending my chin from side to side to study my face. I bore it for a moment before I pulled away. Her adoration was a burden

sometimes. She was so sure of my worth. What if I failed her?

She glanced at the bearers clustered beside her.

“Don’t be offended when I complain,” she told them. “But no one can make a litter ride as pleasant as a walk in the forest.”

“The truth, Simi-ji,” said my father, catching my mother’s eye, “is that you and I both are past the time for strolling through the trees. One root in the path, and we’d be flat on our backs on the ground.”

“You enjoy the fuss,” said my mother. “Cushions and rugs and helpful hands everywhere. And Onkar arranges it so well.”

Anja-ma and I brought water for the guests. I spread mats and we settled on the ground, gathered around my parents in their chairs. Baba-ji perched on the

edge of the verandah, his hair oiled flat against his scalp, his beard springing sideways.

“Go, Chandu, ask our guests in the lean-to to join us,” he said. “They’ll find only friends here.”

Inder and Mira folded themselves to the ground near Anja-ma.

“I think I must speak” said Baba-ji. “You all seem to expect it.”

“Yes, Baba-ji. Teach us,” a driver called out.

“You call me Manu Baba and wait for me to bring down the light of the gods,” said Baba-ji. “But I’ve told you many times. It’s inside you. Look deep and you’ll see the gods shining there. Right there, waiting behind the fog.”

No one stirred. All faces were raised to Baba-ji. He caught my father in his gaze.

“What is this fog, Merchant-ji, that hides the light inside you?”

“I don’t know, Manu Baba,” said my father.

“Onkar, do you know?” Baba-ji asked.

“No, Baba-ji. I wish to hear from you,” said Onkar.

At the sound of Onkar’s voice, Inder swung his head around, staring. For the first time, I saw curiosity in his eyes instead of anger or listlessness.

“I’ll tell you. Onkar,” said Baba-ji. “The fog is fear. Fear of pirates, fear of pain, fear of whatever you’re afraid of. Look beyond fear, Onkar. The light is there, beyond the fog of fear.”

Soon afterward, the drivers left, and my parents and Onkar settled in for a chat.

“Who are your new residents, Manu Baba?” my mother asked. “Is your home far away?” she asked Inder.

“You must answer now. It’s time,” Baba-ji said. “Tell us your story, Mira and Inder.”

Inder stiffened. Mira blinked. Both looked at me.

“We’re your friends,” said Anja-ma. “We’ll help if we know what’s troubling you.”

Inder stretched his arm toward the bearers relaxing against the litters.

“These men grew up with Chetu, whose greetings you brought when you arrived. If you trust Chetu, trust them also,” said Baba-ji.

“Our story is soon told,” said Inder. We’re orphans of the royal family of Palwar. My father the great king Basho being dead, my duty is to take up his throne. The counsellor Lal and his son want me gone so their family can rule. It’s a story old as time.”

Anja-ma drew Mira close and laid her hand on Inder’s shoulder.

“The world’s unjust,” said my mother.

“Too true,” said my father.

Baba-ji’s eyes were half closed.

“Inder,” I said. “You’ve left out the good bits. Let me tell it properly.”

My mother grinned at my father, who smiled back and shrugged.

“Yes,” said Onkar, “Chandu will phrase it well. The noble king, the evil counsellor, the courageous brother and sister…”

Inder’s head swivelled toward Onkar, and then to me.

“Tell it again if it gives you pleasure,” he said.

I stood on the packed earth before the verandah. I stamped the ground for attention.

“I shall recount a story,” I proclaimed to my audience gathered on steps, chairs and mats around me, “a story of greed, courage, honour and dishonour.”

I held my arms out to the audience, most of whom were grinning. Anja-ma’s face was serious, eyes fixed on me with anticipation.

“Continue, Chandu,” said my father. “Your mother and I must leave soon.”

I began, walking back and forth on my patch of earth.

“Long ago, in the distant land of Palwar, before the birth of Inder Raj and his sister the princess Mira, Basho the king, handsome and brave, with his great bow and golden quiver, walked in the mountain forest, in search of an eagle to grace his royal palace. He didn’t walk alone, for, as always, his dear friend and counsellor Lal kept pace with him.

“Through the trees, a high crag reared up where they knew two eaglets lay alone in their nest at the top. Basho had seen the parent eagle soar away.

“Today I’ll try,” Basho Raj said, and, handing his bow and golden quiver to his friend and counsellor Lal, crept handhold by handhold up the rock.”

I moved my hands and feet in the air like Basho on the rock.

“But, alas! As he tried to grasp a baby eagle…”

I paused. Onkar thudded a rhythm with a stone on my father’s brass water pot. I could hear breaths quickening around me.

“Basho over-balanced and disappeared with a loud cry from his companion’s view. What could Lal do? He laid down Basho’s bow and quiver and, just as Basho had, crept handhold by handhold up the rock…”

Again I demonstrated with my hands and feet.

“…and looked cautiously over the top.”

Onkar struck the stone on the pot.

“There was Basho, caught on a shelf of stone far down the other side of the crag. And not a part of him moved.

“Down the crag crawled Lal, squeezing his way like a caterpillar on a leaf, and up he crept again with Basho tied to his back by his *dhoti*. And down again to the other side, until he came to the place where he’d left the bow and quiver.

“By this time, Basho returned to his senses and shouted to be untied from his companion’s back. When he understood how Lal had endangered himself to save him, he thrust his bow and golden quiver on him as a reward.”

Onkar clanged two pots together, like a bell ringing through the clearing.

“I can’t take your bow and golden quiver,” said Lal. “This is a quiver for the shoulder of a king. But by

saving your life, I am pledged to watch over you always. I'll be a second quiver on your other shoulder. Whatever you need from me, you may take."

My father interrupted. "Stop for a moment, Chandu," he said. "You're making out this Lal to be a hero. Are your facts straight? Isn't he the one causing trouble?"

Mira answered his question.

"I don't know how he knows so well, Merchant-ji," she said, "but as he tells it, so it was."

"The story is as old as time, just as Inder Raj said," I explained. "It's often been told."

"Well done, Chandu, but we'll hear the rest another day," said my mother. "We must leave for Sindhapur now."

“I haven’t reached the real story yet,” I said.

“Leave us curious,” said Onkar. “That way, we’ll be eager to hear more.”

He looked at Inder and Mira, his mouth curved in a smile, a strange contrast to his heavy cheeks and long face. He hustled the bearers to the litters.

My father ruffled my hair and held me close.

“Take good care of my son, Anja,” my mother said, climbing heavily into the litter. “He’s my little boy.”

Anja-ma pushed her hair behind her ears and smiled, but her eyes were sad.

3. Courage Unnoticed

By day, Inder brooded beside the lean-to, ignoring me. By night, he went early to the old cot with sagging straps Anja-ma found for him, his back a quilt-wrapped barrier between us. Baba-ji and Anja-ma were patient. Mira was worried.

One morning, as I toted water back to Baba-ji's retreat, the pole wobbled under the extra load I had to carry for an ungrateful guest. I was enraged.

"This Inder treats the dirt under his feet better than me," I growled, menacing trees and sky with my fist.

I pounded home through the forest, determined to persuade Baba-ji to confront Inder. I rushed to the verandah as soon as I reached the clearing.

Baba-ji was not there. I had never gone up the step to his door uninvited, but now I did, giddy with boldness.

Anja-ma's voice trembled inside the hut. Curiosity held me, even though I knew I should step away. Anja-ma and Baba-ji with a life apart from caring for others? The possibility had never occurred to me.

"Only a child," said Anja-ma. "Just a child. Why is it denied to me? Every wife has a child. It's not the impossible I'm wishing for."

I could hear she was crying.

"Impossible, no," said Baba-ji. "What could be impossible for the gods?"

“Don’t talk about the gods,” said Anja-ma, “What do they care whether I have a child or not?”

“They know our desires,” said Baba-ji. “Only they know why they bestow, why they withhold. Receive what they give. Try not to grieve for what is not.”

“I’ll go to the waterfall, to the Kumari,’ said Anja-ma. “You don’t wish it, but you don’t forbid me. Perhaps the gods themselves have put it in my mind to seek her out.”

“Perhaps,” said Baba-ji.

There was resignation but no conviction in his voice.

I moved away before they found me listening.

On my way to store the clay water jars, I passed Mira and Inder. They sat under a dusty-leaved tree, Inder

oiling his bow, Mira brushing away midges before they stuck to the wood, attracted by the smell.

“My strength’s drying up, doing nothing but stringing and unstringing the bow,” Inder complained.

“Here’s Chandu,” said Mira. “Why don’t you teach him to shoot? For both your sakes.”

Inder stared ahead, as if he had not heard. Then he said, “It’s not fitting.”

“Why not?’ asked Mira.” You taught me, and no one teaches girls to shoot.”

“Our father was Basho, and our lives are dedicated to upholding his great name. Chandu’s father weighs bolts of cloth. It’s not the same thing.”

Once more, my chest swelled with anger.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” I said, walking on. “If by chance I acquire an interest in bows, Ruk of the forest will show me.”

Out of their hearing, I added, “If this is a king, may I never meet another one.”

In the evening, Anja-ma called me to her.

“Your ear heals well, which is good. Far away, beneath the waterfall, lives a woman,” she said. “The Kumari. Many believe she grants wishes. Be ready tomorrow to journey there.”

I folded my hands and bowed.

“I have news to please you,” I told Inder when I saw him. “You can sulk alone for a few days. I’m leaving.”

“Where?” Mira asked.

Inder turned his head away, but his eyes rose. He was interested.

I explained about the woman at the waterfall

“I want to come,” said Mira.

I shrugged.

“Ask Anja-ma,” I said.

Next morning, Inder left the lean-to after me, but raced past me to reach the verandah first. He made a challenge out of a simple walk to breakfast.

Ruk and Ganda, skin garments around their waists, arrived at the yard, raising their bows to Baba-ji when he stooped through the door onto the verandah. Inder slipped away and returned with his bow and quiver and a sack slung over his shoulder.

“Inder, put down your things,” said Baba-ji. “Your sister may go as Anja’s companion but your duty is to remain here. You’ve a throne to regain and an enemy to avoid. There’s danger for you in the forest. You don’t know how to hide yourself. Your every gesture is that of a king.”

Inder caught his breath and then relaxed.

“You’re correct, Baba-ji,” he said.

I smirked, pleased to see his wishes thwarted.

A donkey driver pushed through the trees into the clearing, followed by Onkar.

“Chandu’s mother sends comforts from Sindhapur for the travellers and my assistance to those who stay here,” said Onkar.

He handed Anja-ma pouches of sweets, nuts and dried fruit, and a package sealed with my father's tiger stamp.

"For the waterfall Kumari," he said. "A shawl."

With Onkar here," said Anja-ma, "I leave with a light heart."

Leaves glinted in the early sunlight, the stream whispered as we pushed along the rising ground. Ruk and Ganda scouted ahead and behind, bows at the ready. Oil gleamed on their shoulders and on their hair bound back with embroidered thongs. Anja-ma climbed the path with sure feet, balancing her bundle of blankets and food on her head with a graceful arm. Mira followed, stumbling sometimes, always cheerful, wrapped in her shawl to hide her face although we met no one. I scrambled to bend away branches and plant fronds that sprang back from the tribesmen's passage.

“Chandu, will you wish for anything from the Kumari?” Mira asked, at a place where the path was level and our breath was easy.

“There’s nothing I need,’ I said.

I had a wish, of course, for Inder to leave the *ashram* and disappear from my life, but that was too petty to lay before a holy person. And getting rid of Inder meant getting rid of Mira too.

“Can we ask for two things?” Mira asked Anja-ma. “I’ll ask for Inder’s kingdom back, and then, if she lets me, I’ll ask for something myself.”

“What?” I asked.

Mira looked at Anja-ma.

“It’s a secret,” she said.

“Ask as you see fit, but don’t anger her,” said Anja-ma. “Her wrath is to be feared.”

During the day we walked. At night we slept under the trees. Ruk and Ganda took turns tending the fire and watching for wild beasts.

One morning, the way was steeper than before, over rocks that scraped our knees as we crawled, and pebbles that clattered over the cliff sheering off to the side. The river seethed, the rock reared over us, slippery with damp moss on one side, sun-warmed on the other. We veered away from the water into the forest, crawling through the gloom over vines and rotted leaves, grasping roots to keep from slithering downhill.

“I’m beginning to wish we hadn’t come,” said Mira.

Then our world, reduced to slippery ground and the prick of thorns on our palms and knees, burst open.

Men appeared over a rise to the side. Ruk and Ganda sprang upright, arrows trained on the strangers.

“Peace!” called out one of the men, all three holding up empty hands, then clasping them together in greeting.

“Peace” they said, but they wore leather breast plates and helmets, with knives at their waists and bows at their shoulders.

“Approach no further,” Ruk called.

“We have business with you,” said one. “Let us sit together and speak.”

He moved to take a step. Ruk’s arms tensed. Ganda fixed his arrow on the other two.

“Perhaps you didn’t hear me,” the man shouted across the hillside. “We come in peace from Palwar. Give us the princess who is ours, and we’ll not trouble you.”

“We have nothing to give you,” Ruk called back. “Only our arrows.”

I stepped forward.
“Watch me and follow my lead,” I hissed to Mira and Anja-ma.
“I have an idea,” I muttered to Ruk.

Ruk stared hard at me, then raised his eyes in acceptance.

“Hold” he called to Ganda. “But be ready.”

The air wavered, my head swirled, but this was not the time to faint from fear. I held myself straight, breathed in, and swept a hand toward the armed

men from Palwar. Act like Inder, I thought, haughty, proud, relentless like the eagle his father tried to take. For a moment, I became Inder, and the power felt good.

“You are mistaken, men of Palwar, so I overlook your rudeness,” I intoned, like a king making a judgement in a great hall.

I gestured toward Anja-ma.

“This honest woman is no princess. She is a mother, grieving for this daughter sadly afflicted.”

Anja-ma and Mira huddled on the earth.

“It’s not the mother we want,” the man called out. “It’s the so-called daughter, wrapped in the shawl.”

He stepped toward her, then stiffened as an arrow shot past his head, the twang of Ganda's bow vibrating in the air.

Mira wailed and collapsed on the ground. "Mother!" she cried. "Demons! Don't let them take me."

She writhed in the dirt, hidden by her shawl. She shrieked again, making my head pulse, even though I knew her performance was a sham. At least I hoped so. Anja-ma gripped her shoulders. Ganda's eyes flickered once toward Mira, but Ruk's focussed only on the soldiers from Palwar.

"Men of Palwar," I said, "you disgrace your master, whoever he may be. Did he send you to torment a helpless girl?"

They looked at each other, uncertain whether they had blundered. I stared at them, my glance swelling

like a thundercloud, flashing like lightning. I willed them to leave, but still they stood.

Anja-ma bounded up, pulling Mira with her.

“Don’t leave,” she shouted to the men, over Mira’s screams. She stumbled uphill toward them, hauling Mira behind. They drew back.

“Take her,’ she cried. “Why not? She was meant for the Kumari at the waterfall. You might as well have her instead. I don’t want her and that’s a fact.”

She ripped off the shawl and thrust Mira away from her. We all gasped, even Ruk.

Mira snarled, teeth bared, chin pushed forward. Her face was smeared with blood and dirt, muck dripped from her nose, the side of her mouth, the corner of an eye.

“No, no,” screamed Mira.

“Take her,” screamed Anja-ma.

Ruk and Ganda struggled to control their shock, to hold their bows steady. The men from Palwar folded their hands and bowed to me, and sprinted away down the slope.

I sank to the ground, my body shaking. Mira and Anja-ma still screamed at each other. Ruk and Ganda swept their eyes from side to side.

The shrieks faltered and turned into giggles.

“Are they gone for good?” asked Mira, “because I can’t bear this stuff dripping over me any longer.”

“They won’t return soon,” said Ruk. “They fear the demon.”

Ruk and Ganda stood close by me, well away from Mira.

“We’ll soon turn back to the stream, won’t we, Ruk,” asked Anja-ma. “Mira’s no demon. When she’s clean again, you’ll see it was a trick.”

“The princess is no demon, but demons are dangerous,’ said Ruk, without looking at Anja-ma. “It’s unwise to trick with them.”

We rested, leaning against pine trunks and chewing dried apricots. Mira was filthy. She wiped her face with a dirty hand and opened her mouth for Anja-ma to feed her.

“That worked well,” said Mira. “You gave me the idea, Chandu,” she told me, “saying I was an ‘afflicted daughter’. Those were Lal’s men, for sure,” she continued. “I’ve seen them in the palace. But I

knew they wouldn't recognize me if I was ugly. In Palwar, they say I'm beautiful."

"Well done, Mira," said Anja-ma. "If not for your courage we might all be under guard on our way to Palwar."

'But it was my idea," I cried. "They were already leaving before Mira jumped up."

"Yes, Chandu," said Anja-ma, "well done, both of you. And Ruk and Ganda, too, of course."

Ruk caught my eye and shrugged.

"They take your courage for granted," he murmured. "That's higher praise."

"How did you make all the blood, Mira?" asked Anja-ma.

“I stuck my finger with my skirt pin,” said Mira, holding out her hand. “I had to scream to make myself do it. Now it hurts.”

“That shawl has proved itself,” said Anja-ma. “I was right beside you, and hardly knew what you were doing, hidden underneath.”

Ruk and Ganda led us to the stream where it flowed broad and calm. We rested on sun-warmed rocks while Mira washed off blood and dirt. She kept her face hidden behind her shawl. Once Lal’s men reflected, they would come after us again.

4. Three Wishes

"Tie your packs on your backs," said Ruk the next morning. "You'll need both your hands. The rest of the way, we climb, not walk."

The grass above the hissing water thinned, then disappeared. Rock sloped upward. We scrambled in an awkward squat, sometimes on hands and knees. Spray from swirling water stung scrapes and dripped through the sweat on my forehead, burning my eyes. The pounding of the water grew louder until, around a bend, we saw the waterfall. Two waterfalls, really, for a spur of rock and trees thrusting up from the river divided the flow. One rushed from above in a thick torrent, crashing into the river ahead of us veiled in glittering spray, and, closer to us, a ribbon

of water like silk, grey in the forest's shadow, fell to the rocky point halfway down the rock face to spill out in a gleaming sheet to the river beneath.

Ruk pointed to the rock between the two falls.

"The Kumari's pool," he said.

The way to the pool was almost vertical.

Ruk gestured for me to go first. My arms ached as I hauled myself up, while Ruk steadied me from below. Anya-ma's and Mira's heads jerked over the lip of rock after me. We stood on a grassy hollow by the pool.

"Is this it?" asked Mira.

Anja-ma tipped her head yes.

"What's taking Ruk and Ganda so long?" Mira asked.

I looked down to where Ruk and Ganda squatted watching the river.

“They won’t come here,” Anya-ma said. “They fear the Kumari’s power. But they’ll wait for us.”

The pool lay in a huge stone dish. The water was clear except at the edge which was green with algae, the bottom was smooth, sprinkled with bits of metal and jewellery. Water dropped from a rock ledge protruding from the cliff above, and from another ledge higher up, and another higher still. The ledges had been hollowed, shaped into basins, figures of fish cut into their rounded sides. Inder should be here, I thought, to see what Sindhapuri stone workers could create. Like steps the basins supported the silver fall of water into the pool, where it brimmed over into the river below.

A few strides could have taken us across the stepping stones to the spit of stone and gravel and the cliff

face behind it that separated the pool from the main flow of the river.
“Wait,” said Anja-ma, holding out her arms to the a red-painted rock at the base of the cliff. “Leave the Kumari’s shelter to the Kumari.”

Of the Kumari herself there was no sign.

Anja-ma knelt by the pool, tossing a silver piece through the surface. We watched it settle on the bottom among the others. She drew a bundle from her pack, taking out a flat grass basket, packets of food, and the package Onkar had given her for the Kumari. She broke the tiger seal, lifting a length of shimmering fabric, green like leaves, silver like the waterfall, billowing in her arms. She gathered it into folds and laid it in the basket, so soft and fine there was space for the apricots, almonds, salt and grain she arranged on leaves. She folded a cloth threaded with gold over the top and set the basket on the

stone edge of the basin. Her legs folded, her back straight, she settled before it, saying nothing.

Mira and I sat away from her, where the grass was giving way to the undergrowth of the forest. Water birds swooped up, black against the sky, and dove squealing into the river below. But nothing moved by the red rock between the waterfalls

A scattering of twisted trees angled out from the hump of cliff behind the rocks. A golden monkey sprang from a branch onto the stone. As he leaped, his eyes studied us from a black face, the long hairs of his coat shimmered in the air like sunlight. A squirrel darted along the branch. The monkey chattered a warning, and the squirrel scurried back through the leaves.

We watched and waited, while Anja-ma sat on by her basket.

“Are we supposed to do something?” whispered Mira.

“Anja-ma knows,” I whispered back.

Ruk shouldered himself over the lower cliff, catching Anja-ma’s eye.

“It’s fine,” she said. “Go back with Ganda, where you’re comfortable.”

He slipped back over the cliff.

The monkey pulled at a leaf, birds called, we waited.

Anja’s voice rose from deep within her, calling across the pool.

“Respected Kumari, I call to you. I, Anja of Manu’s hermitage, call to you. Grant the boon of your presence, Kumari of the waterfall.”

I watched the rock. No one came. The monkey leaped to the tree branch and swung by an arm, light dancing in his golden fur.

“Respected Kumari, it is Anja who calls. In your great compassion appear before me. I am Anja, who has need of you. Come, Kumari of the waterfall.”

I watched, and still no one came.

Then Mira pushed my arm.

“Chandu, look,” she whispered, pointing.

Somehow, perhaps when I blinked, the Kumari had taken shape beside the red rock. She moved to the edge of the rocky point, raising her hands in blessing.

She was tiny, her body old but her face smooth. Black eyebrows joined above her nose, overhanging her eyes, and black hair, sparse and lank, straggled

over her shoulders. Where it lay thin on the crown of her head, it was dyed red, the scalp beneath red, too. Her skirt, green like emeralds, shifted in the breeze.

Anja-ma's head jerked. She too had seen the Kumari.

The Kumari's voice was thin like her hair and shrill, but her words were clear.

"Something you wish is in your heart, if you have come so far to disturb my monkey," she said. "What do you need?"

"Respected Kumari, grant that I may feel the weight of a child in my arms," Anja-ma called across the water. "Grant that I may rest my face on my child's head, that I will feel the pull of my child's tiny fingers on a strand of my hair."

We waited. The air was still where we sat but moved near the Kumari, swaying her skirt.

The Kumari spoke.

“If this boon should come to you, are you prepared to pay the price?” she asked.

“Whatever you ask, I’ll strive to give you,” said Anja-ma.

She held the basket of offerings toward the Kumari.

“Take these as a token, if you will. More will follow.”

“Cloth and food I have in plenty. This is not the price I speak of,” said the Kumari. “What you offer I accept for your sake, knowing that the giver is blessed.”

Anja-ma replaced the basket on the ground.

“The price I speak of is not a basket passed across the water. There’s a price that will appear one day when you don’t expect it, and you must pay. Are you prepared?” the Kumari asked again.

I was uneasy. What was the price the Kumari could not name? What horror lurked behind her fluttering skirt and golden monkey?

“If the gods grant me a child, I’ll give them gladly whatever they choose,” said Anja-ma.

“Go in peace, Anja of the hermitage,” said the Kumari. “And what of your companions?”

The monkey scuttled across the pebbles and up the Kumari’s arm to settle on her shoulder.

“Mira,” said Anja-ma, “you have something to ask.”

Mira crept forward, touched her head to the ground, and raised her eyes. Her shawl fell to her shoulders and her face shone in the sun, her cheeks burning with agitation.

“Respected Kumari,” she said. “My brother Inder, born to be king, fled for his life from Lal the usurper. If you grant him back his throne, he’ll rule justly and honour our dead father.”

“You look to the welfare of your brother,” said the Kumari in her quavery voice, her face round and smooth like Mira’s, her arms wrinkled. “But the brother must come himself to ask his questions.”

“But it’s dangerous for him,” said Mira.

“It’s more dangerous to make wishes for another. How can you know the secrets of his heart? Let him come himself.”

Mira folded her hands and bowed, but her shoulders were stiff. She struggled to hold her tongue.

“Now you,” said the Kumari, “with hair springing free like the fur of this monkey, you can make a wish. Toss an offering to the goddess and ask.”

Anja-ma passed Mira a silver piece to throw into the water. The monkey combed through the Kumari’s hair with a spidery hand.

Mira glanced at Anja-ma and at me.

“Respected Kumari,” she began again, “Mira of Palwar, a young girl and an orphan, protected only by a brother who is brave but young, turns to you in distress. Perform for me the task, O Kumari, that my departed parents can no longer do.”

The Kumari said nothing. The monkey picked at its fur. Mira sucked in breath through her open mouth, then muttered the rest so I had to strain to hear.

“Respected Kumari,” she said, “find me a prince, a brave warrior with a curling moustache, who can hunt and play at dice with my brother.”

The heat fell from my body, leaving me shivering, then pumped back burning, pounding in my head.

How foolish! How petty! How pointless! One wish, and she wasted it. Young and handsome princes were not hard to find. At, least for someone like Mira. Any one of them would rejoice to receive the wedding garland from Mira.

The world was full of princes, but there was only one Chandu son of Simi and Raju the merchants. Mira should have more understanding.

“A prince with a curling moustache,” said the Kumari. “Are you prepared to pay the price that comes one day all unexpected?”

“Can’t I know what it is, this price?” asked Mira.

“You can’t know until you have paid it,” said the Kumari.

Mira thought for a moment.

“If the price isn’t higher than I have to offer, I am prepared,” she said.

“Nothing is asked you can’t give,” the Kumari said”.

She stroked the monkey’s back. The monkey slid from her shoulder and, swinging across the twisted trees on the cliff above the Kumari’s rock, darted to Anja-ma’s offering basket. He snatched an apricot

from under the cloth and crouched between Anja-ma and Mira, gnawing the fruit.

“The boy hasn’t spoken yet,” said the Kumari, facing me with her tumbling eyebrows and red-smeared forehead.

I was wary of the cost she kept warning about.

Anja-ma held out a piece of silver. Mira shifted to make room for me at the pool’s edge.

“Put that away,” said the Kumari to Anja-ma. “It’s not silver he lacks. It’s courage he needs to offer.”

My eyes fastened on the ground, my tongue was stiff. The moustachioed prince waiting somewhere for Mira would be bursting with courage, probably.

“You must have the courage to take what is yours, when it’s just,” said the Kumari. “Now, hold your courage in both your hands and ask.”

A wish tumbled out of my mouth.

“I want to end the pirate raids off the coast,” I said. “I want to finish them once and for all.”

The Kumari nodded and smiled.

“Are you prepared to pay the price?” she asked.

“I must,” I replied.

“Go in peace,” said the Kumari. “What will happen will happen.”

The three of us bowed and slipped over the cliff where Ruk and Ganda waited.

“Don’t worry, Chandu. She didn’t mean you were a coward. You’re just cautious,” said Mira.

“Why should I trust what you think?” I blurted out. “You don’t care what a person is really like.”

Mira’s face was shocked. She had meant well. I was too bruised inside to worry about her feelings.

“All you see is the hair on a person’s face. You’re not even interested in what’s underneath,” I said.

“You should have asked the Kumari to thicken that hair above your lip, little Chandu,” said Mira. “Then maybe you’d grow up.”

I stalked off ahead. Ruk and Ganda averted their eyes. Anja-ma was lost inside herself. I was relieved the squabble had passed her by. She favoured me, or had until Mira came. I wanted to keep her good opinion.

Ruk stopped, turning to face the rest of us.

“Anja-ma, we have things to discuss,” he said.

Anja-ma said nothing.

“We must speak of our journey back,” said Ruk.

Mira grasped Anja-ma’s arm.

“Yes, our journey back,” said Anja-ma after a moment, with a shake of her head.

“The Palwaris may still be suspicious, stalk us to Baba-ji’s sanctuary and the rightful king,” said Ruk.

“Then we mustn’t go there,” said Mira.

“We’ll take you to our people,” Ruk said. “Let the Palwaris follow. We’ll teach them again if we have to that they can’t take from us.”

He gestured to Mira to cover her face.

“Take us there,” said Anja-ma.

5. A Father's Love

Four days we stayed in the forest village. The tribespeople welcomed us as friends of Baba-ji. If they knew Mira was a princess of Palwar, they hid it well. Perhaps Lal's Palwaris lurked in the trees, but men with arrows kept us safe.

Mira, Anja-ma and I helped slice and spread vegetables to dry in the sun. At first the women giggled at a boy of hunting age working with women, but by morning's end they lost their nervousness and scolded and teased me just as they did the girls.

"Chandu, Chandu," they chanted, "Sorts the seeds and grinds the flour, kneads the dough and spins the

yarn. When he's husband, perhaps he'll suckle the child."

Anja-ma and Mira watched me, unsure of my reaction. The women slapped their knees in laughter. I grinned, not minding their joking. They said worse to each other.

In the afternoon, I sat with the old men under the banyan tree near the stream. Their tales were long. Sindhapur, city of broad walks, flowered pools, and crafty merchants (they shrugged when they realised my parents were two of them) appeared in their stories, as did the land of Palwar, Inder's and Mira's stone city far along the coast. Ruk's people struggled there yearly over rock and dry brush, carrying sweet-smelling oils and barks from the forest and bringing back copper torn from the Palwari rocks for the merchants of Sindhapur.

I thought of Chetu the litter-bearer, who had risked his well-being to bring Inder and Mira out of Palwar to Baba-ji.

“We’ve heard of a litter bearer from Palwar who knows this forest,” I said. “Chetu is his name.”

The little group rustled with interest. One man barked with laughter, his lips stretched wide over gap-toothed gums.

“By the gods, by the gods,” he said. “You saw our Chetu-ji. You’re sitting now in the exact place where Chetu-ji used to sit. He’s a good boy, though he should come more often to touch his father’s feet.”

He gestured toward a man with a wiry white beard springing out below his lips in two sweeps.

“My son is well?” asked the bearded man.

“I think he is well,” I said. “Mira can tell you more. She travelled with him on the river.”

“He always liked the cities,” said Chetu’s father. “I took him to Palwar. I carried a load of skins on my head and him on my shoulders, he was so small. If I’d left him at home, maybe he’d still be here.”

The old men slurped water from clay jars and said nothing while he calmed himself.

“A respected city it was once – Palwar,” said the first man. “But not since the great Basho died.”

“His son’s a boy,” said Chetu’s father. “A boy king’s only as good as his counsellors.”

I was glad Mira was across the village out of hearing.

“His mother’s dead,” I said.

“Then, Chandu my friend, that leaves the power in Lal’s hands,” said the first man. “The gods be praised we don’t live in the kingdom of Palwar.

Then the hunters returned in ones and twos, a deer slung from a pole, a sack of barley, a sack of peas, a red-combed jungle fowl in a woven cage. Hunted, traded or stolen, I was not sure which . The children bounded around each arrival, shouts of excitement fading into the trees. The Palwaris were near, the hunters said, but unseen.

At night, the villagers gathered round the fire. In the dark, a drum thumped, sticks clicked, and people danced, arms swinging, toes pressing into the ground like agile fingers.

On the fifth day, Anja-ma, her hair roughened and her skirt tied short above her calves, set out early with two women to visit their sister, a maid in the ferryman’s house down the river. Mira left later, in a

group of women on their way to gather fruit from the jujube trees upriver from the ferry. I travelled with a group of boys carrying nets to a shallow place even further up the river. After a few days of wading they hoped to have a supply of *palla* fish to dry for the village. The guards from Palwar did not appear, but who knew from what secret places they watched us.

Protected by the shadows of dusk, I left the boys making camp and slouched by a tree at the riverside until I heard the drip of water from paddles, faint above the river's murmur. A small boat, Anja-ma and Mira already seated there, drew to the shore. I stepped in and crouched down quickly, to still the sloppy shift of the bottom. The boatman pulled away up the river to the *ashram*, confident even in the darkness.

Ruk and Ganda met us where the stream joined the river. We stumbled on foot for the last part of our

journey, no lamp to guide us or give us away. At the *ashram* at last, I fell asleep on my mat, feet unwashed.

Inder and Baba-ji were on their own. Onkar had returned to his duties in Sindhapur. Inder offered no welcome back or questions about the Kumari. I decided to ignore his surliness. Maybe that was what the Kumari meant by courage.

“If the Palwari guards find you, what will they do to you?” I asked him.

“What is there to explain?” replied Inder. “Lal is my enemy.”

Baba-ji had sent word to my parents, and at mid-morning their litters appeared through the trees, Onkar bowing them into the clearing with a graceful sweep of his arm. Onkar folded his hands to me and

to Mira, his eyes searching until Inder approached. The two exchanged solemn bows.

My father heaved himself to the ground and into the carved seat Onkar unfolded beneath him. My mother bowed and settled onto hers, solid and dependable as the earth.

“I agree to the litter because Onkar insists,” she said, as she did every time. “I’d be much better walking.”

I struggled to keep my balance as she crushed me against her.

“Tell us of the Kumari,” Onkar said when water had been brought. “Baba-ji’s patient, but Inder Raj and I are waiting to hear. Is her smile as young as they say?”

“Her face is smooth and her monkey has a black face and golden fur,” said Mira. “She spoke a lot about the price we’ll have to pay.”

“These holy people hide behind waterfalls and such and wait for us to bring them riches,”’ said Inder. His face was sheepish as he glanced at Baba-ji, a holy person too.

“No, Inder,” said Mira, “not paying a price to her. Paying to life or the gods or something. She almost promised to help you against Lal if you go and ask her yourself.”

Inder stood up and slammed his palm over his heart.

“Better I should go against Lal the usurper with my bow and an army,” said Inder.

“Well said, Inder Raj,” said Onkar, “but take help where you can. What else did the Kumari say?” he asked.

“We were the ones who spoke,” said Mira.

“We asked. She listened,” said Anja-ma. “You have a dutiful son,” she told my parents. “Chandu thought of you when he made his wish.

My mother smiled, her eyes closed in contentment. My father patted my hand.

“He asked the Kumari for an end to your pirates,” continued Anja-ma.

“More than that,” said Mira. “He said he wanted to put an end to them himself.”

“Chandu,” said Onkar, his long face solemn “leave the pirates to Inder with his bow. We work for a

merchant house, you and I. We keep people fed and clothed and happy. We're not meant for battle. Don't frighten your parents with talk of fighting."

Inder turned to hide the smirk on his face.

"Inder and Chandu both will do as the gods direct them," said Baba-ji, "as we all must. But the gods are not always quick to reveal their wishes."

He looked at Anja-ma as he spoke.

I wished I could follow Onkar's advice and leave the danger to Inder. But I had given my wish to the Kumari.

"Chandu," said Onkar," my drum is here to accompany you. We're awaiting the rest of 'The Orphans of Palwar.'"

"If Inder and Mira agree," I said.

“He can tell it,” said Inder. “It’s not my wish to be a story teller.”

Onkar settled his drum at his knees.

I closed my eyes, taking on my role. I bent low, then leaped up, arms outstretched. I snatched a stick from the pile by the porch and waved it in the air. I began to speak.

“I have already recounted how the great king Basho risked his life to search for an eagle, and how his friend and servant Lal refused Basho’s golden quiver and pledged eternal faith to Basho.”

I bowed to Inder and Mira, Onkar tapped a hollow tone on the drum, Mira slipped the stick out of my hand and returned it with leaves twined round the end, a makeshift story-teller’s staff.

Onkar tapped the drum again, finishing in a graceful sweep of his hand.

“Now Lal,” I said, “true to his word, served Basho loyally for many years. When Basho sat in the great hall, his feet on cushions, his hands on the lion-claw arms of his throne, his golden quiver at his shoulder, there stood Lal the wise behind his other shoulder, nodding approval at every decision. When Basho, decked with gold, rose to receive tribute, there stood Lal the watchful, his hand in readiness on an arrow in his plain wooden quiver. When Basho sat in the royal pavilion watching dust-stained champions wrestle in competition …”

I paused for a drum flourish from Onkar.

“…there was Lal the efficient murmuring the names of the contestants in Basho’s ear when he forgot.

“Lal’s life was Basho’s, and no king had a better servant, and no servant had a better king. Until…”

I leaned over the audience and shook my leafy stick. Deep thumps came from Onkar’s drum.

“Until,” I continued, “Lal began to notice Basho’s son.”

I waved my stick toward Inder. Onkar’s fingers rapped a light-hearted rhythm.

“For while Basho was judging in his great hall, receiving tribute, and cheering on wrestlers, and Lal was being wise and watchful and efficient, their two sons were growing bigger. Basho’s son was Inder, small, wiry…”

Inder’s face hardened.

“…and a great archer.”

Inder nodded once and folded his arms.

“Lal’s son Stana,” I continued, “was tall and handsome with a curled moustache.”

I knew I had described Stana correctly when Mira looked away.

“It was Stana’s great sadness,” I said, “that however many archery teachers his father brought, Stana could never surpass Inder in his skill.

“‘Why should Inder shoot better than I?’ Stana complained to Lal his father almost every day. ‘I’m bigger, my nose has a nobler line, my body’s stronger. I’m really a better shot than he is, too. Watch me.’

“Then he shot seven arrows one after the other, and every arrow hit the target.

"'Well done," said Lal, pleased with his son's skill.

"Now Basho's son stood before the target and shot seven arrows. Each hit the target snug against one of Stana's.

"'Well done,' said Lal, but inside, he was not so pleased."

Onkar thumped the drum seven times, and Mira grinned at Inder. I continued the tale.

"Stana shot five arrows at five stuffed birds, and hit each in the painted eye.

"'Well done,' said Lal, proud of his son.

"Basho's son shot five arrows at one stuffed bird, and his arrows formed a circle around the painted eye.

“‘Well done,’ said Lal, smiling, but angry within.”

Onkar thumped five times.

“Stana shot arrows, one, two, three, through a golden ring swinging from a cord.

“‘Well done,’ said Lal, embracing his son.

“Basho’s son bound a cloth over his eyes and, feeling the breeze and hearing the swish of the cord through the leaves, shot arrows one, two, three, through the golden ring.

“‘Well done,’ said Lal, his arms around Basho’s son but his heart cold with rage, for Lal, faithful servant of his king, was a slave to his son Stana . And Stana was unhappy.”

Onkar clanged a stone on the side of the drum three times.

"'It's always Inder who stands in my way,' said Stana to his father. "He's the king's son. He does nothing and has everything. I'm your son. What have you given me?'"

"Lal the faithful wept at his son's unhappiness.

"'I promised to serve Basho with all my heart,' he thought, 'but I made no such promise to his son. I have no duty toward this Inder, who insults my son by besting him.'"

My voice was tiring, and my father kept glancing at the sinking sun, anxious to return to the city. I bowed, shaking the story-telling stick over the audience.

"This ends the second part of the orphan's tale," I said. "Another day I'll tell more."

Onkar drummed a final flourish.

“Well done. You glow when you tell a story,” my mother said.

“And your face glows as you watch him,” my father told my mother.

Inder leaped to his feet, raising his clenched fist.

“How do you know the details of my shame?” he growled. “Does the whole world talk of it, that I the son of a great father have been bested by the usurper?”

“This story’s not yours alone,” I said. “It’s been lived many times. Stories lie everywhere waiting to be clothed.”

“Inder Raj,” said Onkar, “each of us in this clearing knows you for a young man of courage. Be glad you had the wisdom to remove yourself from danger.”

Inder's eyes were bright as he gazed back at Onkar.

"No, the story teller has made it clear," he said. "Lal must be brought down. If this woman at the waterfall can help, it's not for me to refuse. I'll go to her tomorrow."

6. Message from Lal

Baba-ji insisted on a few days' wait before Inder's journey to the Kumari.

"If your heart is set on going, Inder Raj, then go. But Ruk and Ganda must go with you, and they can't be spared from their village so soon. And we have work for you here at the *ashram*."

At the edge of the clearing was a rough stretch of thorn bush and scrub. My father wanted to build a hut there for guests to the *ashram.* If Inder was still here when it was finished, I would have my lean-to to myself once again.

Baba-ji sent me with an axe and a knife to clear the patch.

“Work with Chandu at the building site,” he told Inder, who was in his usual slouch against the lean-to wall, waxing his loosened bowstring. “You’ll be safe there, and a good sweat will improve your spirits.”

Inder stiffened at the word “safe”, then stood up. I found tools and handed them to him, but he waved them away and stalked ahead to the site, leaving me to carry for both of us.

“You’re wasting time,” he told me, after watching me work, “cutting off branches one by one, like a barber trimming the hair of some dandy. Do the job properly. Go straight to the trunk and hack it through.”

“You do it your way, I’ll do it mine,” I said.

If Inder thinks he knows everything, then why should I care, I thought. I worked in a haze of heat, bundling up wood good for burning, and carrying the brush and hacked-up roots into the forest. Inder's pile of wood was meagre and jagged.

Baba-ji came with a jar of water when the midday sun scorched our backs.

Inder was pulling on a knob of root. It came loose, and he landed hard on the ground. I kept my laughter to myself. Baba-ji stretched out an arm to help him up.

"By the gods, how have you hurt yourself?" he exclaimed.

Inder's shoulders and back were scratched and clotted with dried blood.

“You’ve not been careful of the thorns, Inder Raj,” he said. “This is your responsibility, Chandu. You should have guided him.”

“Baba-ji, he didn’t want my help,” I said.

Inder pinned me with his eyes, his chest heaving.

“I learn on my own, Baba-ji,” he said.

Anja-ma cleaned his wounds.

“You’ve done enough for one day,” she told him. “Chandu can work on his own this afternoon.”

“I’ll finish what I started,” Inder said. “The sooner the site is cleared, the sooner I go to the waterfall.”

“There’s a condition,” said Baba-ji. “Continue if you wish, but Chandu will show you how to avoid the thorns.”

I kept my face expressionless but my heart sang. I knew Inder burned inside.

“You know about thorns,” said Inder as we trudged to the work place, “but in Palwar I’ll have an army to command. A wise ruler doesn’t bother with little tasks. He gives them to the little people.”

Wise rulers are gracious even to the little people, I thought.

Once the thorn was cleared, priests with smooth and oiled topknots came from the city to bless the site. My mother and father arrived with Onkar, and sat with us while the priests chanted. Ruk and Ganda and the tribespeople stood apart, gazing into the trees.

The ceremonies complete, we gathered by Anja-ma’s and Baba-ji’s verandah. Mira fetched the yogurt from the stream where she had kept it cool, I pushed

burning wood into the clay oven, and Anja-ma threw a ball of dough on the stone slab for flattening into *chapattis*.

Onkar and one of the litter bearers rounded the corner of the hut, dragging a second bearer tied hand and foot and gagged with a ragged cloth. I realized Onkar's long face and melancholy eyes had not been among the worshipers around the fire.

"Onkar, where have you been?" asked my father.

"In the lean-to," said Onkar, "where we kept this fellow quiet till the priests were done."

The bound man strained at his ropes, growling through the gag.

"What's he done?" asked my mother.

“As far as I know, nothing yet,” said Onkar, breathless from restraining the captive.

Inder grasped the bound man’s arm and freed Onkar to talk.

“He’s done nothing yet,” he said, “but when he should have been unloading the donkeys, I saw him headed toward the lean-to. He had no explanation when we surprised him there. And I saw he was no driver I had ever hired.”

Onkar pulled a leaf from a bush near the verandah and twirled it in his hand while he spoke.

“Sit him down and ungag him,” said Baba-ji. “He might tell us something now. Chandu, bring him water.”

Inder and the driver pushed the captive to his knees, hands tied behind. I held a water jar to his lips. Ruk

and Ganda kept their eyes on the forest, arrows ready.

“Driver, if you are not a driver, who are you?” asked Baba-ji.

“I am indeed a driver, a standby driver. A driver was taken ill. I replaced him.”

“Then where’s the sick driver you replaced, standby driver?’ asked Onkar. “What have you done with him?”

“He was sick. I replaced him. That’s all,” said the man.

“We can beat him, Onkar-ji,” said Inder, tightening his grip on the captive’s shoulder. “That might change his story.”

“Beating leads to more beating, and worse,” said Baba-ji. “There’s a pleasanter way. We can set him free. Tell us where the true driver is,” he said to the man, “and tell us who sent you here. Then go.”

Inder gasped, then pressed his lips together

The man teetered on his knees, unbalanced because of the ropes. But his eyes were steady, burning with defiance.

“Baba-ji has spoken. Which do you choose?” asked Onkar. “To be beaten or to go free in the forest?”

We waited in silence.

The man pulled his shoulders straight.

“I come from Lal the counsellor to petition Inder the king,” he said.

Inder looked up in surprise at the respectful words.

“Beat me if you will,” the man said, “but it’s not honourable to beat a messenger.”

Inder loosened his grip on the captive’s shoulder and turned to face him.

“I am Inder Raj,” he said. “What words do you bring me?”

“Your kingdom needs you,” said the man. “The people of Palwar cry out for you. Return with us now to Palwar, we entreat you. Come swiftly. Don’t abandon your people.”

Ruk and Ganda raised their bows and peered into the forest. Inder swept his eyes over us, then opened his mouth. I thought he was about to agree with the captive.

“Be careful, Inder,” cried Mira. “Lal’s not to be trusted.”

“Hear me, messenger,” said my father. “Now you’ve searched out this boy’s hiding place, we have other places where we can keep him unharmed. He has nothing to fear from you.”

“Think who your true friends are, Inder Raj,” said Onkar.

Inder looked from his sister to my father to Onkar. He tightened his grip on the captive’s shoulder.

“Take this message to Lal,” he said. “Tell him that Inder Raj has received Lal’s invitation and declines it.”

“Your reply is unwise,” said the man. “Now set me free as you promised,” he said to Baba-ji.

“Where’s our missing driver?” demanded Onkar.

“Return the way you came, and you’ll find him in the trees by the ford. I trussed him up and stuffed his mouth. You did the same to me, so we owe each other nothing.”

“Check the ford,” said Onkar to the bearer who clutched the captive’s arm. Inder Raj and I’ll keep our prisoner roped till you return with our friend unharmed.”

The driver ran off.

The captive called after him, twisting his head to stare into Inder’s eyes.

“Tell him not to lag so far behind next time. Too easy for me. It spoiled my sport.”

7. Tale's End

The missing driver was brought to the *ashram*, embarrassed, but in good health. Lal's man was untied and set free.

"Why did you let him go?" asked Inder. "We learned little from him, and he learned everything about us."

"It's clear Lal's men already knew where you were. Cancel your pilgrimage to the waterfall," Baba-ji's quiet voice said to Inder. "Don't take a step outside the *ashram*. They won't attack a holy place."

My father slitted his eyes and pursed his lips as he always did when he had something important to say.

“Just for a few days,” he said, “until we arrange a new refuge.”

He slumped against the cushions to give room to his great belly.

Anja-ma, Mira and I brought out the meal that had been interrupted.

“Inder Raj,” said Baba-ji, his eyes lively, “when we sit together, those who know me expect to hear words of wisdom pouring out. Shall I pour some over you today?”

“Yes, Baba-ji,” said Inder, squirming.

“Inder Raj,” said Baba-ji, “accept my advice. Soon you’ll rule with cushioned feet from your throne again. If you are wise, watch how people take their food, and you’ll know their hearts.”

Inder looked up in surprise.

“Look at Chandu, for example,” said Baba-ji, tipping his head, smiling.

I lowered my hand, which was halfway to my mouth with *chapatti* and peas. What was I revealing about myself? The others stared at me.

“Chandu eats from one side to the other, until the dish is clean, the way he cleared the thornbush, from one edge of the thicket to the other. Whatever work he takes on, that’s what he does. Begins and carries through to the end, like one of the stories he tells. Is that correct, Chandu?”

He laughed. The others joined in, except for Inder.

“See Ruk and Ganda,” Baba-ji said. “They eat in an instant, as fast as they shoot an arrow, their eyes on the forest. Our protectors. Isn’t it so?”

“It’s so, Baba-ji” said my father. “We rely on them.”

Ruk and Ganda placed their palms together and bowed.

“Now, Inder Raj, look at Chandu’s father, our good friend Raju the merchant. Do you see his eating habit?”

My father smiled in embarrassment. His plate was empty.

“Chandu’s father eats almost nothing – a few peas, one *chapatti*, and still he grows large and mighty like a mountain. He’s a merchant, Inder Raj. He takes little, and turns it into much.”

We all laughed, even Inder.

“Baba-ji, you’ve described him exactly,” said my mother. “And what of me?”

“Chandu’s mother,” said Baba-ji, “heaps her plate, and heaps it again. Generous to her stomach just as she is to all of us.”

My mother tipped her head and smiled.

“Well said, Baba-ji,” said my father.

“Now, Onkar, what about you?” said Baba-ji.

Onkar looked up, cross-legged, hands folded in his lap.

“Onkar rules his food the way he rules Raju merchant’s warehouse, and the way he rules himself,” said Baba-ji. “Do you see how he eats? A fingerful of peas, a fingerful of lentils, a bit of yogurt, a taste of pickle, then a fingerful of peas and the whole round again. And see how he breaks his chapatti, each piece the same size. Fair and just and misses nothing. Am I correct, Onkar?”

“My habits exactly, Baba-ji,” said Onkar. “I confess it.”

“So, Inder Raj,” said Baba-ji, “study how your subjects take their food and you’ll know their hearts.”

“And what of yourself, Baba-ji,” said my mother.

“What about Manu Baba, you ask?” said Baba-ji. “Manu Baba chews and chews and who knows where all that good food goes.”

He patted his hollow midriff and bony knees.”
“I’ll tell you,”. he said. “Do you see these feet?”

He flexed his ankles, wiggled his toes. His feet were huge and knobby, heels jutting out behind the ankle bones, toes splayed wide.

“It’s for them, for my great feet, that I eat,” he said with a wide grin.

We shouted with laughter, comfortable in a world where Baba-ji could laugh at his feet.

“Inder Raj, it’s good you’re laughing now,” said Baba-ji. “These days you laugh too little. Don’t be ruled by your anger. Be happy among your friends.”

“What friends?” asked Inder, leaping up, shattering the peace. “A boy who gives me orders just because he can pull up thornbush? When you finish telling my story, friend…”

He looked at me, drawing out the word to make clear he meant “enemy”.

“…as I’m sure you will, because you find joy strutting in front of us, showing off. When you finish my

story, be sure to make yourself the hero. You've already given yourself that title, anyway."

His agitated breathing filled the circle. Mira drew up her legs and hid her face in her knees. The rest of the circle ignored his outburst.

"The pirate problem grows worse, Baba-ji," said my father, as if Inder Raj had not spoken. "Our whole sea trade is under threat."

"You're a wise man, Raju-ji, and Sindhapur is a great city," said Baba-ji. "With the other merchants you'll crush the pirates."

"Yes, Baba-ji, we must find their source and stop them there," said Onkar, rising and hooking his arm around Inder's, urging him away where he could calm himself.

“The city is acting, Baba-ji,” my father said. “We try, but the ocean is large and the coast is full of hiding places. It seems that sending men off in a trading ship is sending them to their deaths. These pirates will make us a city of fatherless children and childless parents.”

My stomach twisted with nausea. My wish at the waterfall. Did I just wait until it came true or did I have to make it happen? Did I have to go off and fight the pirates? Maybe my death was the price I had to pay.

Out of our hearing, Onkar muttered to Inder’s sullen face. Inder tipped his head in agreement and Onkar drew him back to the circle.

“I request a favour, Chandu,” Inder said in a toneless voice. “Onkar says your tales are well told, so give us the last of ‘The Orphans of Palwar’ if you care to.”

“If the others wish it, I can tell it,” I said.

It was Onkar who had squeezed the grudging apology from Inder, and it was for Onkar that I accepted it.

Mira’s arms loosened around her legs. My mother drew a relieved breath.

“No drum to accompany you today,” said Onkar.

“The ending is short,” I said.

I held out my hand for silence.

“Far away in the land of Palwar the heart of Lal the counsellor was heavy, for every day his son Stana’s face grew gloomier and his longing to surpass Basho’s son Inder grew deeper. But Lal had sworn a great oath of loyalty to Basho and could do nothing.

"'Inder shoots well just to spite me,' Stana complained. 'I'm filled with anger at the sight of him.'

"'My dear son Stana,' said Lal. 'He's the son of a king, so he does what he pleases. Without his father, he would be as nothing. I've sworn a great oath. I'm loyal to the king. But what of you? Are you not a great archer?'

"Stana bowed his head. The next time the great king Basho set out to hunt leopard in the rocky wasteland of the mountain side, he was carried home dead with an arrow through his heart."

I paused. Inder and Mira sat together, their heads high, their eyes teary.

"No one recognized the arrow," I continued, "but Inder had no doubt from whose bow it had come.

“The land of Palwar mourned the death of their king, and Lal and Stana mourned the loudest. Inder’s mother the queen led her son to the throne and set Chetu, her favourite litter bearer, to spy on Lal.

“For it’s often the little people,” I said, thinking of Inder’s taunts about thorn cutting, “who accomplish what the powerful cannot.”

Onkar blinked his eyes, startled, then gazed through me, lost in thought.

“Though Chetu kept careful watch,” I said, “one morning the queen didn’t rise from her bed. She lay dead, a vile liquid dribbling from her mouth.

“Chetu the litter bearer, intent on protecting the queen’s children, went cunningly to Lal and said, ‘The children of this dead king and queen will no longer block your path if they journey across the mountain rocks and rivers to die in a far-off land.’

“And Lal said, ‘The person who took them on such a journey would find himself a wealthy man.’

“So Chetu took the orphans in the night and travelled for many days to another country, to an *ashram* he knew of. And in this *ashram* Inder Raj, rightful ruler of the kingdom of Palwar, and his sister Mira wait to pull Lal and his son Stana from their wrongful place.”

“Well told,” Onkar called, breaking out of his musing and clapping his hands in slow, measured beats. The others joined in. Not Inder, of course. When he realized the clapping was for me, not him, he shrugged his shoulders. I was furious.

I held my arm high.

“The tale is not yet finished,” I shouted above the applause. “The ending must be told.”

I stretched up both hands until there was silence.

“So here sits Inder Raj, sulking, waiting, his face growing longer every day. He hates Stana, son of Lal, but he’s learned well to imitate him.”

My voice swelled.

“Like Stana, he can’t bear to be bested by anyone. Even at brush cutting.

“So ends the tale of the ‘Orphans of Palwar’.”

The circle was silent. Inder’s mouth was an angry slash across his face. Mira and Anja-ma gripped his arms. Baba-ji flicked his eyes at Onkar.

This time I was the one Onkar took aside by the arm.

“Chandu, have compassion,” he murmured. “You’re surrounded by family and friends. Inder has no one but a sister who’s in as much distress as he.”

I shrugged away from Onkar, unwilling to admit I was as ungracious as Inder.

The bearers readied the litters for my parents. The company broke up. I said no more to Inder that night.

By morning, he and Mira, along with the bow and golden quiver, had disappeared.

8. Promises

“It’s my fault they left,” I said to Baba-ji.

“Story tellers have power,” he said. “They must be wise. Now you suffer remorse. You’ve been given a lesson. Next time you’ll hold your anger.”

“Inder needs a lesson too,” I said.

“Yes,” said Baba-ji.

“I fear for them,” said Anja-ma. “No Ruk or Ganda to watch over them. Cold. Dark. Chased by men, beasts, snakes.”

“They’re never alone,” said Baba-ji. “The gods are with them.”

“And now you’ll tell me not to burden the gods with my fear,” said Anja-ma.

“It’s yourself you burden, not the gods,” said Baba-ji. “You confuse what’s happening with your own memories.”

I knew Anja-ma’s story. Dragged from her village, marched over mountains and through forests, barely old enough to understand she was a captive, breaking free and wandering for days, starving and alone, found somehow by Baba-ji and brought to the *ashram*. Since then, the sun had journeyed north and south for many seasons, and Anja-ma was Baba-ji’s wife and ruled the *ashram*, but her suffering still showed in her sunken cheeks, the shadows under her eyes like bruises that never healed. Her hair, an

odd contrast to the pain on her face, looped black and sleek at her neck.

Baba-ji took my face in his hands.

“Inder would have gone in any case,” he said. “The burden of their leaving is not for your shoulders alone.”

Tears sprang in my eyes.

Inder’s cot stood empty in the lean-to. Mira’s mat lay rolled by the wall in the hut.

One morning, cool enough that I was glad of my woollen shawl, I hauled wood to the *ashram*. Baba-ji stretched his arm to me as I returned.

“Inder has been captured.”

He leaned his head toward the door.

“Mira’s inside,” he said.

I bent through the door. Mira sat cross-legged, draped in a blanket, making the tiny room glow.

“Good. It’s you,” said Mira. “I’ve come for help.”

Her haughtiness was as great as Inder’s, but it scorched less.

“Mira says Inder called out to her as they dragged him away,” Anja-ma said, her eyes sad.

“They didn’t drag him,” said Mira. “He’s a king, after all. But they’ve taken him to Palwar, and who can trust Lal the usurper?”

“Why did you leave us?” I asked. “You knew it was unsafe.”

“Inder said he couldn’t hide away any more,” Mari said. “In a shed like a village goat, dying of boredom, listening to insults from a merchant’s son. The *ashram* was holding him back, but maybe the Kumari had more sense and would help him.”

“Patience,” said Anja-ma. “That’s all we asked. Just patience.”

“Inder doesn’t believe in patience, Anja-ma,” said Mira. “Patience is like waiting for the river to flow backwards and float you up the mountain. Better to climb the mountain yourself and forget about the river.”

Anja-ma sighed.

“So you and Inder climbed the cliffs to the waterfall,” she said.

“We planned it. We were patient as you could want when we planned it. We took food, we took blankets…”

“Food that wasn’t yours to take,” I said.

A moment before, she had been the sun returning to a dull day. Now she irritated me.

“We couldn’t ask, could we?’ said Mira.

“Whatever they need is theirs. You know that, Chandu” said Anja-ma.

Mira smirked at me.

“Inder told the Kumari he needed his kingdom back and would pay whatever price was needed,” she said.

‘So be it,’ the Kumari told him.”

“Weren’t you afraid of Lal’s men?” asked Anja.

“Inder had his bow,” said Mira. “And I had a tree root for a club. But there was no sign of them. Till after the waterfall, anyway.”

“How are you here and not captured with Inder?” I asked.

“The Kumari’s monkey,” said Mira. “I gave it almonds, he came for more, and Inder started down without me. I heard men shouting, ‘Inder Raj, we need you in Palwar.’ Then Inder called back up the cliff, ‘I’ll go to Palwar, where I belong. Don’t follow me. Obey me. I am the king.’

“I knew he was talking to me, telling me to stay hidden. So I did. And now, Chandu, you and I must help him.”

“Why me? Help him how?” I said. “He was supposed to wait while people who knew these things figured it out. What can I do?”

“The worst thing is, I saw one of them carrying the quiver – the golden quiver,” said Mira. “Lal knows that whoever possesses the golden quiver is king.”

Voices rose from outside. I heard Onkar’s voice. My parents had arrived to hear the news firsthand.

I stooped through the door, Mira and Anja-ma pressing behind, to see my father already on his padded stool. One of Onkar’s hands arranged cushions on my mother’s seat, the other gestured for the driver to unload the milk and vegetables from the donkey.

“You see, my son,” said my mother, embracing me. “Your worries were groundless. Here’s Mira, safe and sound, and Inder Raj is unharmed, at least.”

“He should have stayed,” said my father. “We had a place in Sindhapur prepared for him.”

“They took his bow and golden quiver,” said Mira.

“Very bad,” said Onkar, his frown emphasized by his drooping cheeks. “For him, that’s worse than being torn by tigers.”

Talk turned to the pirate menace.

“We merchants speak of not sending our ships to Dilmun at all,” said my father. “Our livelihood’s in danger.”

“Track the pirates to their hiding places and deal with them there,” said Onkar. “That’ll put an end to them.”

Their discussion made me uneasy, reminding me of the Kumari and my wish and the painful things

probably in store for me. I left the others and went to smooth the dirt of the new guesthouse yard. Mira followed me.

“You haven’t said yes yet about Palwar. Inder needs help. Will you come?”

“Why would I? He’d as soon spit on me as be helped by me,” I said.

“He was rude to you from the very first, but that didn’t stop you helping us then,” she said. “And once you’ve given aid, you’re bound to continue. You said so yourself.”

“Not this time,” I said, whacking the hoe hard on the earth. “I know nothing of Palwar. Inder’s where he belongs, anyway.”

“You might not know Palwar, but you understand forests and rivers. Someone needs to guide me.”

“Someone, but not Chandu,” I said. “I’m needed here.”

“Not true. Ruk’s relatives serve at the *ashram* any time they’re asked, and your parents go for days without seeing you.”

“Mira, your brother’s brought trouble to my life. Far away from him is where I want to be.”

“And what of me?” asked Mira. “Do you want to be far away from me too?”

I looked up at her. I felt my mouth hanging open and tried to draw my lips together, but my jaw was stiff.

“No. Why should I?” I said.

“I have something of yours,” she said. “If I return it to you, will you come with me?”

I looked over to the verandah, where Anja-ma was speaking, the others listening. All so ordinary. They had no idea of the weird game Mira was playing.

She held out her upturned fist.

“What is it?” I mumbled, turning away from her to probe at a stone.

She stepped around me and thrust out her opened hand.

“See? I’ve had it since the day we came.”

The earring. The one Inder shot from my ear.

“You’ve kept it all this time?” I asked.

“I meant to give it back, but the longer I didn’t, the harder it was to explain. Anyway, take it now,” she said.

The circle lay in her hand, misshapen but familiar. I rubbed my thumb over the threaded golden beads.

“You were brave that day,” Mira said, “and stern. It was scary, trusting you to help us.”

“Keep it,” I said, returning the earring to her palm. “It’s yours now. My parents had another made for me.”

I scraped the hoe through the dirt.

“I guess I could come with you to Palwar,” I said.

Mira’s eyes shone, her cheeks glowed, wisps of her hair floated around her ears. All the beauty of the world was in her face.

For a moment.

And then with a lurch of my stomach, I realised what I had done. Two promises that filled me with dread. One to Mira and one to the Kumari.

I hacked at the ground in disgust.

Onkar picked his way, tall and gaunt, across the rough ground. His long brown face looked more mournful than usual.

“Princess,” he said, bowing to Mira, “I’m much relieved to see you safe, and sorry for the pain you must feel at your brother’s absence.”

Mira dipped her head in thanks.

“If you permit me, I wish to ask a favour,” he said.

His hands were folded, his shoulders still stooped in a bow. Mira waited.

“If you should go to Inder Raj, as I feel sure you’ll try to do…” he said.

Mira turned to me, tossing her head.

“Do you remember what you said the day before Inder Raj left, Chandu? That the little people must help the powerful? Princess, when you see Inder Raj,” said Onkar, “tell him that by choice Onkar the clerk would rush to his aid today, but from duty must fulfill another task first. That done, I’ll come. Tell him, please.”

His drooping face wobbled.

“I’ll find him and I’ll tell him,” said Mira.

Onkar opened his mouth to say more, but caught back his words and returned to the verandah. I wondered what duty he had to perform.

9. The Pendant

“Mira’s afraid for her brother,” I said to Baba-ji next morning on the verandah. “She can’t travel alone.”

“Are you confident you can help?” Baba-ji asked.

“Yes, Baba-ji,” I said.

“Your words are sure, but your voice is not. Why do you hesitate?”

“Lal and Inder are not my affair,” I said.

‘You’re giving with one hand and snatching back with the other,” said Baba-ji. “Walk with a firm step and arms spread wide. Otherwise stay here.”

“I’ll go if I have your blessing,’ I said.

“You already had it,’ said Baba-ji. “But you might face disappointment, Chandu. Many agree to be helped, but few are grateful. Don’t expect thanks.”

Baba-ji sent for Ruk and Ganda to travel with us. Anja-ma handed us heavy bundles of provisions. We unrolled them, removing sacks of grain and crocks of pickled vegetables and two of the blankets.

‘This is too much,” said Mira. “We’ll hunt for food on the way. At least Ruk and Ganda will.”

“We’ll send a message to your parents,” said Anja-ma.

I was glad to avoid telling them myself. My father would grin with pride, my mother would praise me, smother me with embraces, drag promises from me

to be careful, and both of them would make me feel my adventure was theirs and not mine.

The first few days, Mira and I sat on cushions while boatmen steered us downriver. Ruk and Ganda preferred to walk.

“Forest people like forest paths,” Ganda said.

By the time we reached Devgar, where we were to leave the boat behind, Anja-ma’s *chapatti* and vegetables were all eaten, and the blankets, fragrant with sunlight and herbs when we left the *ashram*, smelled of smoke and leaf mould from nights spread by the fire. As clean and neat as we could make ourselves by the riverside, we stepped off the wharf onto the bricks of the street.

Ruk and Ganda waited under a tree by the guesthouse, their eyes widening in relief when they saw us. Nearby, fishermen in crumpled *dhotis*

mended their nets, glancing up from the coils of rope to stare at the straight backs and rough kilts of the two forest men.

“Praise the gods, who brought you safely” said Ruk. “Rest today. We’ll leave tomorrow.”

They pushed beyond the wall into their familiar forest.

Mira and I wandered in the town square chewing fish crumbly from hot oil and chunks of melon bought from a boy crouched in the midst of his fruit.

“See that box,” said Mira. “I’m surprised to see it here. It’s from Palwar.”

I walked with her to a stall roofed with new thatch where a small soapstone box and a gold chain were displayed on a blue cloth.

“That’s Palwari work for sure,” said Mira, stroking the raised figures that circled the base of the box. See the carving? Spearing a leopard.”

A tiny carved man poised to throw a spear, a beast leaping, legs outstretched. The artist’s chisel had picked out the leopard’s snarling jaw, the muscle in the hunter’s arm, even the fierceness in his eye.

“A beautiful box,” said the shop woman, looking up at us. “In the city someone will pay a fortune for it. In this poor market, I’ll charge you almost nothing.”

“A gift for a new son-in-law, it would have been,” Mira said to the woman. “A brave hunter for a bridegroom. There should have been something very fine inside.”

“Yes, daughter, you’re wise,” said the woman. “I have kept it safe. I’ll fetch it for you. Don’t take one without the other.”

The woman fitted the lid back on the box, twisting it until the carved border of mountains and clouds matched top and bottom.

“Bring it,” she shouted, and one of a cluster of small boys chasing a dog peeled himself away and shot behind the shop, bowing jerkily as he passed us.

The woman patted the cushions beside her.

“Sit and be comfortable,” she said. Her tiny pointed face was dwarfed by enormous earrings.

“We’re not here to buy,” I said.

The boy ran up with a cloth-wrapped bundle, unrolled a medallion, and lay it with reverence by the box on the blue cloth.

Mira gasped. Garnet, crystal, shot with sunlight, embedded in gold, suspended from loops of pearls.

More splendid than anything my family's merchant house traded. The stall keeper nodded with satisfaction.

"There it is. Fit for a king," she said.

"How do you have such a piece?" Mira asked, tracing the gold bands with her finger.

"A family coming through from Palwar," said the woman. "It's very costly. Made for a bridegroom but never given, for he discarded the family like broken pots. I couldn't pay them full value and I told them so. I cheat no one. But it was passage down the Sindhu they needed, not jewels."

I glanced at Mira. Her eyes were stretched wide.

"I'll buy it," she said.

“There’s no hurry,” I said. “It’ll be here after we settle ourselves at the rest house if you still want it.”

I took her by the wrist and walked off. She came, as I hoped, to avoid protesting in public.

“Don’t think of buying that,” I said. “In her mind, she’s already burying pots of gold under her hearth. She’ll not give it for less.”

“I’ll pay what’s needed,” said Mira. “I have wealth in my pack you don’t even know about. You forget I’m of a royal house.”

“What will you do with it?” I asked. “It’s not meant for a woman.”

“It’s not meant to lie in a dusty village,” she said. “That’s no ordinary piece of jewellery. There’s a story to it. I know what I’m doing.”

At the guesthouse I bathed and ate and rested in the communal sleeping hall. Mira was given a place with the caretaker's family up the stairway. In the evening, leaving our bundles under the eyes of the attendant, we sauntered out into the market square once again.

"Don't be eager," I told Mira. "She'll raise her price when she sees you're willing to pay. Give me what you have to spend and let me make the bargain, if you're determined to have it."

"Do so," she said, passing me a heavy pouch. "You're the son of a merchant after all."

"Follow my lead," I said.

We stopped at several stalls, admiring bangles, embroidered shoes, shell necklaces, carved shelves.

“Will he even accept it if we buy it for him?” I said as we approached the stall with the garnet pendant.

“Wh…” Mira began, then hid her surprise. “Jewellery’s always good,” she said.

At the stall of the garnet pendant, the woman folded her hands in greeting and smiled up at us. The carved box was still displayed in front of her, along with a brass platter and a tray of coloured beads. The pendant was not in sight.

“Shall I send for it,” she asked, gesturing to the boy. He half rose, ready to run.

“The garnets are the problem,” I said. “The red colour. Do you have others with different stones, Auntie? Green or blue, perhaps?”

Her face fell.

“Only the one,” she said. “As I told you, from the house of a first-rate family.”

“I’d accept it from you with pleasure, Auntie. So beautiful. But the red…We mean it for our brother who refuses to wear red. A vow he took. What can we do?” I said.

Mira blinked.

“At least let’s see it again,” she said.

The woman turned to signal the boy. I waved my hand to remind Mira to be patient.

“Truly a fine piece,” I said when the boy returned. I crouched on the mat, Mira beside me. The woman held it up, the pearl strands draped over her hands.

“There’s no true red in it,” she said. “These garnets are like grapes touched by sun in leaf shadow, or

pomegranate juice deep in a clay cup seeping water drops. Your brother can wear this and not wear red."

"She's right," said Mira.

"Auntie, here is what I can give you for it," I said, holding some pieces of Mira's silver on my palm.

"My son," she said, "I beggared myself to help a Palwari family in need. They feared for their lives, you know, and all because a daughter's promised bridegroom spurned them. Boats, jars of food, the best I gave them. What you offer isn't nearly enough."

"But Auntie, when will someone like us with silver to spare pass by your stall again?" I asked. "Accept our offer and be rid of the burden of so fine an ornament. Take one piece more, but that's all. I have responsibilities."

I added silver to my palm.

“Cover my costs at least,” she said.

“I’m curious,” said Mira. “What was their story?”

“Everything was arranged. The parents arrived at the groom’s house with gifts, this pendant in its box the choicest. The groom’s family wouldn’t so much as receive them. Such dishonour to a great family.’

“Who in Palwar did this to them?” asked Mira.

“The usurper Lal and his conceited son Stana,” the woman said.

Mira shrugged, unsurprised.

“Lal’s eye fastened on a bride for Stana from a higher family, they said,” the woman continued. “Royalty, they said. The very day this Lal refused to see them,

they gathered their children, even the daughter promised to Stana, and the servants and left. It's due to me that they're safely on their way now to relatives across the sea."

Mira was deep in thought.

"We salute your great heart, Auntie," I said. I offer one more piece of silver, a tribute to your wisdom, but in that case, the box must come with the pendant."

The woman wavered, then agreed. She tucked the silver at her waist. Mira took the open box with both hands and smiled at the pendant within.

"May it bring joy to your family," said the woman. "It brought no joy to the family that made it. The gods forbid it's a bad luck pendant."

“It’ll bring good luck,” said Mira. “I knew as soon as I saw it.”

“Why do you spend your silver on Stana’s leavings?” I asked her as we returned to the guesthouse. “The woman hid the bad luck part until we took it, you know. She’s glad to be rid of it.”

Mira hugged the box to her chest.

“I think it was for me that Stana turned away his bride,” she said.

Her eyes looked past me, full of secrets.

10. Palwar

In the morning, we started the long walk through the forest to Palwar. Cloaked in sweat and heat and the buzzing of insects, we struggled over rocks and tree roots, up slopes that made my calves ache. The path to the Kumari had been a garden stroll compared to this. I willed my feet to move, barely aware of my companions, of the screeching of birds, the chattering of small animals.

Several times I lost my footing to crawl for a moment on all fours or tumble down slopes. I slipped in a shallow stream and sat down with a splash, feeling cool and clean in the flow of the water and making no effort to stand. Ganda pulled me up. My thigh throbbed where it had hit a rock. For a while I

limped to protect it, but soon found it was easier to bear the pain and step evenly.

Ruk and Ganda, even Mira, moved in a steady rhythm.

“How do you never tire?” I asked Mira.

“I’m not from the plains like you,” she said. “This is nothing compared to the rocks of Palwar, To walk in Palwar, we have to be strong.”

For every smile she gave me, she jabbed me with an insult.

“Don’t be angry,” she said, touching my arm.

While Ganda helped Mira across a rocky stream bed, Ruk wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

“Some lamps burn true and steady,” he said, “like you. Some flicker from one side to the other.”

Rolling his eyes toward Mira, he clapped me on the back and urged me across the stones.

After days of forests and streams and lumpy roots, we came through thinning trees to a land of brown rock. Rock rearing straight and solid, tops sheared flat against the sky, rock piled block on block like crazy stairways, rock soaring in graceful swirls like dancing arms, rock in a vast rippled sea of peaks and hollows stretching before us. Our feet were bruised by shifting stones, our skin pelted by gusts of wind and dust. We wound our feet and stinging faces with strips of cloth Ganda pulled from his pack.

Mira and I probed with sticks as we walked to warn snakes away, Ruk and Ganda held bows ready, but the only animals we saw were distant mountain goats with twisted horns and a shadow above a rock

that dissolved by the time Ganda trained his arrow on it. Nights we tended bleeding toes and fingers, then pressed under overhangs, shivering on gritty rock

“You and Inder weren’t this battered when you arrived at the *ashram*,” I said to Mira, folding over the rips in my shawl to keep the cold out.

“Sometimes we rode on Chetu’s back, and his friend’s,” said Mira. “They wouldn’t let us walk where it was rough.”

The steepest climb came last. We struggled up a side of rock, stones clattering down the slope behind us. At the top I stood, straightening my cramped back, then abruptly crouched again. Bile burned my throat. We were on a lip of rock that plunged down to a river foaming far below. To either side of us, as far as I could see, the rock continued sheer, the river swirled below.

Ruk stretched his arm toward the other side, where tumbled brown rock rose to the sky.

“Palwar,” he said.

“Across the gorge? How do we get over there?” I asked.

“By the bridge,” said Mira, smirking at my ignorance.

“That way,” said Ruk, pointing to the setting sun. “After we sleep.”

I slept well that night. The end of our ordeal was just a bridge away. We breathed air that seemed alive after the dustiness we had sucked in for days.

In morning light, we followed the gorge, walking well back from the sheer drop. By afternoon, we were clustered on a hump of rock before the bridge. Yesterday’s bile rose in my throat again. A fragile

web of rope, sagging in the middle, swung high above the river.

“The Palwari bridge,” said Mira, her head held high.

The bridge keeper rose from the group crouched by a nearby hut.

“You’re crossing over? Most people come in the other direction these days,” he said.

“What do you mean?” asked Mira.

“The city,” said the keeper. “It’s not to everyone’s taste lately. The young king’s returned, at least, so maybe he’ll set it right. Or maybe he won’t.”

Mira’s chin jutted even higher. I was nervous she might command “Bow down to the young king’s sister,” but she held her tongue.

Ruk pressed silver into the keeper's hand.

"He said the young king's returned. So now we know Inder is safe," I said, as we stepped ahead to the bridge.

Thick coils of rope bound around wooden boards, strong but uneven. Would my feet slip? Sturdy ropes made a sure grip for the hands, but the netting hung beneath was gapped and loose, easy to tumble through to the rocky water far below. My stomach heaved. The sun shone bright but my sweat was cold.

"Don't worry. It's quite safe," said Mira, looking at me. "Go ahead. Step on."

My feet were too heavy to move. I thought I must return to Sindhapur without seeing Palwar.

Ruk grasped my shoulder.

“Wait,” he murmured.

“Princess,” he said to Mira, “how does one walk on this bridge? Must we step in a certain way?”

Mira hesitated.

“I never thought of it that way, but follow me. I’ll show you,” she said.

She grasped the ropes on either side and stepped on the coils, rolling on the balls of her feet with the sway of the bridge. Ruk motioned Ganda to follow, then guided me on by the shoulders.

“Eyes on Ganda,” he said. “Don’t look down. Don’t look back.”

The bridge lurched as I stepped. I held my breath and moved ahead. Once I faltered and glanced to

the side. The river seemed to swoop up to drag me down.

“Eyes on Ganda,” said Ruk’s steady voice.

On the Palwari side, we rested. Mira’s eyes snapped with excitement. Ruk and Ganda, I noticed, were as shaky as I was.

We entered Mira’s city the next afternoon. The streets were thick with guards. Guards just like the ones who had come upon us near the Kumari’s waterfall, standing with feet spread and arms folded, or walking in pairs, clubs at their shoulders, eyes sweeping from side to side.

Palwar was stony, carved from the rock that surrounded it, forbidding, not at all like the sunny brick walls of my city by the river Sindhu. There was little of the bustle that always filled Sindhapur, few children running around our legs, few men loitering

at the drink stands flinging arms in argument, few women chatting and fanning themselves under the trees.

Mira led us along streets that rose higher with every turn, opening at last into a wide square edged with stone pillars and the broad stairway to the great palace. Two guards in spiked bronze helmets crossed spears and barred our way up the stairs.

“Tell the king, if he’s returned, that his sister arrives and begs audience,” said Mira.

They wavered for an instant, surprise flickering on their faces. They peered at our grimy skin and tattered clothing, looked at each other, and lowered their spears. Ruk and Ganda shrank into the crowd when they saw us ushered up the stairs and past the huge creaking doors.

Mira was gathered up by a group of women who carried her off, exclaiming in delight. I was taken down corridors to a great room, refreshed with cool drinks, bathed and oiled and wrapped in new garments and stiff sandals. I settled my pack on the shelf and waited to be taken to Inder, reclining on the lotus-carved couch, wandering by a flower-strewn pool in a garden attached to the room. Darkness fell and lamps were brought by the time a servant led me through torchlit corridors and gestured me into a vast hall that echoed with voices and footfalls.

“Chandu, son of Raju and Simi, merchants of Sindhapur,” announced the herald at the door.

An official with twisted hair and floating robes urged me down the stairs to the centre aisle, where I walked between rows of courtiers gleaming with gold to the dais at the end. The last time I had seen Inder, he was settling for sleep on the old cot in the

lean-to, plotting, although I had no idea of it, to run off in the night. Now he sat gleaming in the torchlight, on a seat with lion paws for legs and armrests, a gilded lion head rearing above his back. One foot rested on his knee, the other was planted on an embroidered stool. His eyes were blank, his head drooping drowsily to the side.

Mira stood beside him, her crinkled hair springing around her face, her haughty bearing a world apart from me. She caught my eye with a half smile.

On Inder's other side stood two men I took to be Lal and Stana, one, white hair thick on his forehead, leaning on a gilded stick topped with a crystal eagle, the other young and muscular with shoulders that seemed polished.

Inder took no notice of me. He seemed half asleep.

“So, Chandu of Sindhapur,” said the white-haired man, “we’ve heard the story from the sister of Inder Raj, and marvel that you dare come before the king, so basely have you acted.”

I was shocked speechless. Mira was shaken, reached out her arm in protest. Inder looked past me, registering nothing.

I sucked saliva over my dry tongue.

“What wrong have I done?” I asked.

“Your crime is vile,” said the old man I identified as Lal the usurper, “and the king has no need to hear it spoken of again. But if you wish to it to be aired once more, so be it.”

He signalled to a herald nearby, who pounded his staff on the stone floor, the echoes vibrating above

our heads. In high rounded tones the herald announced his message.

“In the market place of Devgar,” he called out,” the merchant’s son Chandu, seeing a golden pendant set with garnet and crystal fit for his betters but not for him, rashly advised Mira, the royal sister of Inder Raj, not to purchase it. Then, boldly helping himself to silver rightly belonging to the royal house of Palwar, he took the pendant for his own, and would have kept it had the royal princess not exerted her power over him. For this act, committed against the royal house of Palwar in a market place on the Sindhu, Chandu of Sindhapur is cast today into the dungeon beneath the great hall.”

He thumped his staff again on the floor.

Dungeon!

My jaw fell slack, my stomach clenched. The message was repeated for people further down the darkened hall. I listened in disbelief to the faint echoes.

Lal the usurper drew himself up, his robes in graceful folds.

“Be glad that only imprisonment awaits you, and nothing more,” he said.

Guards gathered around me, grasping my arms.

“You misunderstood, respected Lal the counsellor,” cried Mira. “Chandu helped me. I gave him the silver,” she said. “He didn’t take it.”

“The king’s counsellor has spoken,” said Lal. “His words cannot be withdrawn.”

Stana, his skin glistening in the torchlight, leaned toward his father and spoke into his ear. Lal's eyebrows rose as he listened.

"One thing more, Chandu of Sindhapur," said Lal. "You'll be chained to the wall, so don't hope to escape."

I kept my dignity. I walked calmly between the guards out of the hall. Once, I turned around. Mira's figure, outlined by torchlight, was rigid, her face shocked. Inder's eyes were half shut, as if he was falling asleep. Lal must be drugging him.

11. Friendship

The dungeon was spacious and pillared, but cheerless and dank, the only light the torchlight that seeped from the corridor outside. My bones throbbed from the stone floor. The wall was rough, scraping my back when I slid up to ease the pain in my arms and shoulders. My wrists were chained to rings in the wall, level with my head when I sat, near my waist whenever one of the other prisoners helped me to my feet. I was the only one shackled to the wall. The others roamed in the room as they wished, although they spent most of their time slouched against the wall as I did.

Servants brought us food and drink, carried off our waste, sluiced the floor with pails of water and a

broom, and sluiced us as well. Thoughts of Inder and Mira burned in me hot and cold. Were they drugged? Terrorized by Lal? Glorying in their power?

Prisoners were brought in and taken away. Sunk in misery, I hardly noticed them for the first few days, but then I was glad of their company.

Two were imprisoned for mocking a city guard.

“It didn’t use to be a crime to make people laugh,” one of them said.

One day they were allowed to go.

“The king was waiting for gold,” they said. “At least, Lal was waiting for gold, but he always claims it’s for the king. Our families must have obliged.”

Perhaps Ruk and Ganda had returned to Sindhapur with news of my capture. And perhaps they would reappear with gold to buy my release.

Another prisoner was a strange wild man with a rank-smelling skin kilt, tangled hair, and a body swirling with tattoos. He was caught thieving in the square near the great hall and was cheerful in admitting it. Sometimes, he broke into song, eerie jagged rhythms from the north, I thought, and even the guards crooned along and begged for more when he fell quiet.

“How did you end up in Palwar?” I asked him, as sat beside me to eat. “I thought I was far from home,” I said, “but you seem to be much farther.”

By then, I was able to feed myself. The guards had unshackled my hands after the first few days and left just my feet in chains.

“Chandu-ji, when I’m before you,” he said, “you see Lurag, a hillman, come to the city with precious stones to sell, and cruelly robbed and beaten. The guards here were sad when they heard of the loss of those stones, I can tell you.”

“You lost everything?” I asked.

“So the guards believe,” said Lurag.

“You hid some?” I said. “You still have stones?”

“Chandu-ji, I had no stones before, if I tell the truth, and I have none now. I’ve hidden something far better than stones.”

He laced his hands behind his neck and stretched. I stopped my hand on its way to my mouth with a fingerful of rice. I lowered it to my lap, my mouth still open.

“I have my true self locked away in here,” he said, pounding his chest with his hand and settling himself on folded legs like a sage.

So that’s what he’s talking about, I thought, disappointed. Not treasure. The soul, the journey to the gods that ends deep inside ourselves.

‘I know all about true self,” I said, hoping to avoid a lengthy teaching session. “My Baba-ji has taught me well.”

“No, no,” said Lurag, his teeth flashing with laughter. “Not the true self your Baba-ji talks about. I mean the true self that’s chewing this chunk of cheese, the self whose rump aches from this hard floor.”

Wrestling with his riddles took my mind off the cramps in my legs, but his meaning escaped me.

It was another day or so before he continued our conversation.

“I hide my true self from everybody here, but to you, Chandu-ji, I’ll tell it,” he said. “Do you know why?”

I shrugged.

“Because the moment you revealed the truth about yourself, I knew I had to do the same,” he said.

“What truth?” I asked.

I thought of the things I kept hidden - how Mira was always in my mind and how foolish I was in her eyes, how if something happened to Inder I would not be unhappy. I had said nothing of these to Lurag.

“What truth?” repeated Lurag. “The truth of your name. The truth that you are Chandu of the merchant family of Sindhapur. I’ve eaten at food

stalls in your port. I've seen your family's tiger seal on bales piled on the dock."

A northern hillman in our port? He winked at me again, grinning as if he had confided a secret. He looked around the room. The guards were by the exit to the hallway. The other prisoners were clustered across the floor, casting stones for wagers.

"Are you asking yourself how a hillman ended up at your port at the mouth of the Sindhu?" Lurag asked. "I'll answer your question. A tribesman didn't. Lurag the sailor did. That's the true self I'm talking about. I'm Lurag the sailor of Dilmun, come alive from the sea after fleeing the pirates. They never knew I got away to be washed ashore."

"You're not a hillman?" I asked.

"No, I'm Lurag the sailor, and that's for you to know, and no one else. I'd not live long if Lal found out I'd

seen the harbour where his pirates hide their ships," he said.

"The pirates are Lal's?" I said. "But he's counsellor to the king of Palwar. How could he be a pirate?"

"Chandu-ji, you're too trusting for the world we live in," Lurag teased. "Can't a person be a counsellor and a cheat at the same time?"

"I'm surprised, that's all," I said. "But not that surprised, come to think of it. All the trouble in Palwar – now I understand why."

A flurry of voices and the clatter of feet floated from the corridor. A guard rushed in.

"The keeper," he said, yanking my arms through the rings on the wall.

“Later,” said Lurag, slipping along the wall closer to the others.

The keeper entered, helmeted guards ahead and behind. He paced along the row of prisoners, his robe glinting in the torchlight, the end thrown over a shoulder so thick with embroidery it seemed made of gold. He stopped at me, hands on his hips.

“You’re of interest to the young king, Chandu of Sindhapur,” he said. “I don’t know why. Expect his visit. What he wants to see you for is his business, and Lal’s.”

He turned to the guard beside him.

“Shave off his puny moustache and leave his hair untrimmed. And tighten the chains.”

The guard hooked his arm around the club on his shoulder and bowed. I avoided his eyes.

He untied my arms when the keeper was well gone.

“Don’t worry, Chandu of Sindhapur,” he said. “We’ll make you as miserable as he wants when we hear the king’s coming. Time enough then to smear you with dirt and twist your chains.”

Lurag settled beside me.

“You remember what I said before?” he asked. “I’m Lurag the sailor, not Lurag the hillman, and no one else can know. Lal kills anyone who stumbles on his secret harbour even by accident.”

“No one will ask me, but I’ll say nothing if they do.” I said. “Anyway, Lurag, why did you tell me? There was no need.”

“There was every need,” said Lurag. “A sailor must help a merchant, for how would we fill our ships if not for the merchants? Tell your parents that pirates

lurk in a bay near Palwar. They steal. They kill. They take all. They spare no one. They answer to Lal. I heard his name spoken, along with his son's. They think their secret's safe. So far, they don't know Lurag the sailor exists."

"I'm a prisoner," I said. "I don't see how I can tell them."

"You'll be gone soon. This Ruk and Ganda you speak of will be close to your home by now. When they return with gold, you'll be free. And one of these days, they'll free me, too. A warning and a beating and off I'll go."

But in the long days that followed, no one came to free either of us. Worse, one morning, Ruk and Ganda were led into the room, their once colourful headbands and gleaming hair dingy with grime.

“More guests,” said a guard. “These two hang around the palace all day, so we’ve invited them inside.”

Tears oozed from Ganda’s bloodshot eyes.

“It’s our great shame,” said Ruk. “We failed to rescue you. We were working out a way but now they’ve thrown us here.”

We were a group of four, far from our homes and friendless, unlike the other prisoners, who had displeased Lal in some petty way and waited unconcerned for their families to buy their freedom.

One day the guard brought me the soiled and tattered clothing I had changed from when I first arrived at the palace. The woollen shawl, ragged from our journey, was warm on my bare shoulders when the stony room felt cool. There was no sign of Ruk’s and Ganda’s packs.

“Bring them blankets,” I told the guard.

“Where would I find those, Chandu of Sindhapur?” he replied.

“When my father sends gold, I’ll pay you well, but it’s now these men are shivering.”

“It’s easy to promise gold one doesn’t have,” said the guard.

“There’s a story I could tell,” I said, “if blankets could be provided.”

Ruk and Ganda rolled their shoulders, smiling. The guard leaned against a pillar, crossing his arms over his club. Lurag helped me stand against the wall and arranged the chains dragging at my ankles. I raised my arm for silence.

“A king wandering in the forest came upon an *ashram* where there dwelt a holy man, his wife, and a young man who served them. The young man bowed him to a seat on the verandah step.

“‘What is this? A king must be treated like a king,’ said the king. ‘Bring me cushions for my royal buttocks.’”

The guard’s laughter boomed out. He signalled to his fellows, who came closer, sliding their eyes over their prisoners as they listened.

“The *ashram* had no cushions, but the young man and the holy man’s wife scurried to fetch their blankets, bound them up like cushions, and, a little breathless, presented them to the king with bows and folded hands.

“‘It seems I, who should have the cushions propped carefully around me, must do everything myself,’

said the king. ‘One cushion I put beneath me here, and one I place there for my foot.’”

I pretended to shove a cushion behind my back, and stretched down toward my feet. The prisoners drifted toward my part of the wall, gathering at a distance from the guards to listen.

“A little time passed,” I continued. “The young man pushed a slab of wood into the oven behind the hut so the sesame oil sizzled in the cooking pot above. The holy man’s wife chopped and stirred and boiled and fried until a row of earthen bowls full of food fit for a king stood ready on a tray. The young man, panting from all his efforts, set the tray before the king, and held out a jug to pour water over the royal hands.

“‘Have you forgotten the cloth? A king’s fingers must be dry before he eats,’ said the king. The young man ran to the banyan tree at the stream,

pulled off some leaves, and, slightly breathless, presented them to the king.

"'It seems I must do everything myself," said the king, as he dabbed at his hands with the leaves."

I brushed a corner of my shawl over my hands. My audience grinned.

"The time for sleeping drew near," I continued. "The young man showed the king to a quiet corner of the *ashram*.

"'Where is the royal bedstead?' asked the king. 'A king doesn't lie on the ground like just anybody,' he said.

"The young man ran into the forest and dragged back four stumps. The holy man's wife braided vines into rope. The holy man wove the rope across the stumps, and all three, the young man, the holy man's

wife, and the holy man, slightly breathless, waved the king to his bed.

“The king tested the springy vines by bouncing a few times, then pulled his blanket tight around him.

“‘It seems I must do everything myself,’ he said.”

I wrapped my shawl close to my shoulders, and closed my eyes, pretending to snore loudly. The prisoners shrugged. The guards nodded.

“It’s the way of the world,” said a guard. “Some people work and some just talk about it.”

I grinned at him.

“In the morning,” I said, “the holy man, his wife, and the young man all went to chop thornbush for fuel. The king came to watch. They began to cut away the branches.

"'Bring me an axe,' called the king. 'A king can't just watch when simple folk are ignorant. As usual, I must do it myself.'

"And he pushed down through the thorns to the root."

I hunched over, squirming, protecting my face with my hands.

"'Help!' cried the king. 'I'm caught. I'm taken prisoner by thornbush.'

"The holy man, his wife, and the young man pulled him out, ripped and bleeding, the scratches on his face smeared with tears. They helped him to sit, and gave him water.

"Then, slightly breathless, they bowed to him and sang, 'Hail to the king, slayer of thornbush. Hail to the thorn slayer, who did it all himself.'

“And from then on the king was known as ‘Great Thornbush.’”

“Good, good,” said the guards.

“Another story, Chandu of Sindhapur,” cried the prisoners.

“Another day,” I said.

The next day, the guard brought warm blankets to Ruk and Ganda.

12. King Thornbush

Confined in the rock-walled room, I forced thoughts of home and *ashram* to the back of my mind. Sometimes the guards unchained my ankles and allowed me to move through the room. Prisoners teased each other, quarrelled, bemoaned the weakness of Inder, the power of Lal, the bluster of Stana. A grey-haired man organized a never-ending game wagering pebbles, Ruk and Ganda arranged wrestling bouts, Lurag sang, I told stories.

One morning, in a burst of chatter, two guards shot through the door, dragging me with them to the rings on the wall. They wrenched my arms high into chains, doused me with a pail of water, rubbed my face with dirt.

“Forgive us, Chandu of Sindhapur,” they said. “It’s necessary.”

As the keeper had promised, Inder was on his way to see me.

Guards straightened their caps and arm bands, then stood silent and unblinking. Prisoners re-tied *dhotis* and smoothed shawls on their shoulders. Ruk and Ganda stiffened their backs even more than usual, adjusting their frayed headbands. Lurag slumped in his blanket, slackened his jaw, and gazed ahead with vacant eyes. I shivered as water trickled over my nose and down my shoulder blades. I shivered inside, as well. I was helpless, a prisoner who could live or die at the whim of another. Then, as the wait lengthened, shivering ceased. My shoulders ached so from the pull of the chains I thought only of the pain.

Sandals clattered in the corridor and the door opened. The keeper backed into the room, the gold on his clothing less elaborate than the last time, bowing an invitation to the procession following him. Palace guards in spiked helmets came first, one bearing Inder's bow, the other clasping the golden quiver with both hands. Then came Inder, his face even thinner than I remembered it, his *dhoti* gleaming yellow, his sash flashing from gold to red in the torchlight.

Lal and his son Stana swept behind. Lal marked his steps with his gold-painted staff topped with a crystal eagle's head. His thick white hair and beard were braided and bound close to his head, his long robe a shimmer of silver and blue. Stana's legs glided like a tiger's, his arms dangled like an ape's, too muscled to hang straight. Oil dripped from his hair onto his forehead and from his moustache onto his chin. His shoulders were twice as broad as

Inder's. No wonder he resented Inder's performance with a bow and arrow.

More palace guards drew up behind, polished and barbered. The row of prison guards was shabby in comparison. The prisoners folded their hands as the procession paced by.

Inder stopped in front of me. He moved to fold his hands in greeting, but caught himself when Lal touched his arm. I thought I saw shock in his eyes. How much understanding did he have of Lal's plots, I wondered.

"I'm sorry to see you in such circumstances, Chandu of Sindhapur," Lal said, leaning on his staff. "Sorrier still that you've created them."

"Next time you think to be disrespectful to the royal house," said Stana, sucking in his breath to expand his chest, "you'll hold yourself in check."

I replied to Inder, not to Lal or Stana.

“I showed disrespect to your house only once,” I said. “When we cut thornbush. Never any other time.”

Inder’s lips opened. I thought he was about to agree, but Lal caught his eye and he was silent.

I saw a ripple of recognition pass over the faces of the prisoners and prison guards at my mention of thornbush.

“I’ll remind you, Inder Raj,” said Lal, “that this is the merchant’s son who trailed after your sister, who took her silver. The princess has told us everything. Disrespect to his sister – that’s the greatest offence against a king.”

Stana folded his arms and leered at me, his chin jutting out beneath his moustache.

Inder's face was sullen, the same expression he had worn at the *ashram*. His eyes were unfocussed, half-closed.

"By the gods, Inder," said Stana, grinding his thumb into his wrist to squash an imaginary bug, "my father brought you back to be king. Act like one. Squash him. When I'm ki…," he began.

His last word became a squeal of pain as Lal rapped his staff on his son's ankle. But though Lal had cut off Stana's words, we all understood what he plotted against Inder.

All of us, that is, except Inder himself. He showed no reaction, but gazed straight ahead. Could I shake him out of his fog? I disliked him, but not as much as I was learning to dislike Stana. My life would be over with Stana as king.

“Inder Raj, I can tell a story,” I said. “You used to like my stories. I know one about a thornbush, for example.”

Inder focussed his eyes.

“Then tell it, merchant’s son,” he said.

It was the first time I had heard his voice since arriving in Palwar.

Lal shrugged his shoulders. Stana turned to leave but his father held him back.

“Be courteous a while longer,” he said.

The keeper sent the prison guards for seats. I rattled my chains to bring the audience to attention, and thought myself into my story-teller role.

“A prisoner has many tales to offer, for his eyes and ears stay free even if his hands do not, I said. “There was once a king who had many royal names, but his forest friends called him Thornbush.”

Inder stiffened, so I knew he was listening. The prison guards grinned. Ruk and Ganda raised eyebrows at each other. They knew what I was attempting.

“What’s all this about thornbushes?” asked Stana. “I don’t like it.”

“His friends called the king ‘Thornbush’ because that’s where he lived,” I said. “In a thornbush.”

“Not possible,” said Stana.

A laugh rose from the prisoners and guards. The corner of Inder’s mouth trembled in the beginning of a smile, the first smile I had ever seen on his face.

“Anything’s possible in a story,” he said.

The guards brought stools. Inder sat, one foot across his thigh, the other planted on a cushion on the floor. His old haughtiness was back and I was relieved to see it.

“Thornbush lived in a thornbush surrounded by his courtiers. He was the dove king. His eyes were points of black fire above the curve of his beak.”

I paused while surprise buzzed for a moment.

“A blue collar glinting like a river in the sun circled his neck, his breast was rosy as the river at evening, his shoulders were wrapped in a feathery robe the colour of rain as it falls on the river.

“Every day he flew from his perch in the thornbush, leading the other doves to fields and courtyards where seeds lay thick, but always he returned to his

throne in the bush. And the thornbush, sweet with yellow blossom and darting bees, or heavy with fruit pods, or sometimes with leaves grown frail and thin, loved and protected the king."

My arms ached, my twisted shoulders throbbed. For a moment I lost the words to continue the story. Then I saw eyes watching me, expectant, and found my voice.

"One day some cats with pointed teeth and ears and four legs ending in claws came to visit the king. They stood at the base of the thorn tree.

"'Miaow,' said the cats.

"'Trr,' said the king.

"'Why do you confine yourself in this thornbush?' said the cats. 'Come with us. We know a place

where thorns will never prick your fur or catch your whiskers.’

“‘But I have feathers and slip between the thorns with ease,’ said the king.

“‘No matter. Come with us and we’ll honour you as king,’ said the cats.

“And the king flew down and waddled with the cats to their clearing in the jungle. His legs became tired. He preferred flying but wasn’t about to be rude to such courteous creatures.”

Stana snorted.

“We’re grown men listening to stories for children,” he said. “This Sindhapuri merchant’s wasting our time.”

“Hush, my son,” said Lal. “Let Inder Raj enjoy the tale.”

“The cats tossed grains of barley on the ground of the clearing.

“‘Eat all you want, but don’t go into the forest,’ they said. ‘Stay here, where we can keep you safe.’

I shook my head to relieve the pressure on my arms.

“Free his hands,” said Inder. “What is the need for chains?”

I flexed my shoulders in relief. Stana tossed his head in disgust and once more crushed an imaginary bug with his thumb.

“Squash,” he said.

“While King Thornbush picked at the grain,” I continued, “the cats built up the fire on their hearth and sizzled butter in a huge pan. The smell of frying fennel and mustard seeds and even precious cinnamon filled the air.

“‘How delicious!’ said the king.

“‘Yes,’ said the cats, ‘we chose these flavours just for you. Come now and play with Big Panja. He loves a good boxing match.”

The king looked at big Panja’s huge paws and powerful shoulders. He looked at the sizzling pan which, he suddenly realized, was exactly the size to hold King Thornbush.

“Big Panja flattened herself to the ground, her tail lashing from side to side. In a flash, she sprang at the king, her paws spread wide.

“But, wonder of wonders, she was too late. For at the last moment, Thornbush remembered who he really was. He didn’t have to wait on the ground for the cat to sink her claws. He was a bird. He could fly.

“And fly he did, with a whirr of his wings, all the way back to his thornbush. And that day, the cats had no dinner.”

“Good!” shouted the audience.

“Your ending wasn’t sensible,” said Stana. “You shouldn’t have let the bird escape. What did it expect from cats anyway?”

“A pity you didn’t take a lesson from your own story, merchant,” said Lal. “The dove should have stayed with the birds, and you should have stayed on the Sindhu, telling stories to your own people.”

I was glad Lal and Stana had missed the point of the story, but what of Inder? Surely, if he wanted to leave, Chetu the litter bearer would help him and Mira, just as he had the first time.

“Well told, merchant’s son,” said Inder as he rose to leave.

The procession moved off as it had entered, two guards leading with the bow and golden quiver held high, the others falling in behind. My eye lingered on Lal, his flowing robe, his golden staff, his white head, and on Stana, tall and strong. They over-powered Inder’s puny figure. The keeper bowed them through the door.

“Did Inder understand my warning?” I asked.

“You can’t know,” said Ruk.

“He had more life in him when he left than when he came in,” said Lurag. “You gave him that.”

My arm chains were never replaced, and my feet were hooked to the wall only at night. I was free to scrub myself and my ragged *dhotis* in the washing area, to wander and chat as I wished. They allowed my moustache to grow, and even sent a barber to keep it neat.

One morning, the keeper arrived.

“Leave your game, Chandu of Sindhapur,” he said. “Lal has asked for you.”

I exchanged looks with Ruk and Ganda. Lurag thumped me on the back.

“No point asking why,” he said. “Just go. Keep Lurag the hillman in your heart as the hillman will keep you in his.”

He drew his finger across his mouth.

“I remember,’ I said. “Lurag the hillman. I don’t know any sailors.”

13. The Great Hall

A servant waited outside the prison room. He took me down corridors and up stairways to the same room I had waited in almost a year before. I recognized the lotus carvings on the legs of the couch and the vines climbing the wall of the garden.

Now as then, I was perfumed with oil, wound into an herb-scented *dhoti* and flowing green sash, refreshed with fruit juice and pastries.

What was intended for me?

Two palace guards in belts of patterned leather escorted me to the great hall.

Two more guards lowered their spears and waved me in. The robed and jewelled official, whose oiled and twisted hair I recognized from my last visit to the hall, led me down the wide stairway into the vast room.

I followed him across the stone floor, red and white and black flecked with gold, past gilded pillars and elegant courtiers and halted conversations, the drift of his blue robe a breeze on my face.

We reached the dais at the end of the walkway. I tried to ignore the hope bubbling inside me.

“Chandu of Sindhapur. This meeting must be more to your taste than the last one we had.”

It was Lal speaking, his hair and beard bunched tightly in white waves, his face wrinkled, his hand gripping the crystal eagle’s head on his golden staff.

Stana was with him on the dais, oiled arms gleaming. His *dhoti* was the yellow of sun pouring through forest leaves, his sash glowed like fire. Gold circled his arms and hung from his ears and neck.

Between father and son was Inder. Not the Inder who had sat before me in the prison room like a ruler on his throne, listening to the tale of Thornbush, but an Inder shrunken and frail, his crown, the circle of golden rays that should have risen in glory behind his head, slumped forward. Behind, guards in sashes and golden armbands displayed his bow and quiver.

Then I saw Mira. The last time I had seen her, she was watching me descend into prison. For months, I had tried not to think of her or of anything that made me long for life beyond the prison walls. Now I realized she had been in my every thought.

She stood to one side, swathed in rose threaded with gold. Cheeks still bright, hair still springing in black twists, jewellery like golden armour on her neck, her arms, her hair.

Her eyes stared into mine as if we shared a secret.

“Chandu of Sindhapur,” said Lal. “it’s the wish of the King’s sister on this auspicious day that you be brought here. Today the gods smile on Palwar. Today Mira, the daughter of Basho, will garland the neck of Stana, my son, in token of her pledge to take him as her husband. The child of the great king and the child of the great king’s truest friend will be joined together for the glory of Palwar.”

Now Mira avoided my eyes. I was aghast. Stana was unworthy, his thinking as thick as his muscles, his cruelty as well-honed as his shooting skills.

Inder's face was wooden, his hands clenched on the lion arms of his throne. Was Mira being forced to accept Stana? Probably not, I admitted to myself. Stana had the dashing moustache Mira had requested of the Kumari. I looked at it with envy. It curled to graceful points above his smirk.

My eyes fell to Stana's chest and I gasped, loud enough that Mira's head snapped up. The great jewel around his neck was the garnet and pearl pendant, the groom's gift I had bargained for in the trading village and been imprisoned for in Palwar.

"Since the gods have showered blessings on the families of Basho and Lal," said Lal, "the families of Basho and Lal will shower blessings on Chandu of Sindhapur."

The official with the twisted hair pressed me forward.

“Chandu of Sindhapur,” said Lal, “Mira, sister of Inder Raj, wishing happiness to reign on the day of her betrothal to Stana, son of Lal, asks that you be set free.”

He fell silent, watching for my response. Bowing, I glanced at Mira. Her cheeks flamed. Her eyes were sad.

“Chandu of Sindhapur, you are free,” said Lal. “You may watch the garlanding ceremony, and then you may go back to your *ashram.* Your imprisonment is ended.”

“And also…” Mira began.

Lal rushed to cut her off.

“And also that of the two tribesman,” he said. “They’ll leave with you.”

He looked toward Mira, raising his eyebrows. She lowered her eyes to the floor. My freedom had cost her something. Was marrying Stana the payment? A course she planned to take anyway, if her purchase of the garnet pendant was any indication. Good bargaining, Mira, I thought bitterly.

“There is a third tribesman, I said, thinking of Lurag. “Does he go free as well?”

Mira was startled. She knew nothing of a third tribesman.

“Fetch the tribesmen here,” commanded Lal. “The third one as well, by all means. We have a lesson to teach and then the garland will be presented.”

A woman beside Mira offered her a tray. Mira lifted a thick length of red and yellow blooms, holding it before her with both hands.

“Even now the princess waits with her rope of flowers. Let us conclude this other business quickly.”

Lal planted his staff in front of him, hands draped over the eagle’s head knob. Stana drew in his breath like a child expecting sweets and pulled one end of his moustache. The knots of courtiers along the walls muted their conversations.

My three companions from the dungeon, their rough clothing out of place in the ornate hall, were led in to stand in by the dais.

What’s happening?” Lurag asked me from the corner of his mouth.

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it,” I said.

We jerked at a sudden boom. A man appeared from behind Lal, pounding a drum, then holding still as the vibrations died away.

“The kingdom of Palwar,” said Lal, looking at our little group, “is a hospitable kingdom. All who come from across the sea, from the plains, from the mountains, are welcome here. We are courteous, but our guests must be courteous, too. Is that not so, merchant’s son of Sindhapur?”

I folded my hands and bowed. What was he leading up to?

“A guest who is not courteous has come recently to Palwar,” continued Lal. “There’s a gate to our city, where we would gladly have greeted him, but this visitor chose to steal behind the walls, prowl on the shore.”

Lal watched us closely as he spoke. Had Lurag’s secret been discovered? Beads of sweat glistened on Lurag’s forehead. Inder slumped on his throne, his eyes listless.

“There’s a guesthouse in the square, with warm food and soft blankets, but this visitor lay instead on the brow of a cliff, hiding, deceitful, spying on Palwar’s secret places.”

My ears rang. My knees shook. Would they seize all of us, or only Lurag?

“Such behaviour we can’t tolerate,” said Lal. “This man we condemn to die.”

Lurag was wound tight, ready to spring, but the guards made no move toward him.

The drum boomed out.

“Bring in the clerk,” Lal called out when the sound had dulled.

Clerk?

A huddle of forms moved toward us. Two guards, white *dhotis* flaring, dragged a man up the aisle, half lifting him from the floor, their fists clamped on his arms. His legs pedalled, trying to gain a foothold, his neck strained.

I knew that tall, thin form, the long, mournful face, the slender feet. For an instant I glowed in the joy of recognition. Onkar. How could he be here, so far from my father's warehouse? Then I felt sick. Condemned to die, Lal had said. Onkar. Not Lurag.

The little group halted at the dais. Stana grinned, then turned solemn when his father touched his arm.

"Let me stand on my own. I won't escape," came Onkar's voice, the familiar tone eerie so far from Sindhapur.

Inder, drooping half asleep on his throne, came suddenly to life. He gripped the lion- paw armrest, kicked the padded stool aside, and rose to his feet. Just as an empty sack poured full of grain grows steadily upright.

He stared at Onkar, his arms loose at his sides, his eyes burning. His mouth worked, but said nothing. Onkar leaned toward him, stiff in the grasp of the guards.

“I have finished my task and come as I promised, Inder Raj,” he said. “I never thought to come in this fashion.”

Inder stretched out his hand.

Lal watched in surprise.

“Move the clerk back,” he ordered. “He’s not here to converse with the king.”

The guards pulled Onkar away. Inder resisted as Lal pressed him to sit.

“Onkar the clerk,” said Lal, “you’re a faithful servant of Raju, merchant of Sindhapur, are you not?”

Onkar bowed. The guards yanked back his arms when he tried to fold his hands.

“And at your master’s bidding, by ruse and stealth, you spied out Palwar’s forbidden harbour, did you not?”

“Not at his bidding I did it, but to be of service to him,” said Onkar.

“Chandu of Sindhapur,” Lal called to me, “watch closely, then return to Sindhapur and report to your father how we deal with spies in Palwar.”

Stana's eyes swerved from his father to the side of the dais. Two men with rippled muscles and leather vests approached Onkar's back. Lal inclined his head, raised his hand.

Too late, Ruk shouted, "Watch out!"

Inder cried "No!"

One man stepped behind Onkar, whipping the sash off his hips and around Onkar's throat. Onkar slumped without a sound. The man twisted the sash while the second tugged at Onkar's legs. The gathering was mute, eyes fastened on the struggle.

The two men stood, bowed to Lal, and left. Onkar lay dead. The hall pulsed with a silence that made my eardrums ache. I leaned toward Onkar, longing to smooth back his bulging eyes. Ruk and Ganda started forward. The guards wrenched us away.

Lurag stared at Onkar's body, sprawled where his own would lie if Lal realized what he knew.

The body lay unattended on the empty tiles.

Inder stepped off the dais, his arms outstretched, and collapsed by Onkar. His bow and golden quiver reared above him, held by the guards who sprang after him. Ripped from his throat came a howl that seemed too full and deep for his slight frame. On and on the wail continued.

Mira's arms slackened. The garland slipped off her wrists to the floor. Lal gasped. Stana threw out his hand in protest. Mira rushed to her brother, her foot catching a loop of the flowers. Stumbling, she kicked it off, scattering petals on the polished stone.

She laid her hand on Inder's arm for a moment, then crouched beside him, not speaking, not moving, except to shift her legs caught beneath her. Her

golden finery was garish against the anguish on her face.

I struggled against the guard, who tightened his grip. The courtiers broke from their orderly rows behind the pillars, pressed close to the dais, buzzing with comments. Stana pointed his chin toward Inder and Mira, a question in his eyes. Lal held him back with an impatient flick of his wrist.

“Leave him,” sneered Lal. “Let the people see how a king behaves.”

He turned to me, his lip flaring.

“Get out,” he said. “Get out and take your friends before you find yourself back in prison.’

The guards released us. I bowed to Inder and Mira, both too lost in Inder’s pain to notice me. I bowed to

Onkar’s lifeless body, hoping the real Onkar was watching.

We hurried down the length of the hall, expecting to feel a guard’s heavy hand on our shoulders, until we passed through the great doors to the square.

14. *Ashram* Reunions

Lurag found his own way out of the city. When he met us at the gates, he had a bundle of blankets over his shoulder.

“Give me time to tour the streets once more, and I’ll outfit us completely,” he said.

We waited by a rock until he returned with water pots, cooking utensils, and food for our long walk to Sindhapur.

“A sailor’s life isn’t all tying knots and singing to the horizon,” he said, passing us some sweets dripping with honey. “Pirating skills come in handy sometimes, too.”

I wondered what deeds he kept buried deep.

When we reached the rope bridge, I crossed first. I had seen a man slaughtered, heard a king in grief, watched men plot to steal a throne, and lain in prison for a year. How could I fear to cross a bridge just because it swayed in the wind?

Our journey was tedious, with under-cooked grain for food, sticks and stones for weapons, and hearts heavy with Onkar's death.

"This man Onkar was dear to you?" Lurag asked.

"Like an older brother," I said. "Like a son to my parents. He served them better than I ever will."

"Was he always a spy?" Lurag asked.

“He was a clerk,” I said, “working out schedules and shouting at donkeys and fetching cushions for my parents.”

I grinned, remembering.

“He showed off a little, and my parents loved it,” I said.

Ruk turned on the stony ground to face us.

“He was a man of courage, a man with a great heart,” he said. “He told Chandu’s father he’d track the pirates to their source and put an end to Raju merchant’s worries.”

“And what of Inder Raj?” asked Lurag.

“They knew each other at the *ashram*,” I said. “When Inder was with Onkar he was almost likeable.”

At least our journey was dry. We reached my parents' gate before the rains began.

I left the others resting by the tree and went to find my mother in the back courtyard. She signalled to the servant to help her rise.

"Welcome to this house," she said.

"Mother, I'm Chandu," I said, bending to touch her feet.

Her eyes widened.

"Chandu, your son," I said.

She slumped to the ground. The servant eased her fall with one arm and pushed the milk pan aside with the other.

"Chandu," said my mother.

She kissed my hands, pressed my head against her, and when I lost my balance, squashed me in an embrace.

“Your beard is full,” she said, “You’ve returned a man. But I knew you right away. You startled me, but I’d recognize you anywhere.”

My father rounded the house corner. He jerked to a stop, clutching the wall for support. I bent to touch his feet.

“The gods be thanked,” he said.

He smoothed and straightened the shawl slung over my shoulder. His face twisted, tears squeezing through the folds of skin.

“I knew you were safe,” said my mother. “I never doubted it. Others feared the worst, but for all those months, I knew.”

“She never doubted it,” said my father. “All those sobs and lamentations whenever your name was mentioned were for joy.”

My mother smiled.

“I never doubted, but sometimes I worried I was mistaken,” she said.

Ruk and Ganda were greeted and Lurag introduced. Food was brought, on red platters I had never seen before. The taste of buttermilk cooled in the well and vegetables drenched in spices and sizzling oil made me tearful.

We sat under the courtyard tree, my father and mother on chairs, I on the brick ledge by the tree, Ruk, Ganda and Lurag on cushions and rugs that had not been in the house a year ago.

Resentment leaked into my joy at being home. Life had not stopped for my parents when they lost me. They lived on, acquiring cushions and rugs and earthenware without me.

“Just like that they took his life?” my father said when we told them of Onkar. “Shameful. To do such evil and still think themselves men. Lal may be a pirate, but even a pirate should understand honour.”

I smoothed my hand along the ledge where Onkar had rested in the evenings, always poised to jump up, his long feet scurrying with cushions and drinks, writing tablets, lamps, shawls. He was seldom still, unless hunched over his drums. I missed his drooping solemn face.

“The gods gave us back Chandu, may they be praised,” said my mother, “and took Onkar. May they be praised for that also.”

Lurag was startled.

“Yes, praise them for taking Onkar. We’re selfish and want Onkar for ourselves,” said my mother, “but he lived for others. Now he serves the gods as is his due.”

Her face collapsed in tears. There was no Onkar to rush to her with a cloth. She wiped her eyes on her shawl.

“He vowed to track the pirate ships to their hiding place,” said my father, “and so he did. At great cost. And already Lurag knew the secret we sought. The gods are mysterious.”

“Lal tries to dull Sindhapur with fear,” said Lurag.

“Let him try,” said my father. “I’m filled with grief, but never with fear. And filled with sadness to hear that Inder is a friend of pirates.”

“Not Inder Raj,” said Ruk. “His understanding is weak, but his honour is strong.”

“I think they’re poisoning him,” I said. “And he hates them now because they killed Onkar.”

“Inder Raj or not, the pirates have the might of Palwar behind them,” said my father “The danger’s even greater than we thought. The city must act.”

Lurag stayed in Sindhapur, plotting with the city fathers against the pirates. Ruk, Ganda and I continued to the *ashram.*

Anja-ma sat cross-legged on the verandah, a curly-haired baby kicking in her lap. We expected it. My mother had told us. Baba-ji leaned against the wall,

arms crossed over his chest. Anja-ma's sunken cheeks had rounded, her eyes turned outward.

"We've missed you here," said Baba-ji. "My daughter needs an older brother to fetch firewood and water. A tiny being's needs are great."

Anja-ma handed me the baby.

"We call her Niki," she said.

I held Niki under her arms, leaving her chubby feet dangling.

She stared at me with round brown eyes.

"She knows she's safe with you," said Anja-ma, lifting her back onto her lap, stroking the baby's legs. "When you were gone, your mother wept. Your father never spoke. Baba-ji spoke but forgot partway what he meant to say."

“It’s finished now,” I said. “Worse happened to you before you came to the *ashram*.”

“Worse,’ Anja-ma agreed, “because when the raiders took me, there was no one left. They were all killed. The wind blew, the birds sang, as if the village had never been.”

“Now there are others who care for you,” said Baba-ji. “Leave the darkness. Kiss your child’s head and feel her weight in your arms.”

“I want my mother to be here to kiss this child,” said Anja-ma. “She used to scold me for running through the wet washing, but she never stopped me. She should be here now to scold this child and not really mean it.”

She massaged the baby, her movements frantic. Baba-ji smoothed her hands into her lap and lifted Niki, kissing her forehead.

“When I was stolen,” said Anja-ma, “my mother didn’t cry. She couldn’t. She was dead.”

“The gods have pity,’ said Baba-ji. “I don’t know how to help you.”

Baba-ji upset? The core of my world was cracking.

“Don’t pay any attention to me,” said Anja-ma, patting my shoulder. “These moods come and then they pass. What matters is that you and Ruk and Ganda are safe. Thank the gods for that.”

My old life had disappeared. Ruk’s sisters and brothers helped at the *ashram* now. I had become more a friend to the adults and playmate for Niki than servant. My parents’ visits, which Onkar had always turned into festivities, were sober exchanges of supplies and news.

I asked Ruk to teach me to shoot. One day, when two tribesmen entered the *ashram* with a pot of honey and a plucked jungle fowl, Ruk came too, carrying an extra bow. He was
patient, but we both knew I would never be an archer.

“You shoot like a merchant,” he said, “thinking, thinking, thinking. You must become the arrow, the bowstring, the target, even. Then you can shoot.”

I was glad Inder had refused to teach me, sparing me the humiliation of showing him my lack of skill.

One morning toward the end of the rainy season, I knelt on muddy stones building up the fire for Anja-ma. Ruk and Ganda slipped from the trees with two strangers wrapped in dripping shawls.

“My kinsman,” said Ruk, bowing to Anja-ma and urging one of the figures forward, “Chetu just arrived from Palwar.”

“Don’t you know me?” asked the other.

Mira’s voice.

Of course we knew her, once she peeled the clammy fabric from her face. She swooped to touch Anja-ma’s feet, then leaped up to press her head on her shoulder.

“I’ve come to you for the second time, Anja-ma,” said Mira. “Chetu’s brought me again from Palwar. Will Baba-ji let me stay?”

“This is your home,” said Anja-ma.

We sat with Baba-ji on his verandah. Rain slid off the thatch in ropes and bit into the dirt of the yard, walling us into our own little world

“I can’t tell you how Inder is,” Mira said. “They won’t let me near my brother. You saw how it was, Chandu,” she said. “Lal bowing like a loyal servant and plotting away behind our backs, his son slobbering to perch himself on the throne, and Inder not noticing what they were doing.”

She avoided my eye.

“Your brother looked ill, Princess, when he visited the prison,” said Ruk, “and more ill the day Onkar died.”

“Poison,” said Anja-ma. “Mountain dwellers know the plants that cause evil, and some would gladly teach Lal for gold.”

“You say Inder looked ill at the prison,” said Mira, “but that was the day he began to improve. He came back looking excited, making plans. He was done with letting Lal walk all over him, he said. I had to calm him down, because Lal was watching, but it was a joy seeing him full of life again.”

Ruk caught my eye.

“That was Chandu’s doing, Princess,” he said.

“Chandu’s doing?” she said.

She looked me full in the face, then swivelled away.

“Chandu told a story about a thornbush,” said Ruk “The king liked it.”

“Thornbush?” said Mira. “He hates thornbushes.”

“Chandu taught him a different way to see a thornbush, Princess,” said Ruk.

Mira looked at me. So did everyone else on the verandah. Anja-ma shifted the baby to her other shoulder. The rain swept down around us.

“For those of us who were not in Palwar, you’d better tell the story,” said Baba-ji.

“A bird who was king escaped from some cats by flying to a thornbush,” I said. “I didn’t mean Inder should fly to the *ashram*, just that he had friends here and enemies in Palwar. He must have understood.”

“We made plans,” said Mira. “We realised if I married Stana it would be good for both of us and for Palwar. Just to impress me, Stana would wheedle his father into doing anything we wanted. But then they killed Onkar and everything fell apart.”

She glanced at me, finally willing to face me.

“But Anja-ma, you’re right. They must have poisoned him. They say he’s too sick to come to the audience hall. They keep him in his bed and say he mustn’t be disturbed. Sometimes I wonder if he’s still alive.”

“So many stories,” said Chetu. “Some say the princess trampled the garland intended for Stana, and the king was taken ill from the shock. Some say Stana refused the garland when the princess gave it and the king went mad. Some say a murderous demon burst into the hall then vanished, destroyed by Inder’s screams. Some say a celestial being appeared to Inder but was slaughtered by Lal’s demons. Some say Inder was poisoned and Lal nursed him with his own hands. Some say Lal smiled while the king screamed in agony. Who knows the truth?”

“You can be sure they’ll keep Inder alive,” Baba-ji said. “Palwaris follow Lal as long as they think he speaks for Basho’s son. If Inder dies, Lal’s power dies with him.”

“They have his golden quiver,” said Mira. “They keep it on his throne and bow to it like loyal subjects,” said Mira.

“What of the pirates?” I asked.

“Chetu can tell you,” said Mira.

“You see me here,” said Chetu. “I’ve left. One day long ago I stayed in Palwar while my father returned to the Sindhu alone, for I thought the life of a litter bearer was a life of adventure. My father - thanks to the gods he still sits under the banyan tree – my father told me when he left, ‘The day you can’t live in the city with honour, then leave.’”

He tapped his fingers on his forehead, then slammed his fist into his hand.

“By the gods, I hear his words still in my head,” he said, his voice booming as the rain thinned. “Now in Palwar there’s no honour,”

Niki jerked awake and cried out.

“The pirates have drained it away. First there were strangers lounging in the palace, meeting with Lal, dicing with Stana. Then one of the strangers was made head bearer and threatened to dump the rest of us in the sea. That’s when I took my family away from the city. The princess came with us. Nobody we met on our journey knew one of my daughters was a princess.”

“He risked his life for me,” said Mira. “His job is done. Now it’s your turn.” She looked at me.

The rain had stopped. Leaves and puddles sparkled in the sun.

“Stories,” said Baba-ji, “all of them false, all of them hiding pieces of truth.”

15. Journeys

Mari expected me to return with her to rescue Inder. Chetu, along with Ruk and Ganda and ten tribesmen were going with us.

“The king needs me,” Chetu said.

Lurag and my parents came to celebrate the end of the rains, full of city plans to send off shiploads of armed men, now that the monsoon season was over.

“I’m treated like a prince here,” said Lurag. “Feasted in the best homes, pointed out in the streets. You’ve made me an authority in pirate ways, just because Lal’s pirates almost killed me.”

“You know their hiding place,” said my father. “That’s all we need.”

We sat on the ground around the fire, roasting grain until it was crunchy and fragrant. Flames crackled, sparks flared and died, insects fluttered to the light. Anja-ma settled beside Mira and me, nodding and clicking her tongue to make Niki smile.

“You must be glad you went to the Kumari,” said Mira. “Such a sweet baby, and all due to the Kumari.”

“Maybe the Kumari, or maybe my own longing,” said Anja-ma, smoothing Niki’s hair from her forehead. “All I know is I was sad before, and now I’m sadder, and now there’s a child with a mother who can’t laugh.”

“You’re not happy about Niki, then?” Mira asked.

Anja- ma looked up. Firelight deepened the shadows beneath her eyes. She laid a hand across her midriff.

“Happiness – I don’t know what it is any more. It doesn’t come to me,” she said. “There used to be a place in me where happiness grew. It’s dead now.”

She stood with the baby and walked to the hut. Baba-ji watched her go, then returned to his conversation with Lurag and my parents.

“Chandu, do you remember Ruk and Ganda wouldn’t go near the Kumari?” Mira asked. “Maybe they were wise and we were foolish. Just see what’s happened to Anja-ma. She wishes for a child. She gets her wish. Then she can’t stop weeping.”

“Anja-ma’s been sad since she came here,” I said. “She saw her mother murdered. She can’t forget it.”

"But it's not just Anja-ma," said Mira. "See my brother. He asks the Kumari for his throne back. He gets it back. Then Onkar is strangled in front of it, and Lal's probably going to kill Inder, or imprison him or something. This Kumari makes our wishes come true so she can hurt us."

"She warned us."

"And look at me," said Mira. "It's embarrassing, but I might as well face the facts. I wish for a handsome prince, and lo and behold, there's Stana, not a prince exactly, but with a handsome moustache and eager to marry me. He turns out to be a coward and a brute and a murderer, using me to climb on Inder's throne. That Kumari knew exactly what she had in store for me."

"Maybe she knew," I said, "but it was your idea to chase after Stana like a hunter after a deer."

Mira gasped.

“That’s a rude thing to say to me, Chandu,” she said.

“You’re the one who wanted to face facts,” I said. “And it’s a fact you gave Stana that garnet pendant. And it’s a fact that you had him in mind when you made me bargain for it in the trading village.”

Mira looked at the ground.

“What if I did?” she muttered.

“You’re blaming the Kumari for your own mistakes,” I said. “It’s not her intention to harm. I asked for an end to the pirate menace, and then I met Lurag and it’s all working out.”

Then I caught my breath, horrified.

“I just realised,” I said. “It was Onkar. Onkar was the price. We found the pirates, but Onkar’s death was the price.”

The others were listening to us now.

“Don’t blame the Kumari,” said Baba-ji, flexing his toes in the firelight. “She can’t change the way of the world. Remember Chandu’s story of the wood pigeon and the thornbush. Think of the thorns. The bird is safe behind them. But those same thorns can impale, if he’s not careful. Don’t blame the Kumari for that.”

Baba-ji’s words must have worked in Mira’s head.

“We should visit the Kumari,” she told me the nest morning. “And take Anja-ma with us. Who knows? She might help.”

“Why not?” I said.

Once again, Ruk and Ganda led us up the stream to the waterfall.

“Watch over Anja,” said Baba-ji. “These days she’s careless of herself.”

No Palwari guards threatened us. They were all in Palwar, pacing the corridors of the palace. Tigers and snakes and bandits were the danger this time, but little besides rustlings in the trees disturbed our long climb.

I remembered Anja-ma the first time we made the journey to the waterfall, the grace of her arm balancing the bundle on her head, the sway of her skirt, her sure step along the path. Now she huddled in her shawl, caressing the baby’s head, looking at nothing, speaking little. At night, she rocked and hummed until Mira and I folded a blanket around her and urged her down, Niki tucked against her.

At the base of the waterfall, Ruk and Ganda helped us crawl up the last rock cliff, then sat cross-legged with their gambling stones on a grassy patch below. Mira set a tray of woven grass at the pool's edge and made careful cone-shaped piles of nut meats and dried apricots and rice dyed deep yellow. Anja-ma hunched down by the pool where it fell to the river below, rocking Niki against her shoulder.

"Do something, Chandu," said Mira.

"Hear us, respected Kumari of the waterfall," I called out. "Anja of Manu's *ashram* longs to see you, as do Mira of Palwar and I, Chandu. Appear before us if it's your wish."

Water splashed over the fish engravings on the rock basins, birds shrieked and rustled the foliage. I squinted through the sun's glare at the Kumari's rock.

The golden monkey bounded across the pool. Scolding and hissing, he snatched an almond and leaped back to the red-painted rock. And there the Kumari stood.

She was the same as before, scrawny, lank hair, the top of her head smeared red, the face of a girl, the shrill cracked voice of an old woman. Water rippled at her feet, her green skirt shifted in the breeze. The monkey clawed its way to her shoulder and peered at the almond clutched in his fingers.

“Why have you returned?” the Kumari asked. “Take care that you don’t disturb an old woman and her monkey for nothing.”

“Respected Kumari,” I said, “we come with a question. We came before with wishes, and agreed to pay the price. Now we ask you, is the paying done? Our friend Onkar is dead, Anja-ma is sunk in darkness, Mira’s heart is broken…”

“Not true,” said Mira.

“…and Inder is sick,” I continued, “or a captive, or both. When will the paying end?”

“Only you can end it,” said the Kumari.

We strained to hear her above the rush of water.

“You came over rocks and through the forest, thinking to pluck your wishes from me like figs from a tree. Don’t you know? It’s you who bring the wishes to life by wishing them. And it’s the wishes themselves that set the price. It’s not up to me”

“There’s nothing you can do?” said Mira, stretching toward her. “My brother will remain a king who’s not a king forever? A prisoner in his golden room?”

"I said a price had to be paid. Did I tell you to stop living? You're young and healthy. If your brother's in need, fight for him."

Mira squared her shoulders and smiled.

"I will," said Mira. "While Chandu fights pirates, I'll fight for Inder."

Her face beamed.

"How can we fight for Anja-ma?" I asked.

"I have no answer," said the Kumari, "no weapon to crack the darkness inside her."

The monkey leaped to the ground and across the stones. He dropped the almond on Anja-ma's lap. Anja-ma caressed his golden fur.

"The gods grant returning joy to you, Anja of the *ashram*," the Kumari said.

Niki cried for much of the long journey back. Mira and I took turns carrying her while Anja-ma walked alone, her arms folded across her waist.

Lurag was waiting in Sindhapur.

"We're ready to sail," he said.

He was dressed like a sailor in a white loin cloth and a red turban, shiny black hair curving up at his neck, golden ear hoops swinging against his cheeks, tattoos curving over his arms and legs.

"Three ships of fighting men to creep up the coast," my father said. "Lurag will leave in the first ship. With his help, we'll surprise the pirates in their harbour."

“And Chetu and Ruk and their archers,” I said, “will take Mari and me through the forest in time to keep Lal and Stana busy in the city.”

“Do your duty, Chandu,” my father said. “But go carefully.”

Lurag and I rushed to support my mother as she rolled to her feet. She pulled me to her, engulfing me in the folds of her shawl.

“The gods be with you,” she said, “and grant that you finish what dear Onkar started. If I should meet that murderer Lal,” she snarled, “these nails will slice him to ribbons.”

She held out her hands, the fingers bent ready to scratch.

Baba-ji raised his arms, opened his hands to the sky above the clearing.

“The light inside you will guide you true.”

16. The Mongoose Lord

Before daylight struck through the leaves, we were on our way.

This time, there were many of us travelling to Palwar. Barefoot tribesmen in bark fibre kilts and wicker breastplates, hair pushed back with bright headbands, bows or knobbed clubs over their shoulders. Tribeswomen with shell necklaces around their necks and baskets of food and bedding on their heads. Chetu, a tribesman too, but in the *dhoti* and flowing sash of a city dweller. Mira, red cheeks, wiry hair, dark eyes sparkling with purpose, the starched pleats of her skirt fanning out, red carnelian at her ears and neck. I was fresh for the beginning of the journey at least, white *dhoti* crisp, hair curling at my

neck, moustache trimmed. I carried a bow as well, although I hoped not to use it.

“They share everything, but I keep my things for myself.” said Mira the first evening, while women laid bedding for her from her private supply. “I guess I’m selfish.”

“It’s true,” I said. “You’re selfish. You probably don’t mean to be. Your brother’s selfish too. I hated him for it. Now I feel sorry for him. Anyway, I’ve thought out how to organize Palwar city against Lal. We need to do what the mongoose in the story did.”

“What mongoose?” said Mira.

“I’ll explain,” I said.

I looked across the clearing to where some of the men squatted, chattering.

“Ruk,” I called. “Bring everyone to gather at the fire. I have a story to tell”

“You’re getting bossy,” said Mira. “Do you think you’re a prince or something?”

She smiled, so I hid my irritation.

I sat cross-legged, my companions’ faces looming out of the dark in the glint of the fire.

“Once in a country far away,” I said, “a grey and brown mongoose lord slipped through the rocks and grass of his domain, his wide hairy tail sweeping the ground behind him.”

Ruk and Ganda grinned.

“As the mongoose neared his comfortable burrow in the roots of a tree,” I continued, “he heard his small son sobbing.

"'But Mother, why can't I go to the riverbank?' his son cried. "Don't you remember how good those eggs taste? The crocodile won't miss them.'

"'I've told you, my son," the mongoose heard his wife say. 'A tiger waits by the river. With one slash of her paw she'll put an end to you. You'll have to learn to do without crocodile eggs.'

"The mongoose lord was saddened by his son's tears. While he sniffed at a lizard with his pointed snout and rolled it in the dirt with his spidery claws, he thought about how he could get crocodile eggs for his little one.

"A spotted deer swung along a trail, leading her fawn to the river. 'Madame Deer,' said the mongoose, 'do you not know that a great tiger waits by the path to crush your child's neck with her enormous jaw? And your neck too, Madame.'

"'Please don't worry about us,' said the deer. 'You're mistaken. The tiger hunts by night. Now, before the sky reddens with evening, we're free to cross the grassy plain and cool our throats in the river.'"

"Not wise. Not wise," my companions around the fire interrupted me.

"Not wise, indeed," I said, "and that's what the mongoose told the deer.

"'No, Madame Deer,' he said, 'this tiger is crafty and particularly hungry. Day and night are the same to her. Should we not think of a way to rid our home of her presence?'

"The fawn began to tremble.

"'My child is frightened. He must be kept safe,' said the deer. 'What do you suggest?'

“‘Meet by the forest’s edge at dusk,’ said the mongoose lord. ‘When day is ended and night not begun, by the forest’s edge, and you will see what will happen.’”

From across the fire, Ganda clapped his hands in rhythm. Others joined in.

That was Onkar’s role, I thought, my throat tightening. Ganda looked at me above the fire, his beat faltering until I jerked my chin in approval.

I continued the story.

“The mongoose went to his rabbit friends.

“ ‘O king of the rabbits, so plump, so soft,’ the mongoose said, ‘your subjects are hopping on the open plain, nibbling tender shoots. Should you not be cautious of the tiger who can spring upon them in an instant?’

“‘Please don’t worry about us, dear friend. The tiger is fast, but we’re faster, and small. We’ll scurry down our holes, where no tiger can ever follow.”

A woman at the campfire interrupted, calling out, “That’s true. The little can outwit the big.”

The circle erupted in claps and cheers. She was tiny, the husband beside her twice her size. She poked him with her elbow, and he laughed too.

I resumed the story.

“The mongoose lord said to the rabbit king, ‘The tiger will set her striped cubs with their twitching noses and ready paws to watch every hole you build. Your children, cowering deep in the ground, will forget how it was to munch flower buds in the moonlight.’

"'Even our back doors the tiger will watch?' asked the rabbit king. 'Then what can be done, mongoose lord?'

"'O king of the rabbits, this is what you must do. Go with your children and grandchildren, your respected parents and grandparents, your aunts and uncles, your nieces and nephews, to the river bank,' said the mongoose. 'And where the ground is smooth, dig and scoop and hollow so the plain, though seeming smooth, is riddled with rabbit holes. And when dusk comes, when day is ended and night not begun, you will see what will happen.'

Ganda clapped his hands, and so did others.

"Then," I said, "the mongoose lord searched for their neighbour the cobra. He found her as she slithered through the leaves of an old *sal* tree.

"'Respected ruler of snakes,' called the mongoose, looking up through the branches. 'Do not hide from me. I am small, except for my beautiful furry tail, too small to hurt you.'

"'All the same,' said the cobra, 'You stay there, and I'll listen from here, if you have something to say.'

"Her flat head drooped down from the branch where she was curled."

A voice cried out from my audience. "It's good you're careful, Madame Cobra. You're no match for a mongoose."

I nodded at the speaker and went on with the story.

"The mongoose called up to the cobra, 'Without doubt you've seen the tiger who walks the plain as if she's queen.'

“‘And if I have, what is it to me?’ asked the cobra. “‘You and all you animals who run on four feet have good reason to fear her, but not I. This tiger has good reason to run from me. One strike of my fang is the end of her.’

“‘It’s your children’s happiness I speak of, not your safety,’ said the mongoose.

“‘My children? What of my children?’ asked the cobra.

“‘Back where even now your royal husband guards your eggs in their leafy nest are the rocks where the tiger’s cubs love to roll and play. Such scuffling, such growling, such dislodging of stones and dirt as they scamper. Your hundred squirming babies will be disturbed and nervous, rearing on their tails to strike and hiss, instead of growing peacefully healthy and strong.’

“‘You have a point,’ said the cobra, ‘even though you move on legs and your teeth have no venom. My children mustn’t be disturbed. What do you suggest, mongoose lord?’

“‘Be near the river bank at dusk,’ said the mongoose, ‘when day is ended and night not begun, and you’ll see what happens. Eat well before you go, so rabbits can dig unmolested. In any case, we mongooses will be there to keep them safe.’”

“When the sun dipped low, leaving the forest black and the river grey, the mongoose wound his way to the edge of the forest, his long tail trailing behind.

“‘Watch for the tiger to pass by, Madame Deer,’ the mongoose said. ‘Then leap past, your graceful neck arched high to tempt her, and lead her to the river. Spring high over the rabbits’ digging place, or you may wrench a leg.’

“Then the mongoose slipped across the plain to send the rabbits away from digging their traps, for traps they were, and to remind the mongooses and cobra of their responsibilities.”

“And sure enough,” I continued, “the deer and the tiger pelted over the rise and swept toward the holes dotting the plain. The deer leaped high, her legs folded like a dancer’s. But the tiger had no warning. A paw caught in a rabbit hole and she jerked to the ground.

“ ‘Now!’ called the mongoose lord, and the mongoose and his sisters and brothers and cousins attacked the tiger in a frenzy, jumping at her again and again to sink their teeth in her muzzle, leaping to avoid her paws.

“With great struggle, the tiger stood, planted her paws on level ground, and opened her jaws in a huge roar. The mongooses scattered. The tiger swept her

eyes over the landscape, then stiffened at a sudden movement ahead of her.

“The cobra reared up hissing, her hood puffed wide and menacing against the pink sky. Far from the snake’s forked tongue and the tiger’s paws, the mongooses and the rabbits watched. The tiger, not a muscle moving in her golden coat, stared at the cobra, entranced by the rhythm as the snake swayed, dancing ever closer.

“Then the cobra struck. In an instant, her head darted forward, her snout snapped on the tiger’s cheek, and flipped back.

“No one moved. Even the cobra stopped her dance.

“Then in one sinuous twist, the tiger spun round and dissolved into the darkening trees.

"'That was a warning,' the cobra hissed. 'Let my children bask in the sun in peace, or next time I'll bite in earnest.'

"The tiger disappeared, and was never seen in that part of the plain again."

"The next morning," I said, "the mongoose lord took his family to the river bank. Their furry bellies scraped the ground as they hurried through the grass and over the rise and across the rocks. While the crocodile floated like a log in the river, they dug through weeds and mud with their black hairless hands and nosed crocodile eggs out of the earth with their pointed snouts. And what a feast they had."

"Well told, Chandu-ji," said Ruk.

"So what are you telling us, Chandu?" asked Mira. "You said you'd explain your plan."

“We’ll go into the streets of Palwar when we get there,” I said, “like the mongoose lord. We’ll tell stories about the evils of Lal and Stana, make the people join together against them.”

“You mean us to be mongooses?” Ganda asked. He squeezed his fingers together into the shape of a mongoose head, and waved it in the firelight, two pebbles on his knuckles for ears, wiggling his fingertips like a nose.

“If we’re mongooses, that means Lal is a tiger,” said Mira.

“Oh no,” a woman called out, “don’t say Lal’s a tiger. Tigers are shining creatures, golden and wise. This Lal person’s not at all like a tiger.”

“That’s right,” said Ganda. “Perhaps you should change your story, Chandu-ji. Make Lal a boar, a

bristly boar with ugly tusks crashing through the forest. And a little Stana boar running beside him."

"No," I said, "not a boar. Boars are brave. Lal's a crow. With jagged feathers and a voice that makes ugly sounds. He spies into people's nests and carries away their jewels with his crooked beak."

"He's a louse," said Ruk, "scurrying from hair to hair on our heads. I'll pick him off and flatten him like this."

Ruk rubbed a fingertip over his thumb and made a spitting sound.

"He used to be nice," said Mira. "He and my father – they'd kiss all three of us, Inder, Stana, and me, and go off to hunt. Our mothers would sit in the sun combing their hair while we children played. And when the men came back they brought us sweets.

Lal's not like any animal I know of. He's human. Only humans change their nature like that."

We fell silent and settled in our blankets. My mind seethed with pictures of children laughing together, then growing up enemies.

Long days of walking followed, and nights on the hard ground, until we straggled across the rope bridge to Palwar.

17. Disappearance

“If you see us in the city, don’t speak,” Ruk told us as we stepped off the bridge. “Leave messages at the stone workers’ village.”

“Go and be a mongoose,” said Ganda, smiling, flapping his hand like a mongoose head.

Ahead of us, a guard gripped a man by the shoulder and thrust him away from the gate, the small boy beside him stumbling from the impact.

“Go back where you came from and let them feed you,” the guard said. “You and your brat both. You’re not wanted here.”

The guard turned to us, swinging his club like a toy.

“Come for the show, have you?” he said. “Like every other fool with nothing better to do. Beggars are not welcome here.”

“We’re merchants, not beggars,” I said. “And our silver is the purest north of the Sindhu.”

I slipped a piece of silver into his hand.

“We’re on time, then, for the - ah - show?” I asked.

“What show?’ said Mira.

“You don’t know?” asked the guard, holding his palm open in front of him.

I slapped down a second bit of silver.

“Just announced by the great Lal,” said the guard. “The young king himself. Inder Raj. A grand audience, open to all. He’s regained his health, they say.”

“When is this audience?” I asked.

“Let me think if I can recall…,” the guard said.

I added one more silver chip.

“The day after tomorrow,” he said.

“The gods be with you,’ I said.

“You still have silver in that sack,” he said. “Make sure it finds its way into our cookhouses. Don’t think you can camp in front of the palace with the beggars. Lal will put a stop to that soon anyway.”

“What’s Inder thinking?” said Mira as we walked between huge stone towers into Palwar city. “Does he do everything Lal asks now? I’m furious with him.”

“Who knows what Lal’s done to him,” I said.

We wandered through the streets. The marketplace was almost empty, with none of the laughing and milling around of Sindhapur.

A man, his belly round, his face cheerful, held up a carved bear, pulling a cord to make it dance. Tiny wooden birds and cows and water buffalo were spread out before him on the mat.

“Is business good?” I asked him.

“Once it was,” he said. “They lined up for my carvings. Tiger, crocodile, rhinoceros, I couldn’t make

enough. Now I sit looking at them. No one thinks of toys for children anymore. Or flutes."

He pointed with his chin to a stall hung with flutes, the bored stall-minder leaning on the counter with his elbows.

"Or perfumes," he said, glancing at a man and woman crouched on a nearby mat, packing small stone jars into a straw-lined tray.

"We're strangers here, and still have an interest in toys," I said, passing him a string of shells. "I'll gladly take that bear if you'll accept this. What's happened to blight the city so?"

"A usurper in the palace," said the toymaker, "though many wouldn't say it as boldly as I. A usurper and his band of pirates who squeeze us dry as old goats past milking and will slaughter our sweet young king when they think the time is right."

“Can’t you do something about it?” I asked.

“How?” said the toymaker. “You see the perfumers? That’s another family giving up. At least they won’t starve. The palace gives out food. Lal’s still courting favour. Who knows for how long?”

“Lots of people eat there, do they?” I asked.

“What else can they do? They’ve lost their livelihood. Lal has a lot to answer for.”

“There’s a way,” I said. “Day after tomorrow, be at the palace. For the grand audience.”

I thought for a moment.

“Look for people waving thornbush branches. They’ll know what to do.”

The toymaker looked doubtful.

“Far away, a Kumari guards a holy waterfall,” said Mira. “She requests it.”

The toymaker’s face brightened.

I stopped by a wine stall and slapped both hands on the counter. Mira looked back in surprise, the same look of distaste on her face my mother would have worn.

“A jar of your best,” I said, and passed him the price. I tasted cautiously and spat out on the dirty stones of the street. I knew nothing of wine, but I knew enough of wine sellers. They would not waste good wine on an eager boy parting with silver so freely.

“I said of your best, not a jar of sludge from the frog pond,” I said.

The wine seller widened his eyes and handed me another jar. Even I could taste the improvement.

“Now that rolls smoothly on the tongue,” I said.

Mira smirked at my sophistication. She was picking over clay bowls in the next booth, wrapped in her shawl to hide who she was.

While I drank, other customers came and went.

“Your trade is brisk,” I said.

“Fortunes are to be made in times like these,” he said, “for those who provide what’s wanted. Lal’s soldiers and sailors like their drink and carry heavy purses to pay for it.”

“Soldiers and sailors have a thirst,” I agreed. “Be cautious, though. One day they’ll help themselves to your jars and forget to pass you the purse.”

“No worry of that,” said the wine seller. “This is Palwar. The king won’t allow it.”

“I heard Lal does all the ruling,” I said. “Is the king not ill?”

“Recovered and in his full strength, I understand” said the wine seller. “You’ve heard? He’s appearing in the great hall the day after tomorrow.”

“Because Lal and his pirates say he can,” I said. “Can he no longer think for himself?”

The man’s face fell.

“Can a pirate be trusted?” I said

“We have no choice,” he shrugged.”

“Be at the palace square the day of the audience,” I said. “Look for people carrying thorn branches.”

I threw my used cup on the heap of broken pottery by the stall and walked off. Mira rushed to keep up.

“You’re swaggering like Stana,” she said. “You think you’re some kind of hero, just because you were arrogant at a wine stall?” she asked.

“I’m just being a mongoose,” I said.

The street sloped uphill as we walked toward the palace square speaking of thornbushes to anyone with sad eyes and a careworn face. I hoped Ruk and Ganda and Chetu were finding listeners in other parts of the city.

In front of the palace, people sat in the paved square. Two servers, in the white *dhotis* and red sashes of palace staff, walked along the row with a basket and a bronze pot, slapping chapattis on their hands, spooning a savoury-smelling mixture on the *chapattis*.

Mira and I crouched on the stones at the end of the line. A woman paused from slipping bits of *chapatti*

into her child's mouth, and shifted to make room for us.

"You're hungry?" she asked.

Her shawl had been dyed the blue, and was edged with bands of black and silver and embroidered leaves. But it was marred by pulled threads and fraying holes and a brown stain where it draped over her shoulder.

"This is your first time here?" she asked.

The men approached with food.

"Out of the greatness of Lal and Stana, you are given this meal," the man with the basket of *chapattis* said.

"Hah!" said the woman, when the men were out of earshot, "Lal and his son take all we have, then make us grovel for our food."

Mira swallowed a mouthful.

“What happened?” she asked.

“What happened to any of us?” said the woman. “Lal’s pirates marched into the warehouse with their clubs and pushed my children’s father out the gate.”

“You’re merchants,” said Mira, “just like…”

“Like lots of the people Lal hurts,” I interrupted, my mouth full. I pressed Mira’s elbow to stop her from plunging into our story.

“Where’s your husband now?” asked Mira.

“At home moping. He won’t beg, he says, and grumbles about what I take him. But he eats it in the end.”

“Where are they holding this audience we hear about?” I asked.

“The day after tomorrow? In the great hall – right up that stairway,” she said, pointing to the towering doors I had burst through with Ruk and Ganda and Lurag months before. “If you’re here for that, you might as well sleep in my courtyard. We’ve no food but plenty of company, and walls to keep out jackals, animal or human.”

She wiped her greasy hands on the paving stones and stood with her children. Nine or ten people stood with her. We walked down the sloping street, tripping against each other as the children darted through our legs.

Palace guards, fierce with wide leather belts topping their kilts and clubs over their shoulders, eyed us as we passed.

“Thieves,” hissed our new friend under her breath.

We slept with her other guests on the earthen floor of her courtyard, rolled in the blankets from our packs. First, though, we sat around a meagre fire. A young man played a flute, the longing and sadness in the melody floating out into the dark night.

“The king is ill and Palwar is ill,” said an old man with a straggly beard. “It’s Lal’s guards spreading the sickness. In the market, they tipped the cart of the old turnip seller. Vegetables everywhere, people grabbing for free food, the turnip woman snatching up what she could. Probably ruined her. Another one for Lal’s handouts. And the guards laughing.”

“There’s evil in the great hall,” I said. “There was a clerk so noble even his masters bowed before him. Onkar was his name. Every day Onkar the clerk ran his long pointed finger over shipping lists and passed his hands over bales and bags and jars of goods,

keeping his master's merchant empire in order. Then tales of pirates were heard in the land."

"Onkar swore a great oath to his master.

" 'I'll protect your ships to the ends of the earth. Your precious oils, your shawls, your sacks heavy with grain and pulses, your silken coverlets that run through fingers like water.'

And Onkar swore a great oath to the Palwari king.

"'Whatever the need, wherever the place, whenever the time, call me and I will come. This is my duty and my heart's delight.'

"And true to his oaths, when pirates stole his master's ships, and other pirates stole away the handsome king, Onkar the clerk followed. And was cruelly captured, chained and murdered by the pirate Lal.

“And as Onkar lay crumpled on the floor, jackals howled, crows squawked, the walls of the great hall moaned, the ocean roared and waves lashed the pirate ships in their secret cove. And so piercing were the cries of the grieving king that they drowned out the other laments.

“Lal snatched the king away and hid him from his friends, all the while scheming to seize the throne.”

“A good story, but with no truth to it,” a voice called. “In two days’ time, he’ll show us the king, safe and sound. You’re making plots and schemes from nothing.”

I thought the words came from a shadowed face near the wall. Lal had spies in every courtyard.

“Then let’s see what happens the day after tomorrow,” said our hostess. “Perhaps the king will stand tall and strike the wickedness to the ground.”

“We’ll be there to honour the king,” I called out. “The day after tomorrow. In front of the palace.”

I said no more in front of one who might be a spy.

I kept watch over Mira myself, huddled by the fire in the cool night air, jerking awake whenever my head drooped. But I fell asleep in spite of my efforts.

And in the morning, Mira was gone.

“She was beside me when we lay down,” said a woman. “See, her blanket’s still here.”

But no sign of Mira.

18. Sealed Doors

We sat in the early light eating soggy *chapatti* and vegetable. No face resembled the one I had seen watching from the shadows.

Had Mira gone willingly? She had a habit of being my companion when it suited her, then throwing me on the trash pile like a broken cup if Inder or Stana called. I shivered in fury.

Or had she been dragged off by that nameless face across the fire? Gagged, beaten, while we slept. I imagined her helpless, cheeks still glowing even in her terror.

“Lal must have her,” I said.

“She’s the princess, isn’t she?” said the old man who had seen the turnip seller taunted in the market place. I recognized his wispy beard and huge white teeth.

“I knew as soon as you sat with us,” he said. “You should have kept her safer. If I could see it, others could too.”

“You’re correct,” I said “It’s my responsibility.”

I thought of the toymaker, the wine seller, all the others who in one more day would be watching for thorn branches in the palace square. Convincing them had been fun when Mira was with me. We had planned another day of the same, perhaps even a walk on the cliffs to look for signs of the Sindhapuri ships crawling along the coast near Palwar. Now a lonely day carrying on without Mira stretched ahead.

I pushed through the city to the main gate on my way to the stoneworkers' village where Ruk and Ganda and Chetu were. Pairs of guards lurked around the corners, warlike in their kilts and heavy clubs.

"Hey," one guard called to me, gnawing on a chunk of dry cheese. "In rags, walking quickly. Where are you going?"

"I'm taking a message to the stoneworkers' village," I said. "My master needs their work by tomorrow."

I spoke a half-truth, easier to tell than a lie.

He waved his hand to dismiss me, too bored to inquire further.

The morning streets were bright, scattered with people. Except for the guards, most were as ragged as I. Women draped in threadbare shawls, hair

combed neatly back from sagging faces. Men in stained *dhotis* crouching by the roadside, holding up bits of pottery and jewellery that none stopped to buy. Families under dusty trees, sleeping mats rolled beside them, silent children leaning against their parents' knees.

I spoke to them of the palace square and the thorn branches. Some people avoided my eyes, but many turned to their companions with light in their eyes. Even if some slipped away to alert the guards, it hardly mattered, for my mongoose campaign was thriving.

When I reached the stoneworkers' village, the sun was low in the sky. Ruk and Ganda and Chetu were expected after dark, the headman told me, when they would all set out for the walls of Palwar.

"There's news of your father's ships, Chandu-ji," he said, scratching his stomach where his *dhoti* clung.

“They lie just east of Palwar. On the morning tide they’ll burst upon the pirates like a gift from Sindhapur.”

I tipped my head, then continued chewing flatbread and pickle.

“Tell Ruk that Mira’s disappeared,” I said. “By force or her own design I don’t know.”

The headman raised his eyebrows.

“We’ve done as asked,” he said. “Gathered thorn branches. Braided rope.”

“Remind Ruk to swing the thorn over the walls when they climb up,” I said.

It was dark when I re-entered the city and slipped into the courtyard for my pack. It was still dark when I slipped out, hair and beard oiled with the last of my

supply, the clean wheat-coloured *dhoti* I had saved for the day wound round my hips, my fine wool shawl, crushed and smelling a little of mildew, folded on my shoulder, gold rings and bands shining on my earlobes and upper arms.

I trudged up the sloping streets, one of many grey shadows gliding toward the great hall. The vast palace square where we had eaten two days before was clustered with silent shapes watching and waiting. A dark form loomed beside me.

“Two pillars to the left of the stairway,” said Ruk’s voice. “You’ll find your bow there.”

“Are all the tribespeople here, Ruk-ji?” I asked.

“Yes,” he said, dissolving into the shadow.

A boy appeared, handing me a branch from a bundle on his back.

“Hold it here, where we scraped off the thorns,” he said, pressing his palms together and slipping away.

The sky lightened, sun rays blinded my eyes for a moment, birds chirped and soared from the trees in a sudden sweep. Scattered shadows became men and women wrapped in shawls against the early chill, crouched under trees, lounging against low garden walls.

Dotted around the square stood Ruk’s men, twirling branches in their hands, tapping them on the paving stones. Knots of people thickened around them, around me and my piece of thorn.

“Watch the heads banded in red,” I said, nodding to the pillars where Ruk and Ganda stood. “If they’re still, be still. If they shout, shout too. If they run, run with them.”

We arranged ourselves to wait under the eyes of guards standing stiff on the stairway. The sun rose higher, vendors settled under the trees, the air seethed with cooking smells and the calls of hawkers. Meat sizzled in spices, milk frothed in huge pots, toy monkeys clattered on sticks. I sauntered by the toymaker's mat, flicking my stick of thorn leaves.

"How is your little carved bear today?" the toymaker asked. "As you see, I took your advice and brought my business to the great audience. Where's the young woman who so admires the Kumari of the waterfall?"

I shrugged.

"Watch the heads banded in red," I said.

At the top of the stairs, the carved wooden doors, more than twice my height, creaked open. People surged toward the entrance, eager for a view of the

hall. The guards, gleaming in polished leather and oiled hair, crossed their spears to hold back the crowd, slamming the shafts against the stone threshold. Bending my elbows out to shield others from the thorns, I pushed through to the door. People saw my gold armbands and costly shawl and let me pass.

I looked past two sets of doors to the hall within, a wave of flowery incense filling my nostrils. The dais at the end of the black and red-tiled walkway was still empty. I had walked up those tiles twice, once without knowing I was on my way to captivity, once without knowing I was about to be freed. What would happen today, I wondered.

Columns layered with gold lined the walkway, carved with leaping deer and tigers at their bases, and with graceful beaks and outstretched wings where they joined the high ceiling. Behind the pillars courtiers sat on cushions, waving their hands in conversation.

The throne rose from the dais above them, lion-paw legs, lion-maned back spread like a golden sun. A golden footstool, cushioned in red, awaited Inder's foot. Three lion-footed seats with curved sides shared the dais with the throne.

An official in sweeping robes hurried out of a side corridor. He blinked at the branch in my hands, then stopped, peering at me past the guards' crossed spears.

"You're the Sindhapuri boy. You made a lucky escape a few months back. I'm surprised you've returned."

I remembered his intricate knob of hair bound with cord. He had led me to the dais the day Onkar died.

"I've come to see the king," I said. "It's joyful news that his health has returned."

“The dead leaves in your hand?” he asked.

“A Sindhapuri custom,” I said.

He turned to the guards, gesturing toward the crowd on the landing and stairway.

“Let the people cram themselves in as close as they wish,” he said. “There will be much for them to see today, Lal-ji promises.”

He turned to me again.

“Be careful, young man,” he said. “You’re remembered here.”

He rushed back down the corridor. The people jammed together on the stairs grew noisier as the wait lengthened.

The official reappeared, this time leading a procession of gold-draped courtiers to stand at the base of the dais.

“Lal’s friends,” said a voice in my ear. “The decent people have fled.”

I recognised the speaker – the old man with huge teeth who had heard my story in the courtyard and recognized Mira for who she was.

“I see your thorn branch, Chandu-ji,” he murmured. “Tell me what to do.”

“The men with heads banded in red, Uncle-ji,’ I said. “Follow their lead.”

The official with the elaborate hair hurried back down the walkway, glancing at me as he passed. More movement and voices burst from the side corridor, women this time, sandals clattering on the

tiles, a cloud of perfumed oil, swirling skirts and tinkling ankle bells. In the midst of the jumble of floating scarves and eyes rimmed in black, one figure moved aloof, face stiff, arms crossed tightly above her waist. Her wiry hair and red cheeks were unmistakeable.

“There she is,” said the old man. “They’ve washed her face and oiled her hair and wrapped her in gold, but it’s the same girl who sat with us in the courtyard.”

“She doesn’t see me,” I said.

The old man cleared his throat and lifted his sunken chest.

“Give me your blessing, princess,” he called out. “Mira, princess of Palwar, daughter of Basho, sister of Inder, your blessing, if it pleases you.”

Mira turned her head, her eyes startled, and raised her hand to him as the cluster of women carried her past. Her eyes widened when she saw me, demanded something of me. Rescue? Understanding? Forgiveness? I had no way of knowing.

“Her hope’s in you, Chandu-ji,” the old man muttered, pressing my upper arm.

I glanced behind me. Ruk stood by a pillar, his thorn branch cradled in his arms. I picked out other tribesmen, their heads bound in red, blending into the crowd. I turned back toward the doors. Between the crowds and the courtiers, the guards stood wooden-faced and disinterested.

I looked to the end of the great hall. Mira perched on the lion-clawed chair at the edge of the dais, surrounded by women.

Another flurry of movement near the corridor's end. Two guards in elaborate uniform paced side by side. Bronze helmets, engraved and topped by fluted spikes, leather breast plates with shoulders padded and ridged, sashes swaying as they stepped. One carried a bow before him, the other held out Inder's golden quiver, stocked with feathered arrows.

They stopped in the shadow of a column before the entrance to the hall, where the crowd outside could see them. Their bodies were rigid, their arms taut, displaying the symbols of Palwar's rulers.

Inder himself, supported by Lal and Stana, drew up behind them. Inder, helmeted with his jewelled crown, the golden rays fixed to the back springing around his head. He was thin, but no moreso than usual. Restored to health, indeed. Or cleansed of Lal's poisons, more likely, for some purpose of Lal's.

Beams of the autumn sun angled suddenly through the cutwork of the corridor wall, sprinkling him and his companions with flecks of light. The crowd gasped in a single breath, then broke into scattered calls of “Long life to Inder Raj”. The cheers dwindled away in the face of Lal’s nose held high and Stana’s scowl.

Lal, his embroidered robe in a graceful drape over his shoulder, his beard curled tight to his chin, his white hair twisted in oiled coils, wielded his crystal-headed staff with one hand and gripped Inder’s arm with the other.

Stana’s hand circled Inder’s arm on the other side. Stana, bunched muscle under polished skin, black hair curled beneath his spiked helmet, bow and quiver on his shoulder even though only guards and the king were permitted bows in the great hall.

I tapped the thorn branch against my chest. All three swivelled their eyes to me. Lal dismissed me with a flare of his nostrils and turned away. Stana sucked in his breath. Inder's eyes flickered in recognition, not just of me but of the thorn too, I hoped. I rolled my eyes toward the branch and shook it again.

"Hail to Inder Raj," I called. "Accept this poor branch as a token of respect."

I held out the branch. A guard snatched it away and lifted it for Lal to see. Lal shrugged and gestured to a servant, who hurried with it down the corridor. No reaction showed in Inder's set face. Perhaps he understood that we had come to help him. Perhaps not.

Stana smirked. He thrust his free hand in front of Inder's face, balancing something small on his palm. Inder avoided looking and held his head high, arms

crossed on his chest, legs planted apart. He might be a prisoner, but he looked fully a king.

Then Stana held his hand toward me, dangling the object between his thumb and forefinger. It glinted in the sunlight, golden beads threaded on a golden loop. Bent out of shape, first by Inder's arrow, then by Mira's hand, and now, it seemed, by Stana's hand. My earring. I had told Mira to keep it.

Stana's face was bright with anticipation, waiting for me to crumple. I shrugged, but my insides were queasy. Had he torn the earring from Mira? Or had she given it to him, the two of them laughing at me?

Lal, without turning toward Stana, spoke something, his lips squeezed in emphasis. Stana drew back his hand.

Inside the entrance to the great hall, the rolled-haired official I was beginning to think of as my

friend waved his arm. The two guards stiffened, held the royal symbols higher, Lal smoothed the pleats on his shoulder, Stana thrust out his chest.

“Inder, son of Basho, King of Palwar, protector of the gods,” boomed the herald’s voice.

The occupants of the great hall formed lines along the pillars, leaving their conversations. The royal procession, led by the bow and golden quiver, moved to the walkway and paced slowly to the dais, onlookers folding hands as it passed. Servants in white *dhotis* and red sashes hurried to ease Inder onto the throne, to place the stool under his foot. He straightened his crown. The guards held up the bow and quiver behind him.

Mira was seated at the edge of the dais. Lal sat between Inder and Mira, hand firm on his staff. Stana took the chair on Inder’s other side, preening and self-conscious in the gaze of the gathering.

Inder gestured to both sides of the hall, and the courtiers and officials sank back onto cushions and chairs. Beyond the guards with their crossed spears, the rest of us crowded at the entrance, balancing on column bases, climbing on shoulders, to view the distant dais. Ruk's men stayed close to their weapons hidden behind the pillars.

Lal raised his hand.

"Today is a momentous day for the kingdom of Palwar," he said.

At the stairway, we strained to hear.

"Today is a momentous day for the kingdom of Palwar," repeated the herald at our end of the hall.

The crowd cheered.

“Inder Raj is restored to health,” Lal said, and the herald repeated.

The crowd cheered again. Inder folded his hands and bowed.

“Inder Raj, grateful to the gods for the grace they have showered on him and Palwar, wishes to honour them,” Lal said echoed by the herald.

Another cheer from the crowd.

“I don’t like this,” said the old man beside me, twisting his skinny moustache. “Beware when Lal and Stana look happy.”

“On this day,” said Lal, “Inder our king shows us his true greatness. Today, he rests his foot on the crimson cushion of royalty and weighs down his head with a king’s crown, for the last time.”

The audience gasped.

“Today,” said Lal, “he embraces his sister, he embraces his friend Stana, he touches the feet of Lal his counsellor, and frees his head forever of the crown’s weight. Today Inder Raj rises from the golden throne and journeys far away, to devote himself to the gods, to live in solitude and austerity...”

The courtiers muttered, eyed each other, stared at Lal.

“What did he say?” the people outside cried in disbelief, pressing against the guards.

A boy shoved from his father’s shoulders sprawled against me, almost knocking me down.

“…leaving Stana to rule in his stead,” Lal continued.

"…Stana to rule in his stead," echoed the herald.

Stana stood and bowed to the hall. Feeble cheers rose from the courtiers nearest the dais. The rumble of mutterings increased.

My elderly companion climbed on a stone block, supporting himself with an arm round the pillar. He thrust the other arm in the air, his fist clenched.

"What have you done to him?" he screamed, froth seeping through his bared teeth. "What have you done to Inder our king?"

I tugged at him to come down. He pulled away.

"Stana will rule," An shouted Lal, pounding his staff on the floor of the dais, "with the princess of Palwar as his bride."

“…the princess of Palwar as his bride,” repeated the herald.

Inder and Mira sat with faces like stone.

The old man’s eyes swelled with fury.

“The gods won’t forget your treachery, Lal of the crystal staff,” he cried.

“Uncle-ji, climb down,” I urged.

He ignored me.

“Lal, you dishonour your family by mistreating the king,” he called out. “Since the day you slaughtered Onkar, noble emissary of the city of Sindhapur, you dishonour your family.”

An arrow sliced into his chest, lifting him from the pillar. People screamed, staggered back, as he

crumpled across the stairway. Helpless, I bent over him, glancing down the hall to the dais. Stana stood, his legs balanced wide, fitting another arrow to his bow.

Along the length of the hall, across the entrance way, through the great doors, straight to the ribs of a skinny old man hugging a pillar. A great marksman, an evil act.

Guards raised spears and bows.

“Seal the doors,” Lal called.

“Seal the doors,” echoed the herald.

Guards rushed behind the huge door slabs and pushed. The air was filled with the hiss of posts sliding in their sockets, the scraping of wood on the stone sill, the crashing of the great bar. The crowd grew silent.

Our view of the dais was blocked. The great doors were a wall closing us off from the hall. Lal had cut the Palwari people from their king. Inder and Mira were friendless on the other side.

19. A Day's Work

The old man's voice was faint but his eyes were fierce. The woman from the courtyard pushed through the crowd, lifted his head to her lap.

"Go. Do your work. Leave me to others," he said to me.

My work, I thought. I hardly understood what that was any more, but I knew speed was our hope, before the guards rallied themselves.

"Uncle-ji, what is your name?" I asked. "The king should know it. You've sacrificed much for him."

"Go," he gasped.

“He’s our carter Lun,” said the woman. “Faithful to us and the king to the end. He’ll die in peace if you go now.”

I shot down the stairway and along the wall of the palace, stretching the thorn branch above my head as I ran. I rounded the corner out of sight of the guards and slammed to a stop, leaning against the wall out of breath. Ruk joined me, handing me my little bow, retrieved along with his from its hiding place. I dropped the branch. It had served its purpose.

Other tribesmen loped across the pavement toward me, bows on their backs. A collection of flushed townspeople in tucked-up *dhotis* and skirts pounded behind, following the red headbands. I recognised the toymaker among them. Above us the palace wall rose sheer and blank, the few openings high and narrow. Beside us stretched tumbled rock and stunted trees.

“A wall around a garden - along here somewhere. I was in it once,” I said.

Chetu ran ahead and returned, beckoning us forward. A wall jutted out from the palace, twice our height and smooth, but easy for Chetu and Ganda to scale with a boost from other shoulders. They peered across the top and slipped to the other side. Ruk’s men helped the rest of us scramble over, and vaulted gracefully themselves.

“Aaii!” cried the toymaker when his bare belly scraped the stone.

“Shh,” mouthed Ruk, holding his finger to his lips.

The toymaker pressed his finger to his mouth. We picked off the twigs and leaves that had snagged our clothing from our slide down the wall. The garden was as I remembered, a secluded walking place. Twice I had gazed upon it, waiting to be conducted

to the great hall. A pool in the centre bordered with tiers of steps, round lotus leaves floating in the silver water, tree branches clinging to the wall, roses flowering pink and red through the thorns.

Ruk tossed his head toward the blue-painted door in the palace wall. Chetu and Ganda forced it open and pushed through. I held my breath, primed for screaming guards to burst into our midst. But the only sound was a shout, quickly muffled. Ganda reappeared, motioning us in.

Two men cowered by an open chest, half-folded lengths of cloth draped over their hands. They stared at our little group of invaders. Tribesmen with straight backs, red headbands, bows ready to do Ruk's bidding. Townspeople, fat and thin, old and young, hanging back.

"Those who are young and strong - go with my archers and unbar the great doors," said Ruk. "The

rest - hold these servants and any others you come upon."

"Wait," said the toymaker. "Tell us the plan, forest man. When do we deal with Lal? I didn't scrape and strain myself just to frighten servants."

Ruk's hand flashed to his quiver at the challenge, his men's hands too. I spoke quickly.

"Seek answers from me, toymaker-ji, for it was I who made the promises. Allow noble Ruk to do his work, for he's our hope."

The toymaker bowed to Ruk.

"I regret I've offended you, Ruk of the forest, "but old and top-heavy though I am, I can fight as well as the young ones here."

Ruk waved the offense away, and jogged down the corridor, stopping every few steps to sweep his bow left to right, back to front. Ganda moved in a sideways step, watching behind. Ruk's archers urged along the cluster of Palwari youths.

"I'll tell you what I know," I said to the toymaker and the others left behind by the clothing chest. "If you round up the servants, we're free to break the doors open. If we break the doors open, Lal and the guards will be too busy to think of the sea. If Lal neglects the sea, there are ships come from Sindhapur that will scuttle his ships and cudgel his pirates. If the pirate ships are sunk, the souls of Onkar and the old man Lun will bless us."

"And the king?" asked the toymaker. "The king and the princess?"

"I won't sleep till they're out of Lal's hands," I said.

“Then I'll do as the tribesman asks,” he said.

I rushed after Ruk, bow in my hand. We twisted through the corridors, listening at corners for the shouting, pounding, and thumping that grew louder as we neared the entrance. Frightened eyes appeared at open doors along our way.

“Go to the garden room. Stay there,” Ruk said, his bow raised.

Twice, palace guards burst around corners. Ruk’s men flipped them to the floor and left them by the wall, trussed in their sashes.

We eased around the final corner to the entrance doors. Shouting from outside filled the silence, and the pounding of fists and feet made the huge door slabs tremble.

“Open the doors! Lal has gone too far! Let us see the king! cried the townspeople.

The palace guards inside ignored the vibrating doors, the thumps and shouts from the other side. Backs to the doors, their bodies rigid, they trained their eyes into the great hall.

Ruk stepped toward them, an arrow to his bow, followers pushing close behind. The guards swerved their heads, then snapped their attention back to the hall.

“Let the tribesmen be,” said their grey-headed leader, walking toward us, his hand held out in reassurance. “I don’t know your intentions,” he said in an undertone, glaring above his streaky beard, “but make no sound if you have regard for the safety of the king.”

Ruk lowered his bow, although the archers behind held theirs steady. I stood beside Ruk, my bow hanging off my shoulder.

“Is Inder Raj in danger?” Ruk murmured

“The whole hall’s in danger,” said the guard. “Lal’s son has gone mad.”

“Inder’s my friend, “I said. “I need to see.”

I crept to the hall entrance, pushing past the grizzled guard. His men ignored me, their eyes strained on the scene within. Supporting my hand on the smooth wood around the inner entrance, feeling as puny under the tall carved lintel as a pebble on the valley floor beneath the swinging bridge, I stretched my neck around the frame. My eyes lit on the official with the elaborate hair and flowing robes.

“Go back,” he mouthed. “It’s not safe.”

Nothing moved. Stana towered halfway down the walkway, his back toward me. His legs were planted apart, an arrow was nocked against the bowstring, his arm bulged with the effort of stretching it back. The arrow was pointed at Inder.

Inder stood, his leg against the embroidered footstool, his great bow in his hand. The guard behind him held out the golden quiver. Fixed to Inder's bow was an arrow, aimed straight at Stana.

Each held the other at bay, like cobras rearing up waiting for the other to strike. I slowed my breathing, afraid even the movement of my chest would destroy the balance.

Lal stood to one side of the throne, holding out his hands to his son half the room away. The courtiers pressed back against the walls. Mira's companions huddled in the far corner, grasping Mira, who was straining to see around them. The guards beside

me held their arrows slack in their bows, uncertainty on their faces. Was it Stana they should protect, or Inder?

“Do nothing,” mouthed the courtier with rolled and bound hair.

The guards seemed content to obey.

The silence was dense, barely touched by the thumps and shouts from outside. Sparrows twittered where the pillars met the ceiling, a world apart from the thickening tension below.

Inder stood, compact and solid. The stooped, feeble figure he had become in Palwar had disappeared. The arrogant *raja* who had so infuriated me in the forests of Sindhapur had returned. Power gleamed in the set of his jaw, in his arms flexed round the bow, in his sinewy legs.

I stepped past the threshold of the hall, raising my bow. My practise bow, hardly bigger than a child's, ridiculous beside the guards' bows and the huge weapons of Stana and Inder.

"Stana," I called, "look behind. It's not only Inder Raj's arrow you should fear."

The spell of silence was broken. Stana whirled around. Inder's arms relaxed.

Stana hooted when he recognised me. Bile burned my throat. I shivered and sweated at the same time.

"Merchant's son," skoffed Stana. "Go weigh your beads or measure your grain or whatever it is you do."

Lal stepped off the dais, reaching toward Stana.

“Put down your weapon, my son,” he called out. “I swore an oath to Inder’s father. Don’t betray my word. You’ve threatened the king in his own hall. Don’t displease the gods any further.”

Stana turned his ear to his father.

“Your time is almost here,” said Lal. “You’re forgetting. Inder leaves for the forest. All will be yours.”

I gripped the bow, the bowstring taut. I saw Inder flinch at Lal’s words and Mira strain against the women who held her.

“Put down your bow, my son,” called Lal again.

Stana stepped toward his father, bow in one hand, arrow in the other.

“Since you ask it, Father, I do it,” he said, spreading his arms wide, the arrow far from the bow.

The room relaxed. The pounding and shouting outside faded. The chirping of the birds in the roof filled my ears. Comical as I had looked strutting into the hall wielding my tiny bow like a child playing warrior, I had broken the impasse.

But the air was still dangerous.

“Why do you find fault with me, my father?” Stana called out. “Should you not scold Inder? He’s the one who threatened me. I did nothing to him.”

“You’re right, my son,” said Lal. “Inder Raj must also put his weapon aside. He had no provocation to attack you.”

Inder snapped to attention, stiffened his bow arm. Strong and sure, fully a king, for all his small stature and thin body. I was proud to be his friend.

“Lal-ji,” Inder called out. “Permit me to say that in fact your son gave me good reason to act against him. An innocent man lies dead outside these barred doors, pierced by Stana’s arrow. Never would my father the great Basho have allowed this. Never would the noble Lal as I once knew him allow it.”

Lal moistened his lips and swallowed.

“This son of yours,” continued Inder, “this Stana, whose mighty shoulders and god-like face hide feebleness within, this son of yours has tainted you with his foulness.”

The grey-bearded soldier beside me gasped.

Swift as a cobra, Stana hefted his bow and nocked an arrow.

“It’s too much, Father,” he cried to his father, spitting saliva. “In all things I obey you except in this. Never can I allow insults to my father.”

Inder threw out his leather-padded chest, open to Stana’s aim. I knew his mind. Inder would not attack a man defending a father’s honour.

But I cared little about an evil son’s love for an evil father. I had seen the fury in Stana’s eyes. His heart was set on murdering Inder.

I raised my bow, drew back the arrow. The smooth wood sprang from my hand and flew at Stana, glancing off his shoulder just as he snapped his arrow at Inder.

An echo of Ruk's words as he taught me to shoot in the forests of Sindhapur flashed through my mind. So that's what he meant, I thought, as the arrow left my bow. I was the arrow, streaking down the hall. I was Stana's shoulder, bunching to let an arrow fly, recoiling from the bite of my tiny arrow that clattered to the floor, its work complete.

Just a tiny jerk of Stana's shoulder, but a deadly swerve in the path of the arrow sprung from his bow. A thwack jolted the air, a body collapsed, guards rushed to support slumping shoulders.

The man stretched on the floor by the dais, an arrow stuck firm in his chest, was not Inder.

Stana's face twisted in a scream so shrill my own throat strained with his effort.

"Father!" he shrieked, his bow limp at his side.

“Father!” shrieked Stana again. “My father is dead. Why am I alive?”

Inder stretched his arm toward him.

“Don’t blame yourself, my brother,” he called out. “It’s the gods who decide.”

“Never the gods,” shouted Stana, whirling as one with his bow to face the entrance, his arrow trained on me. “Never the gods. Only this Sindhapuri merchant’s son,” he cried.

He drew back his arm. I stood calm, no thought of the gods, no fear, just curiosity. How would it feel?

I waited for the arrow to slap through the air, slam into my chest.

A shout, “Stana, behind you!” A thunk. An urgent murmur from the crowd.

The instant had passed, and I still stood. Stana lay splayed on the floor face down, his bow beneath him. On the dais stood Inder, his arm limp over his bow, the guard beside him still holding out the golden quiver of arrows. Inder had killed Stana .

I was calm no more. My body shook, my teeth chattered, I felt as if my joints had come apart. The old soldier propped me against the door frame as I sank to the tiles.

“I thought we’d lost you,” he said.

Ruk eased past the doorway and hunched down beside me.

The crowd was silent as Inder stepped off the dais, attended by the quiver bearer, and paced along the walkway to where Stana sprawled. Servants crouched over the body. Father and son were dead. Dead on the same day.

By the throne at the end of the hall, her head held high, no longer clutched back by her women, Mira waited alone.

Inder bowed his head over Stana's body, then spread his arms wide.

"To stop evil, I have made a greater one. Stana, son of my father's oldest friend, it was not fitting for you to die like this. The fault is mine. A thousand lifetimes won't cleanse me of letting fly an arrow at Stana's back."

Ruk slid upright from beside me and moved forward down the stairway. His voice rang out down the hall, a rough-kilted forest man confronting a king in his gilded audience hall.

"O King," said Ruk, "as warrior to warrior I speak to you. I heard, we all heard, the gods heard, that you warned Stana before you loosed your arrow. An

innocent lad is alive. A murderer has been freed from his murderous path. You did as a warrior must."

A babble of voices floated from the pillars, then stilled at the sight of Inder's stormy face and stiff shoulders. Ruk caught Inder's eyes with his own, bored into them, two proud wills confronting each other. Then Inder shifted, folded his hands to Ruk, and the air felt light, alive again with the chirping of sparrows in the ceiling beams.

"I hail the great king," Ruk called out, and lowered his forehead to the floor, his bow caught up behind.

"Hail to Inder Raj," called the herald, who had once again taken up his place at the entrance. "Son of Basho, upholder of the law, keeper of the peace, slayer of demons. Hail to Inder Raj."

"Hail," the court echoed.

Inder bowed. The guard beside him held up the golden quiver with both hands.

I rose to my feet and cheered, my strength returned. The courtiers cheered, the guards cheered, the herald cheered. Mira cheered, alone on the dais. The toymaker cheered from the corridor, where his small band of townspeople and bewildered servants had drawn up.

“The doors. Open the doors,” called the Palwari youths who had raced with Ruk through the palace corridors.

The guards, motioned by their grey-bearded leader not to interfere, grinned at the disorganised scramble to raise the heavy bar. The huge doors swung open, scattering people still clustered on the outer stairs.

“Lal is no more, laid low by his son,” announced the toymaker. “Stana is no more, fallen to Inder Raj’s arrow. Hail to Inder Raj. Hail to the princess.”

His words were passed on like echoes. The square was a tumult of jubilant voices, arms thrust up in victory, stamping feet.

In the hall, the din of celebration dwindled as guards shuffled slowly along the walkway, the bodies of the slain father and son slung in cloths.

The crowd outside split apart. A figure burst up the stairway to the great entrance. He collapsed near the top and lay panting, his *dhoti* splotched with dirt, his arm crusted with blood, one foot without a sandal.

“Lal-ji. A message for Lal-ji,” he gasped.

The guards bearing Lal and Stana, about to turn down the corridor, staggered, clutching the bloody cloths supporting the bodies.

“Take me to Lal-ji,” the messenger repeated. His head hung low, his shoulders heaved.

The grey-bearded guard stood above him.

“It is to Inder Raj you must give your message,” he said. “Lal-ji has left his body, borne before you as we speak.”

The messenger lifted his head in shock.

“It’s Lal-ji who commands us,” said the messenger. “Inder Raj knows nothing of this. Who can help us now? It’s over.”

“You’ve been sent with a message, so do your duty,” said the guard. “Control yourself. Speak what you have to speak.”

“Lal-ji was to know,” said the messenger, “that the harbour is taken. Attacked and taken. Our fierce ships are sinking, our sharp knives captured. We have failed Lal-ji, but he will never know it.”

Once again, I slumped against the wall, this time from excitement. I had forgotten about Lurag and the Sindhapuri ships, the major work of the day.

Lal and Stana dead. Inder’s strength revived. Mira saved from an ugly marriage.

And the pirate menace wiped out, if the messenger was to be believed.

The day had turned out well.

20. Frankness

The official with braided hair and floating robes led Lurag and me along the red and black tiles to Inder Raj. After the victory against the pirates, Lurag had climbed the cliffs above the cove clogged with broken pirate ships and thrown his arms around me in a rough embrace. I clasped him just as tightly, stinking and grimy as he was

Inder sat on the lion throne, his leg planted on the cushioned footrest. Whatever poison Lal had fed into his system was worn off completely. His eyes snapped, his back was straight.

“Now you sit well on the throne,” I said.

“Once before we were together in this hall,” said Inder. “We were prisoners, all three. You two understood it well. I didn’t. Till they killed Onkar. Then I knew.”

“Many have sacrificed to bring us to this day,” I said.

“Chandu of Sindhapur,” said Inder, “when I first knew you, we were boys, and I came close to kicking you in the dirt. Now we are men, and I call you friend and ally. I honour your sacrifices for me and Palwar.”

I folded my hands in thanks. Not wanting to stir up his pain at causing Stana’s death, I said nothing of how he had saved my life.

“Of you, Lurag,” said Inder, “I have much admiration, but little knowledge. Chandu-ji, tell us the story of Lurag’s exploits.”

He waved his arm and cushions were brought for us. Mira, in her chair beside Inder, leaned close. The court chattered and bustled behind us.

“Lurag of Dilmun,” I said,” one sailor among many on his master’s ship, set sail in the freshening winds for the great mouth of the River Sindhu across the sea. Every day, wrapped in a loincloth, with gold rings gleaming in his ears and tattoos swirling on his body, he served his turn as ship’s lookout.

“One day, scurrying up the mast like a louse on a hair shaft, and clinging there, singing to the horizon all around him, he saw a distant shadow he knew was the rocky cliff of Palwar. Squinting in the glare from sky and sea, he saw black dots pulling toward him from the cliff. He leaped to the deck, calling a warning to his fellows, and snatched up the knife at his waist.

“Pierced by arrows, slashed by swords, the shipful of sailors from Dilmun was no match for the attackers who jumped aboard their ship. As evening fell, the pirates laughed with wide mouths as they heaved all – the dead, the wounded, the unhurt – into the sea.

“Lurag, in the dimness, clamped his knife between his teeth and leaped into the water by his own choice. He swam toward the sunset, and when it grew dark, away from the glow of the ship the pirates had put to flame. He was tumbled by a great wave, his knife plummeted to the ocean floor, another wave snatched away the wooden plank he floated on, and he pushed on alone through the night.

“When dawn came, wandering hunters found him half buried in the sand by the high cliffs of Palwar. They looked at the strange shapes dyed into his skin and heard the plaintive melodies he sang, and took him to their hearts.

“In skins and a woollen blanket, he became Lurag the northern hunter. He wandered over mountain and rock with the tribe, until one day they laboured up a high spit of land topped by a stunted tree. The hunters pointed down with spears, and far below Lurag saw a sheltered cove and a cluster of the very pirates who had looted and burned his ship and killed his companions.

“He vowed by the gods that their crimes would be punished. Lurag taught others of the pirates’ hiding place and brought them to the spot. And Lal and his pirates met the end they deserved.”

“Well told, Chandu-ji,” said Inder. “And to you, Lurag of Dilmun, Palwar is grateful.”

I marvelled at Inder’s gracious smile, the confident stance of his foot on the cushioned stool, his leg draped over his knee.

I had changed too. If someone shot off my earring today, I thought, I would protest, even to a king. I smiled, remembering how timid I had been.

Then I looked at Mira, and remembered I was angry with her.

“Were you forced, or was sneaking away from the courtyard that night your own idea?” I asked.

“Inder needed me,” she said. “You wouldn’t have understood.”

She sat with her legs tucked up, pleated and sashed in blue and red, hung with gold, her hair braided tight but springing up at her forehead even so. Her eyes snapped black, just like her brother’s. They were alike, now that he had lost his sullenness.

I thought of my return to Sindhapur and the plains, far from Inder and Mira and the excitement of

Palwar. I kept smiling and bowing, but emptily, like an actor in the market place.

Ruk and Ganda and the tribespeople gathered at their camp in the sparse forests of Palwar. Inder visited them, carried there by Chetu, once again litter bearer for the palace.

Looking their most ferocious, with red and black zigzags of paint across their cheeks, Ruk's people honoured Inder. They seated him on a rock draped with cloth, heaped him with garlands of yellow flowers, and danced, their feet pounding, their waving arms making eerie shadows around the fire.

Several days later they left word for me at the stone workers' village that they had begun their journey southeast back to Sindhapur.

Lurag and I stayed in Palwar until the winds changed, lodged in the palace. Soothed with perfumed oils,

wrapped in new-dyed cloths, warmed in the cool nights with quilted coverings light on the toes, we tasted a life far removed from our usual.

In the mornings we swept through the palace doors, kept open under Inder's rule, fine blankets draped on our shoulders, gold and silver at our waists. Sometimes we walked out in the countryside, as far as the swinging bridge, where rolls of mist swirled around our feet and the river beneath until the sun rose higher to dissolve them. Sometimes, we explored the city. Stone streets, running between blank stone walls, avenues bordered by trees, dull green in the cool, the market square, busy now, where merchants sat by their heaps of red and yellow spices, sacks of beans and peas, rows of pots and clay bangles. The flower sellers' garlands, pale and meagre at first, brighter and thicker as the weather warmed, marked the passing days.

We squatted with the toymaker on his mat, chatting while his knife created little animals out of chunks of wood.

“I’ll take that monkey,” I said one day. “It looks like the Kumari’s monkey. Inder Raj’s sister is fond of the Kumari at the waterfall.”

The toymaker grinned, and pulled the cord taut. The monkey twisted, hanging by its feet, then flipping to its tail.

I took Lurag to the courtyard where Mira and I had sheltered. The woman and her children still wore clothing that was stained and ragged, and her husband still passed his days sitting in his room, but now the children smiled and played. I told stories and Lurag sang as we warmed our hands and feet by their fire.

But the times I liked best in Palwar were when Mira and Inder brought us to their walled garden. We sat by the pool on cushioned benches, rolling fruit drinks on our tongues, turning faces to the sun, as long pale lotus buds floated over the water.
Or, as the season cooled, we wrapped ourselves in shawls and sipped boiled milk, the froth sticking to our lips, while water birds flashed blue and purple, swooping to rest on their journey to the Sindhu and my home. Or, as our departure approached, we savoured parched grain, the spicy taste blending with the fragrance of apricot blossoms, pink and delicate, foaming against the wall.

When the winds blew that would carry the ships to the mouth of the Sindhu, it was time to leave.

“See, Chandu, what I’ve had planted here,” said Inder, a few days before Lurag and I were to sail.

He and Mira steered me along a row of rose bushes studded with tiny green buds. At one end, in a bed of mould-smelling earth heaped within a circle of stones, three spindly branches like dead sticks reached up from a frail trunk. Sharp spikes reared up through a scattering of white blossoms.

“A thorn tree,” I said.

“Yes” said Inder. “It’s small now, but it’ll grow thick and birds will shelter there.”

‘We call it ‘Chandu’,” said Mira.

“Chandu,” I said. “My name?”

”At the hermitage, when you taught me how to cut one down,” said Inder, “I was discourteous.”

I jerked my head in disbelief.

“No,” said Inder, “don’t deny my fault. It was lowly of me to treat you as I did.”

I had no intention of denying his fault. I had suffered for it. It was his openness in admitting it that surprised me.

“But still you aided me,” said Inder. “Your thornbush story – I tell you honestly. That’s when I started to understand.”

“You’re our thorn tree, Chandu,” said Mira.

“The route’s well-travelled now,” I said. “Visit us in Sindhapur. Anja-ma will rejoice to see Mira again.”

“Chandu, my brother,” said Inder, “it’s my wish and duty to journey again to Sindhapur, to breathe the air of the places Onkar knew well, to give his ashes – I’ve guarded them well – to the great river Sindhu.’

He fell silent. We folded our hands and lowered our eyes. Onkar of the long sagging cheeks and narrow feet seemed to hover near.

“But,” said Inder, “I’ve work to do here first. I’ll honour Onkar by being the best king he could imagine.”

“Chandu,” said Mira, “take this when you go. It’s yours.”

She lifted my hand and pressed a tiny embroidered bag into my palm. I unwound the cord and drew out what I suspected I would find. My earring, bent but bright in the sun.

“The women took it off Stana’s body and gave it to me. They knew how he’d snatched it from me that morning. I told them to sell the garnet pendant and use the silver as they wished. They were grateful.”

“You keep it,” I said. “I gave it to you.”

“No,” said Mira. “It carries too much meaning. Better you should have it.”

I held the ornament in my hand, thinking of all that had changed since the day Inder shot it off my ear. And of how I still felt tongue-tied in front of Mira when I wanted to speak of what she meant to me.

“Think of me while you watch this thorn bush grow,” I blurted out. “I’ll think of both of you whenever I hold this earring.”

“No need to include me,’ said Inder. “I know how you feel about my sister.”

Oh no, I thought, this is his day for being frank. Embarrassing for me.

“You can’t help it,” said Inder. “You’ll feel Mira in your heart whenever you hold that earring.”

Inder’s eyes were wet. He was thinking of Onkar.

“It’s my duty to see her married, Chandu,” he said, “and you’re like my brother, but a princess of Palwar can’t have a merchant’s son for husband. I regret this is so.”

“You speak what I already know,” I said.

And anyway, she doesn’t want me, I thought.

“Hold your talk, Inder, of who can do what,” said Mira. “You didn’t want Chandu to learn archery. A merchant’s place isn’t with a bow and arrow, you said. But if it weren’t for Chandu’s arrow, you’d have taken Stana’s in the heart.”

“Chandu knows I’m grateful for it, and he understands what I say,” said Inder.

“A princess of Palwar will do what she pleases,” said Mira.

For an instant, I felt hopeful.

“But as yet, “she said, “even I don’t know what that is.”

She tossed her head at both of us, smiling, then fell silent and sad.

I pulled the toy monkey from the pouch at my waist and held it out.

“Another memory for you,” I said. “The Kumari’s monkey.”

She took it gently, her eyes far away.

21. The Waterfall

When we steered out of the harbour a few days later, Mira was with us.

“There’s something I have to ask the Kumari,” she said.

We said little to each other on our passage down the coast. Lurag filled the silence with his songs. When we reached Sindhapur, Lurag remained to work in the warehouse until a ship sailed for his home across the sea. Mari and I walked to the *ashram*.

Baba-ji stood on his verandah to greet us, legs like sticks poking up from his knobby feet, arms crossed

under his blanket, broad smile under his chunky topknot.

Anja-ma was thin, the dark smudges under her eyes deepened by the shadow of her hair hanging loose.

I fell into my old duties as soon as I had bowed to Baba-ji, firing the oven, fetching water, chopping cucumbers. Mira played with Niki, who ran in zigzags around the yard, oiled curls clinging to her ears, chubby fingers clutching the carved bear from Palwar. Her legs kicked and her face crinkled in delight as Mira tossed her in the air. What hidden stores in Baba-ji's gristly and bony frame, in Anja-ma's faded eyes and straight hair, had formed this zest for life in Niki?

"You're the same helpful boy inside, Chandu," said Anja-ma as we ate fried melon slices on the verandah, "but Palwar has changed you. You've returned an elegant young man."

“Yes,” teased Baba-ji from his cushion, “how long do you work on that moustache every morning? And the hair curled so smoothly on the neck?”

He spread his arms.

“It’s good. It’s good,” he said. “It’s a kindness to our eyes to make yourself pleasing.”

Guided by Ruk’s tribespeople, Mira left for the waterfall.

“I’ve made my decision, Chandu,” she said. “I’ve found what it pleases me to do. If she’ll have me, I’ll serve the Kumari.”

Anja-ma passed listless hours leaning against the step, leaving Niki to play in the dust and me to cook and sweep. Sometimes, Baba-ji came off the verandah to sit beside her, his arms around his calves.

“Will she be all right?” I asked.

“Only the gods know,” he said, Niki leaning against his knees. “Terror as a child. She’s never lost it. And with Niki to guard, her fear’s doubled. Her heart’s frayed apart from the strain. I pray the gods will teach us how to help her.”

The rains came, and Anja-ma brightened. She ran into the yard, spattered with mud, twirling Niki in her arms, swaying like the trees whipped by the driving water, staggering from the force of the downpour. But her smile vanished as the days of gloom and damp stretched on.

Once I sat with her on the step, in a brief time of clear sky and white clouds.

“Chandu,” she said, “don’t you feel you’re floating in all that soft blue? Doesn’t your heart leap into it?”

“I know what you mean,” I said, smiling.

““I used to feel it, Chandu,” she said. “Right here.”

She pressed her hands on her ribcage where her shawl was draped.

“I used to feel it, but it’s dull and barren now. Blue isn’t even blue any more.”

The next morning, she and Niki were gone.

“She said she’d leave one day,” Baba-ji told my parents when they emerged from the forest path to sit with him.

“What about Niki?” my mother asked.

“Anja knows the forest. She fears it but she knows it. It was her refuge before she came here. May it keep them both safe now,” said Baba-ji.

“Chandu,” my mother said as the bearers helped her into the litter, ““Make sure Baba-ji eats. Tend him carefully.”

Days later, one of Ruk’s people slipped through a wall of rain into the hermitage. Baba-ji stood on the verandah to receive him.

“We’ve found mother and child,” said the tribesman. “They’re in good health,” he added quickly. “They’re at the waterfall with the Kumari. The princess says you should come.”

We tucked bundles of nuts and cheese and cold chapattis under layers of shawl to keep them dry, and we left, shoulders hunched against the rain, sinking to our calves in the mud. The river thundered high and brown beside us as we plodded and crawled along the slippery path.

“Baba-ji, have you come this way before?’ I asked.

“Long ago,” he said. “It’s years since I travelled further than the hermitage bathing spot.”

After days of strain we reached the ledge by the waterfall. A miserable journey it must have been for Anja-ma, weighed down with Niki. We pulled ourselves over the last lip of rock one dull morning. The rain had stopped, but clouds loomed in the sky, the rush of the river hollow in the heavy air. The waterfall surged down the rock face, overshooting the rock basins and slamming straight into the pool, stinging our eyes with its spray.

There was no sign of Anja- ma or anyone else, only a pair of twisted ropes strung between tree branches over the heaving pool where in drier weather we had seen the monkey jump from rock to rock.

Baba-ji stepped to the sodden edge of the pool, and raised his voice over the water’s boom.

“Manu of the hermitage calls the Kumari of the waterfall,” he said.

Nothing stirred by the Kumari’s rock. The red splotches I remembered stood out where the wet surface was drying. Then the Kumari was there, her black eyebrows and bald forehead a blur in the mist.

“Kumari, I salute you,” called Baba-ji. “What do you need for your comfort?”

The golden monkey crawled from the Kumari’s shawl and settled on her shoulder.

“Ask me questions when the waters are calm and the sun shines through the leaves,” she shouted. “For now, look to Anja.”

“Kumari-ji, you’ve honoured me by caring for my wife and daughter.”

“Manu of the hermitage,” said the Kumari, “I’m sorry to say I have no more skill in caring for your wife than you have yourself.”

She gestured up to the trees and mist at the top of the waterfall. The monkey sprang to the rock, his face turned up toward where she pointed.

“Climb the rocks to the height of the falls,” she said, “as Anja did and Mira after her. You’ll find them there, sheltering in the trees if they’re wise. So far, Mira’s held her from the edge.

We scrabbled up the cliff, ledge to slippery ledge, wrenching our shoulders as we pulled ourselves over the bulging rock. I could hear Baba-ji’s ragged breathing above the water’s rush and the patter of dislodged pebbles. Thunder cracked like the storm gods, water drops brushed my forehead, and rain sluiced down again, its force throwing Baba-ji off

balance as he hauled himself over the last lip of rock. He swayed, then steadied. I breathed out in relief.

I lifted myself after him onto the river bank above the fall. Water bounced off the stones, the fringes of grass flattened by the beating rain.

With a cry full of despair, a blur of grey sped from the forest, twisting with sure step through the wet stones toward the waterfall.

“You should not have come,” wailed Anja-ma’s voice.

I pulled myself upright and lunged after her, straining to stop her. For an instant I brushed her skirt with my hand, then over-reached myself and thudded down, banging my head. But I had managed to break Anja-ma’s stride. She faltered and slumped to the ground, clutching at Niki bundled against her. Mira burst from the trees and grabbed at her.

"It's finished. Leave me alone," Anja-ma sobbed, shrugging Mira off, darting toward the waterfall.

Mira leaped on her again. They struggled on the ground, Mira pulling at Niki slung against Anja-ma's shoulder. I pushed toward them, my head ringing. Baba-ji hobbled after me, his leg patched with blood and rain.

Anja-ma thrust Mira away, surged forward again, staggering as Mira wrenched the baby away and thrust her at Baba-ji.

Anja-ma reached out for an instant, twisting a handful of Mira's skirt. Mira slammed to the ground and I tripped over her. Baba-ji crashed to his knees on top of us, holding Niki high in the driving rain, unharmed but screaming.

Entangled and helpless, we watched Anja-ma step over the edge into the waterfall. A graceful, ordinary

step, it seemed, where there was nowhere to step. One moment she was there. The next, the bank was empty.

“Too much,” cried Baba-ji. “It’s too much.”

His moan of anguish was louder in my ears than the cracking thunder.

Mira took Niki. I rushed headlong to the cliff we had just climbed, vaguely aware that Mira was rocking Niki close, crooning a melody that rose to a sob. Baba-ji and I crawled downward. Desperate to reach the bottom, we were forced to go slowly, groping for toeholds on the sleek rock face. A moaning came from my throat, with a life of its own, out of my control. My mind blocked any idea of what we would find at the bottom of the cliff.

The Kumari hovered in the middle of the pool, pelted by the rain. Her arms were hooked over one of the

ropes, swaying from the movement of the water and her own efforts. Like a river man holding a boat at rest on the Sindhu, she leaned her weight onto a long pole plunged into the floor of the pool.

But it was no boat she was holding against the pull of the water. Anja-ma's head was propped over a submerged rock, her arm flung crookedly above the water, her shoulder clamped by the Kumari's feet, flexible like the golden monkey's. The monkey himself, fur dull in the rain, leaped and screeched by the Kumari's red-painted rock.

Baba-ji gripped the rope handholds and crept toward the two women, seeking the underwater path with his feet. I followed, sliding into him in my impatience, clinging to the rope against the pull of the water at my ankles. Dragged by the overflow, a tree branch was snatched over the lower fall to the river beneath. The same awaited us below if we lost

our hold to be whirled and battered to death among the rocks and raging water.

Baba-ji hung over the rope, pulled Anja-ma's arm from the Kumari's clenched feet, hauled it toward me, and seized the other arm. The ropes burned my arms as we slid backward. The Kumari took hold of a foot, loosing her hold on the pole, which was tossed over the basin lip by the heaving pool.

We dragged Anja-ma to the bank, laid her on the earth under the trees. A vein fluttered in her neck and her chest rose and fell. Blood welled in the scrapes and gashes scoured clean by the water.

"It's dry coverings she needs, and dry I had the last time I looked," said the Kumari.

As she spoke, I felt the rain dwindle to nothing.

“If the shelter’s still standing, it might have kept out the wet,” she said. “Bring my pouches and ointments too.”

I threaded my way across the bank, littered with leaves and twigs blown down in the storm, and splashed over the stones, grasping the slippery ropes. Now that Anja-ma lay safe under the trees, the crossing was easy. I found the Kumari’s shelter behind the reddened rock, surprised that it was so ordinary, half-suspecting she had sprung from the rock each time we visited her. The small hut was damaged as the Kumari had said, the grass roof over the entrance collapsed, dangling from one crooked post. The monkey danced toward the blocked door then jerked away, back and forth, scolding, grimacing.

But behind the broken entrance, the room was snug and sweet-smelling. I took blankets and bundles from a chest and pottery jars from a hollow in the

rough stone wall, and shored up the sagging frame as best I could before I crossed the pool once more. The monkey, golden again in the drying air, darted past me through the door.

“Kumari, ji,” I said, “it was your door post. The pole you used for Anja-ma – it was part of your hut.” My voice squeaked high, like a child’s.

“I used what I had,” said the Kumari.

Mira had reached the bottom of the cliff with Niki and helped to carry Anja-ma deeper into the trees to a shelter of sticks and boughs.

“Is this where you’ve been sheltering?” I asked Mira.

“The Kumari allows it,” said Mira.

Baba-ji sat on a rock, watching Niki toddle in the damp grass, babbling to herself. The crusted scrape

on his shin was livid in the grey air. I squatted beside him, feeling the breaking sun on my face.

“So, Manu of the hermitage,” the Kumari called to Baba-ji, binding herbs and smoothing ointments onto wounds while Mira chafed Anja-ma’s hands. “Was it worth the price, then?”

Baba-ji watched her face, waiting for her to continue.

“A wounded bird,” said the Kumari, “like a wounded bird she was, and she tried to sing like a sound one. I warned you the gods would ask a price. Are you thinking now the price was too high?”

Baba-ji made no response. He closed his eyes, relaxed his jaw. I knew the signs. He was journeying within himself.

He opened his eyes.

“Indeed, Kumari-ji, for a moment I thought the price too high. Beyond all bearing it was. When she walked into the brow of the waterfall, for a moment I regretted the cost. I wavered and was distraught, as was my right as a husband.”

The Kumari glanced at him and continued tucking blankets around Anja-ma.

“But you and I both know it, Kumari-ji,” said Baba-ji. “The gods give what they give with open hands. Chandu’s father bargains for the best price as he must. He’s a merchant. But not the gods. It’s their nature to shower us with gifts. Even our troubles are gifts. It’s all a blessing.”

“For sure, it’s a blessing of the gods that you have us to look after you, Manu Baba,” said the Kumari. “You’re too good for this world.”

Baba-ji bowed his head.

“Chandu,” said the Kumari, “your Baba-ji says not to bargain with the gods, but still you can honour them. If you have a silver piece or two, throw an offering in the pool. Direct the eyes of the goddess to Anja.”

I tossed in some silver, which disappeared in the mist at the base of the waterfall.

“Look, Kumari-ji,” said Mira. “She’s opened her eyes.

22. Life Restored

Anja-ma groaned. Her eyes fluttered closed, then opened again. Once more she groaned, pulled her arm from Mira's grasp and turned her head away.

Baba-ji laid his hand on her forehead.

"Rest," he said.

"Move your toes," said the Kumari, uncovering Anja-ma's feet.

Anja-ma lay still.

The Kumari waited, then jabbed her fingernail into the tip of Anja-ma's big toe. The leg jerked back, as did the other when the Kumari tested it.

"Our task is to keep her warm and dry," she said.

There were days of rigging branches against the wet, collecting firewood, napping by turns. Anja-ma slept, or stared at nothing.

"The stone basins saved her," said the Kumari. "They're pretty, water splashing from dish to dish, but I never thought they'd be useful. They broke her fall. She'd have crashed to death in the rock pool here if they hadn't caught at her as she tumbled."

We mashed her food and pushed it through her bruised jaws with our fingers, just as we fed Niki. She swallowed when we asked her to, and opened her arms to Niki, even hummed to her, but otherwise was silent and still. Once she had spent her days

looking after us. Now she seemed ungrateful for the discomfort and strain we endured making her comfortable. Her bruises faded, her joints loosened as the Kumari worked them back and forth, but her face was closed to us.

“Will she recover?” I asked.

We had carried her across the pool to the Kumari’s hut. It was dim inside, the cave that formed the back lost in blackness, the front where we crowded shadowed grey in the dull light seeping through the entrance.

“It’s in Anja’s hands,” said the Kumari. “Whether she lives or dies is up to her. Manu Baba will say it’s the gods who decide, but I say that she herself selects her course.”

“Kumari-ji, our view is the same,” said Baba-ji. “The gods who decide live within us.”

I folded my legs and settled beside Anja-ma’s mat.

“If you wish, Kumari-ji, I’ll tell a story to pass the time,” I said, checking from the side of my eye that Anja-ma was listening.

“Time passes on its own, but if you have a tale to tell, then tell it,” said the Kumari.

The others settled back.

“Long ago,” I said, “near a jungle where green parakeets swooped and jungle fowl called from hidden places and pale blossoms clung to the trees, a young girl lived with her mother.

“‘As long as we watch blue ducks swim in the lake and rest in the reeds, as long as the water ripples

beside us, the goddess of the lake will let us want for nothing,' her mother said.

"Every day the girl sat in the twisted arms of the banyan tree to watch the villagers drive the cows to drink in the shallows of the lake, for the great prince across the hill entrusted all his beasts to them. In the spring, she carried water from the lake to swell barley seeds and wheat and lentils, and in the dry season to slake the thirst of dusty roots. In the early morning she helped her mother scrub the villagers' clothes in the lake, slap them clean on the rocks, spread them gleaming white on bushes to dry.

"'You see,' said her mother. 'This lake is like a mother to us both.'"

I glanced around my audience. Mira's face was eager for what happened next, her hand caressing Niki's dark hair as the baby slept in her lap. The Kumari rested her head against the wall, the monkey

beside her, both watching me through half-shut eyes. Baba-ji leaned against the other wall, watching Anja-ma. Anja-ma's face was hidden, but the stiffness of her arms on the blanket made me sure she was alert.

I went on with the story.

"One morning, the laundry from the headman's household hung fresh on the bushes. The girl crawled beneath, pretending she was in a mountain cave piled with rubies.

"'Don't disturb the washing,' her mother called as she walked toward the huts of the village. 'You'll make it dirty.'

"The girl sat on in her hiding place, knowing her mother didn't really mind."

Anja-ma turned her head toward me, opened her mouth as if to speak, but was silent. Baba-ji reached out his hand, then withdrew it before Anja-ma noticed it.

“For the mother always knew what was close to her daughter’s heart.

“But the peaceful life by the lake was not to last. Raiders came, sweeping across the plain into the village, raiders who had heard of the prince’s wealth of cattle and of the villagers by the lake who tended them so well. The girl, digging for rubies in her mountain cave, hearing sudden shouts and wails, turned to look through the loose weave of the washing toward the village her mother had entered a moment before.

“In a swirl of dust and screaming horses and battle cries, men circled the herds of cows, clubbing and knifing the villagers who leaped to stop them,

hacking and burning the buildings. When they swept away, driving the cattle ahead, the girl crept from her hiding place through the mutilated bodies, found her mother crumpled in the dust, dead eyes glassy, chest bloody, and watched the flames spouting from their hut on the village edge. Other children slipped from the shadows to stand with her.

“Two raiders swooped back into the burning village and roped the children into a line.

“‘This is no place for you,” they said. ‘You’ll be better off with us.’

“So the girl was hauled away on a rope, past the lake no longer rippling clear but churning with the mud of pounding hooves, poisoned with bodies tossed in by the raiders. The goddess of the lake and the mother who knew her every thought were a bloody memory.”

Anja-ma turned her face away, tears welling around her eyes. Niki woke up, pressing her head against Mira, toddled over to where her mother lay, then tumbled suddenly to the floor, grunting in surprise. The Kumari still drowsed by the wall.

I continued.

“The girl, who never again had a mother to scold her, to pamper her, grew up alone.
Often, without thinking, she said to herself, ‘Mother will be pleased with me.’

“And, each time, she had to remember over again, ‘Mother is gone.’”

Anja-ma wriggled her shoulders, pushed at her pillow, tugged at the blanket.

“One day,” I said, “the girl had a child of her own.

"'Mother will be pleased with me,' she said.

"But however much she longed for her mother's smile, it was gone forever.

"Then the woman who had once been a young girl by the lake made a vow. She looked at her little girl, babbling in the dust, laughing as she chased a spider across the floor. She made a sacred vow to the goddess of the lake where she played as a child, to the goddess of the waterfall where she rested with her own child."

Anja-ma turned over, raised herself on her elbow. I thought she was ready to speak, and hurried to finish.

"The woman looked at her child and called out, 'hear my pledge, goddess of the lake, goddess of the waterfall. Silver pieces I'll give you every year, and fruit and nuts and golden cloths I'll spread on your

waters, in thanks for my beautiful child. I vow to be near her as she grows to a woman, and not leave her to languish as my mother left me. For my mother was helpless against the knife that took her, but I am not helpless. I can do as I wish.'"

"You're wrong," cried Anja-ma.

She jerked up from her mat, the first time since her leap into the waterfall. Mira scrambled to support her. The monkey squawked and leaped off the Kumari's lap, sidling close to Anja-ma, darting glances at all of us.

"You're wrong," said Anja-ma again. "You're just a boy. You don't know."

The little hut was filled with the rustle of rain on the thatch above us and the crash of the waterfall. No one spoke. No one moved. Even Niki was still.

For a moment I was hurt that Anja-ma rejected my story. She had always praised me before. Then my mind cleared. Anja-ma had spoken, even if in words of anger. She had returned to us. It was as if a breeze fragrant with lotus and swelling with birdsong had swept through the hut.

Anja-ma eased herself down, her shoulders hunched. Mira smoothed the blanket. Baba-ji was grinning, his cheeks rounded, his eyes shut. I smiled to see him. Mira smiled back at me. The monkey leaped to the Kumari's shoulder.

"Don't question Chandu's story, Anja of the hermitage," said the Kumari. "It's his story. He tells it as he wishes."

Anja-ma stared at the Kumari and then at me. She struggled to sit up again.

"You are right, Kumari-ji," she said.

I folded my hands and lowered my eyes. I hoped Anja-ma was back to stay.

“Chandu told us his tale,” said the Kumari. “He can’t tell yours. That’s up to you, Anja of the hermitage.”

Anja-ma folded her hands and slipped down on her mat. Niki crawled beside her under the blanket. Anja-ma, Baba-ji, Mira, the Kumari, all sat in silence, peaceful, lost in themselves.

23. The Moustachioed Prince

When the rains stopped and the ground was firm enough for walking, Anja-ma, Baba-ji, Niki and I returned to the *ashram*. Anja-ma played with Niki and wandered in the forest, while Ruk's tribespeople helped with the chores. I sat with Baba-ji on the verandah.

One morning Anja-ma was not there.

"She'll be back," said Baba-ji, oiling Niki's hair, twisting it on top of her head.

Another morning, she re-appeared through the trees.

“I see Mata-ji. I see Mata-ji,” called Niki, running to her.

“You’ve learned to speak, my daughter,” said Anja-ma. “I’m pleased with you.”

She touched Baba-ji’s feet. He bowed and folded his hands.

For a while she stayed, filled with her old energy. She cooked for Baba-ji, filled jars with fried pastries and spiced vegetables glistening in oil. She lined the shelves with bright new cloths. She sang to Niki, and walked with her in the forest. Then again she was gone. That became her pattern.

“I thank the gods who have given her peace, and given Niki her mother,” said Baba-ji. “The Kumari would say she found the peace herself, and sleeping cold in the forest is the price. Your mother, Chandu, who looks on you as the sun of the universe, would

say it's all due to you and your story. We're all correct."

Behind a line of donkeys loaded with supplies, my parents arrived, lurching into the clearing in their litters, still missing Onkar and his loving attention. My mother greeted me with the fervour Baba-ji had predicted.

"Such a story teller I have for a son," she said, fanning her face after heaving herself from the litter to her stool, "giving new life to Anja. And Inder Raj would be sitting here still, a sullen look on his face, the Palwaris still crushed under Lal and his ungrateful son, if you hadn't fired them up with your stories. Your father and I are pleased with you."

But my stories had a lot to answer for.

"It's the little people who accomplish what the powerful cannot," I had said one day, and Onkar

took my words to heart and left for Palwar. And his death.

I set out with Ruk and Ganda for the waterfall, shouldering sacks of food my parents had brought for the Kumari. The river surface was smooth like glazed pottery, the rush of the rains over for another year.
Ruk and Ganda helped me hoist up the sacks, then crouched on the grassy shelf below the Kumari's pool with their gambling stones.

"You won't pay respects to the Kumari?" I asked.

"Her power's strong," said Ganda. "I'll not be caught in it if I can help it."

So I left them there and waited by the pool, the air filled with birdsong and the gentle splash of the fall over the stone basins.

Mira appeared through the trees, dragging a bundle of branches behind her.

“Our roles are reversed,” she said. “You were gathering wood the first time I saw you.”

The monkey glided over the stepping stones, tail high, golden fringe of fur springing around his black face, and settled by my side. The Kumari appeared from behind her red rock across the pool.

“What have you brought me?” she called out, her voice thin but somehow clear above the splash of water. One end of her green shawl wrapped her arms and shoulders, the other fluttered at her feet. Her bald forehead glistened red, her black hair hanging in threads behind.

My eyes flicked toward Mira’s springing hairline. No red dye there, I thought, relieved. Was she visiting or living here?

“Please accept my parents’ gratitude,” I called out, for your care of Anja and Niki of the hermitage.”

“I accept their gratitude and those sacks,” she said. ‘I’m glad to have them. And as for you, what wish have you come with today?”

“No wish, Kumari-ji,” I said. “Just a question.”

“I speak to wishes, not answers,” she said. “Answers you must find yourself.”

But she stood there still, so I put my question anyway.

“Kumari-ji, why do you let us wish for things, when you know such pain will come of them?”

The Kumari waited.

“Why don’t you just tell us ‘no’?” I asked.

“Chandu, I’ve no answers for you, but I’ll give you a tale you can add to your store. Come across. I’m through with shouting.”

I carried the sacks one by one across the stones to the hut. The Kumari watched, sitting on a rock. The monkey leaped to the entrance roof, which was firm over the new slab of wood that replaced the missing pole. Mira and I sat cross-legged to hear the Kumari’s tale.

“Long ago, before either of you was born,” said the Kumari in her thin monotone, “the man you call Baba-ji and I call Manu wandered far and wide, seeking wisdom.”

I widened my eyes in surprise.

“You thought he’s spent his whole life on that verandah of his?” said the Kumari. “Feet don’t become knobbed like his from sitting.”

I folded my hands politely, lowered my eyes.

“Once,” continued the Kumari, “on his way back to Sindhapur from the mountains, he climbed down this river and, slipping on the wet rocks, slid down the height right into this clearing. It was the young girl Anja, come from the forest to be my servant, who found him and faithfully tended him. Now, her care for me, for even then I was old, was always attentive, but what she lavished on Manu was beyond that. Even Manu, whose eyes were always staring at things we knew nothing about, noticed with what tenderness she served his food and poured his water.

“One day Manu, your Baba-ji, said to me, ‘Kumari-ma, I wish to take this girl with me to Sindhapur as wife.’

“And I said, ‘Manu, this girl is a straw that’s been bent forward and backward too many times. One more twist and she’ll break.’

“Manu said, ‘Already I feel the pain I’ll cause her and the pain she’ll cause me, but I wish to take her with me for the joy of it.’

“And that was that,” said the Kumari. “And now, Chandu, I’ve told you the tale. You asked a question, and this is your answer. People do what they do. They don’t count the cost till after.”

I watched the water falling from basin to basin into the pool. Had it foreseen this dance down the rock when it leaped into the flow high in the mountains?

“We make it happen ourselves, you mean?” I asked.

“Our beginnings make our ends,” she said.

“One thing I know,” said Mira, “Inder’s wish came true. He wobbled on his throne at first, but now he’s a lion on the lion chair.”

“Wishes are not always what they seem,’” said the Kumari. “Take your wish, Mira. There’s more than one man with a moustache, and more than one way to be a prince. If it’s a moustachioed prince you must have, Chandu’s moustache is growing thick, and his mother and father have thought him a prince from the day he was born.”

This was embarrassing. I saw Mira fumbling for words.

“Her brother’s forbade it,” I said. “My parents may think me a prince, but Inder Raj knows I’m not.”

“Listen carefully to what I say, Chandu of Sindhapur and Mira of Palwar,” said the Kumari. “A princess

marries a prince, but one who serves the Kumari marries as she will."

The monkey leaped from the roof and stared into our faces. The waterfall splashed as the Kumari smiled.

I raised my eyes. Mira blinked, hair wild around her face, eyelashes black against her red cheeks. A glimmer of hope expanded in my chest.

"Kumari-ji," said Mira. "I came from Palwar with a question, and you've answered it. Your earring, Chandu-ji," she said. "I'll take it now if you care to give it to me."

"It's back at the *ashram*. I'll bring it next time I come," I said. My voice trembled.

My mother and father were visiting Baba-ji when I arrived back at the *ashram*.

“Waterfall or not,” said my mother, “born a princess, always a princess. What does a princess know of a merchant’s son? What does she know of caring for your father and mother when they grow old?”

My father half closed his eyes, pursed his mouth.

“No one held us back when we were young, mother of Chandu,” he said. “Give the same honour to your son.”

My mother stared, then tipped her head and settled back against her cushions.

“Take the earring and your parents’ blessings and return to the waterfall,” said Baba-ji. “When the gods grant happiness, why delay?”

I set out the next morning.

cover illustration: detail from a painting by David Parks