

THE STORY OF UNREASON

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For the lost children of the world — a
nightmare and a fairy tale.

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Part-I: Of Spirits

Chapter One

1.

Into the house of reeds I peer. For those who believe in words, there sits my lord, where the two walls clash heads like feisty waves from another world. So I rub my eyes and look again, and reflecting the painful lights, find him there again indeed. Greying hair cascades down his emaciated face — a tale of loss, a picture of permanence. His breaths are even, his eyes are closed, and like always, I don't know what I will see there when he reopens them.

When will he? Is that not just a possibility — hinging on a two letter *if*? Dread fills me when I think about it — the same dread if he does open them if he doesn't. I want his breathing to stop. But do I?

The same dread that pins me in place mortifies the world. It forgets to exhale — and expands and expands, like an overblown balloony lung that could burst and scatter any second — or puncture, more suited for quiet thieves in the night who take things not theirs. A terrible shame fills us, me and his world, partners in the same crime.

“How cruel it must be. That you must fall in love each time you deliver death.” Sympathy it is, this time, as my lord wakes up.

“Since I take what is not mine, I have to make it mine. Falling in love is one way,” I wince. Is that what has been happening?

“Is death something to be given? Is life something to be taken? Am I not the one giving life and taking death, right now?”

His meaningless words are to be ignored. They are the habit of an old cow that knows naught but to regurgitate. ‘Sleep,’ my stern eyes convey my command. ‘If you don’t?’ I surge up to him and kiss him. I want him to fall into me. I want him to give me whatever he has. Then sleep. He doesn’t resist. But he doesn’t fall. He has nothing to

give away. How do I take away what one doesn't have? How do I kill what doesn't breathe? How — and why did he become like this? What made him?

A pauper's death, then. A beggar's end. An ignominy to all beginnings, to life itself. So be it. The ignominy shall be mine; the peace be yours. To the mother's lap you return — the mother doesn't know the stillborn differently from the animated; she doesn't look at the prodigal son any different.

There is more, however, as there always is. My bottom lip quivers. An inaudible sigh rips through everything. How I want to see one spark of life before I burn my hand in it and douse it black! I don't let it show.

"My lord. You're tired but can't sleep. So be it. I will tell you a story now."

A fitting story it must be. A story for the end of the world, as for what makes it live. Any story it can be — precisely why, and I pick the only story it can be: the only story being told every moment, every place, always and evermore. The only story that the teller is inconsequential for, and doesn't lose its charm, neither exposes it, on the umpteen thousandth retelling.

2.

In the beginning there is always light, and therefore, the light is entitled to everything good that there is. That is, however, a false beginning. It is merely the end of the darkness there always was, always will be. The darkness the light has slayed mercifully on the roadside before arriving. It is the darkness the light has just pierced the bosom of and broken out. It is the darkness the light has soothed, and warmed, and melted, to put to rest, just now.

Childbirth is, therefore, a beautiful and fearsome thing. A mother's lap, a brother's hand is always snatched to fill the void in

someone else's. And the light is the last party to be given a choice in the transaction, before it is turned on itself to boil in its own glare. And then it must also be grateful, thankful for its own rape.

And so it was for your birth, my lord. Someone's will, someone's wish — when it congealed in the darkness to form a beating heart — You, it would have been sweet and beautiful but for the darkness that surrounded it eagerly. Hungry, curious for touch, the darkness was happy after a long time; it was glad. You burst out with light laughter, and it could not wait to soak it all away like a mountainous glob of sponge. Yes, you were going to be drained, but it knew it had to preserve you, prolong its meal as much as possible, because without you the darkness would fade away into the realm of oblivion and unconsciousness; without you it wouldn't have itself.

When you opened your eyes, what you saw was a tall, pale woman with a lean face and white hair. You called her your friend.

Your friend was old — a bag of bones. But her hair was full of vitality, each strand taut and dignified like a member of Saraswati's veena. And she picked one of those out — one of those — to tie on your arm.

She would tell you stories at night. In all her stories, they would never end up happy. When you would confront her about it, she'd tell you that happiness is something to be desired, not had.

You would hunt for fish in the mountain streams during the day — not that you would catch any. She would tell you stories of the stars while you splashed around in the misty water. The stars were just like the humans — close, but far from each other, as the lines of an old song went — and therefore they deserved sagas no less than we, and romance, and heartbreak, and delusions, and hope. But they were fixed, always there with their soft lights for us, whereas humans had slipped up and fallen into a hole so far and deep that their own light couldn't be seen from the outside, no matter how much they waved or blinked as if their lives depended on it.

The first time you saw your reflection in the water, you were an unkempt boy of thirteen. The entire world suffers you at thirteen. The birds sing for you free of charge; the antelope looks back and isn't disgusted by what it sees; the rippling water invites you for a jaunt in its cool avenue with traffic full of bustling fishes. And therefore, you took up on its offer and went.

It was an ordinary but magical town. Characters were hard at work, but you had a feeling that none of them were far from their home. The smith's sons stood around him as he struck on the malleable metal, their faces flush with some queer happiness in the washing heat. The rug seller could spare a moment to admire the intricate patterns and not worry about the absence of customers.

It's not that they didn't notice you. Nobody looked a question, however. They accepted you as an unstated part of their world.

As you sat in the sun some ways off on a small green hilltop, you could watch small children playing and women washing clothes. Mothers? Sisters? Friends? It didn't matter, for as long as they were close together, playing and washing, they could and would be all of those.

So you closed your eyes and started to watch them in your mind. A hundred happy futures. The sun penetrated the black walls of your mind as if to complement and further embellish the colours you saw. In time, though, they started to lose their sparkle. The sun was on its way down. You opened your eyes, and there she was. Your old friend. Waiting patiently for you.

As you started to walk back towards home, it hit you. This lost world, frozen between heaven and hell, where nothing was ever complete, and flowers fell off before they could bloom to the fullest under God's grace, but were still always blooming — was it really there? A world where nothing was perfect, was curiously a world where sorrow and desire were real, and you felt them cast an anchor on you, claiming you.

You suddenly had an urge to taste that sorrow, that unfulfilling desire. Would it taste like the stars, or would it taste like the failure of a man looking up at the stars? Would his sullying, desperate gaze even be able to tarnish the perfect stars? Luckily for you, there was just the man selling just the sweets who had not yet packed up. You asked your friend to buy one.

The sweets were incredibly bitter. It didn't make any sense, but your friend looked longingly as if she couldn't wait for you to give up on this world.

3.

Home was an old cave with a narrow, half disguised mouth. Somehow, you weren't surprised. There was no clear stream on the high valleys, only a small drain that coursed through weakly. There were no stars, only the meek shine of the cave roof for eyes straining so hard in loneliness that they saw the stars only blind people see. There were no mountains either, only cragged peaks etched upon the cave walls by childish crayons. There were no humans, but butterflies hanging from spider-webs only the husks of which remained.

That night you lay unresistingly within those crushing confines that were growing even smaller, but you knew you would steal yourself away again. And when you did, that's how you met Smirnoff.

Smirnoff was a diaphanous creature, not unlike a tadpole. But there was this redeeming quality — he could fly. He would glide round and round over a small hamlet and wait for his food to waft up and join him. A shark of the sky, he would look enviously at the food of the land people — gross, coarse, fleshy, and inviting — but would be powerless to do anything but look.

After humanity slipped, life became a long red thread with periodic lumps and knots — brief interludes where our hearts jumped and minds soared. But most of the rest of it was ordinary,

and painful. If things were to be perfectly balanced, one would question why we had been left with so much sorrow and so little joy and told to even it out — something clearly didn't make sense, the milk certainly was going missing somewhere. 'A defect of a decadent world falling apart at the seams, it needs to be sung to sleep,' someone like Smirnoff would say. But then creatures like him would hover over every city, every village, every lone cottage in the wilderness — you simply couldn't run from him — and leech away the dancing of your heart. He would intrude uninvited, then take away your happiness before it could reach your neighbour — happiness he did nothing to earn — to present to his beloved.

Yes, Smirnoff was in love with a girl. In fact, all the Smirnoffs were in love with a girl — a slime creature, to be precise. But she used to be a pure maiden once, or a pure toddler, depending on the version. When the clouds parted on the face of the moon at night, she would come out and sing a song. A song that used to be pure and beautiful like her once upon a time, but was now all the knobbly garbles and awkward intonations of the passionate dumb. All the Smirnoffs would surround her on the cloud-top, like cool moths around a cool fire, and sway from side to side. Then they would present her with their gifts, the stolen happiness of countless people. The legendary bow the artisan saw in her dream, but would never make; the fruit-cake the mother wanted to make her children, but caught a disease; the glory the hopeless dreamer would dream of achieving before he became a drunken bastard. Nobody knew whether the gifts reached the slime-creature, for she was blind, deaf, and dumb, but the Smirnoffs were devoted like rocks in the face of a puny storm, and they didn't really care.

There was one Smirnoff my lord liked to follow around, with a forked ear. It was a self-inflicted wound whose only purpose, and it was an important one, was to distinguish him from all the other Smirnoffs in front of his beloved. Peggy, my lord called him, as if a

domesticated pet. That malevolent being was nobody's pet, but he allowed himself to be made familiar by a whimsical boy with his head in the clouds, even to the point of imagined mastery, not unlike how a cribbing old clerk, venomous to everyone non-discriminatorily, sometimes chooses to benevolently ignore and indulge a really young one.

While others would move from side to side, Peggy would sit unmoving, gaze focused on the singing Madonna on clouds. Peggy was more sentient than the others. While others felt no rush or hurry in their timeworn ritual, Peggy felt as if time was deceiving him — it wouldn't pass. While others brought all kinds of gifts, Peggy held himself back, building up for something big.

This peculiar Smirnoff was once in a good mood, and he wanted to give my lord a gift. He took you down to a tall tree at the mouth of a deep forest, and sat you on its topmost branch.

“Do you fancy that hat, boy?” he asked you, an impatient face saying it all — demurring wasn't an option.

A drop of red on the grassy field was all you could see as you cast your stare down. But it became a beautiful canvas held up by a small head as you looked harder — the head of a small girl. It was a woollen cap, the sign of someone's love, and the white lines on red were so skilfully woven that they could become the mural of a hero slaying a dragon or the map of a vast continent, whatever the beholder held to be pretty.

The girl was different. She did not play tag with herself or carve innocuous secrets onto secret trees. She sat on her haunches, her palms on her cheeks, pining for the forest, listening to its murmured song. She had heard it many times before, but knew those weren't the right time. The timing had to be right. A little willowy flower alone in a forest; ways lost; dangerous, blood-loving monsters; no food, light, or clothing — all the right ingredients for the right song.

What would happen afterwards? You must not think about that; rather, you must believe — that the song would be just the right song.

Today was the right day. She was glad that she had finally been called; now she knew that she wouldn't be left alone for eternity. But before her intention to move could play out in a ripple on her limbs, you silently wished for her to stop, and so out came running her elder brother, food for them both in his hands.

Peggy looked at you suspiciously, eyebrows pinched. "Do you want that hat, boy? Or don't you?" he asked in a raspy voice. There was no off-putting his instincts.

The brother was especially chirpy and talkative today. He began to narrate this story from another continent he had recently heard. A funny story, and the fervour in his eyes was especially funny, his hand gestures especially grandiose. It was as if this illusory world of gilded cages and stale fairy tales had sent him on a mission, to lure her away from her true calling, to make sure her red cap never fell off her head. But the girl saw through it all.

She began to see a future together with the brother under the trees. Surely, someone who loved her this much deserved to see the blissful world she was destined for. Some people were special, above others. That much was written. But they could bring some others they cared for with them; that was one of the perks of being special. Nothing forbade that.

Every time she thought of what awaited her in reward, a gleaming craze entered her eyes — or the euphoria of impending discovery — purely a matter of opinion. But she hid it well and completely, an effect of lifelong practice. The mere presence of it under the veneer, however, like the lurking of a sea beast under the calm surface, could still be felt by laypeople, and somehow made her face that much more alluring, otherworldly, and seductive.

Suggestion, anticipation, spell — she entranced her brother, seduced him, to go into the forest too, until they both were taking the first step, hand in little hand.

Horried, my lord stood up on his branch, and wished for rain. Down came rain out of a blue sky on her chariot, charging straight into the sore ground — each drop strong and heavy like a thrown spear. The spell was broken, and the elder sibling and the younger ran towards their home, where their mother waited, making them a warm meal for the evening that was to fall.

Smirnoff was spitting mad. He slapped you, but his puffy hand passed right through your face, not finding purchase on anything. My lord had stopped the snake from having his rare fat meal, the ground-rat, while he did not wish to partake himself. He had broken the natural cycle. It was a blasphemy to order, to right. What made it that much more insulting was the snake had intended to be kind with my lord.

Smirnoff got off the tree and set forward to the little homestead sitting upon an elevated wooden base, for wherever he would go, misfortune wouldn't fail to fall upon the heads of the little puppets dancing below. My lord ran after him and stood in his way, arms stretched out, back to the house, a veritable little hero. The Smirnoff's eyes glinted feral red in the dusty, melding dusk.

"Move," he hissed, "Move, rat! Mine!"

"My food," he said again through clenched jaws.

If he could pounce upon you and tear you up, he would have, time upon time. But his strength was matched by his powerlessness, whereas my lord's calm belied his total control — that we also call whim. There the two of you stood, looking at each other, for who knows how long.

"I will tell you a secret, rat," he said at last.

“All my friends bring this and that and that to the cloud-top, to my girl. But I don’t. Do you know why? I give them to Lady Unreason.”

Unreason. Your friend. The empress of this world and beyond.

“Why? Because my friends are losers. They can’t save my lovely, or anything for that matter. They are the ones trying to be saved. But I am different. I will save her, and then I will take her. Then we will even save my friends. Then a large marble palace and servants and —”

He stopped his own reverie short.

“Do you know what my lady does with them? She gives them to you. That shirt you are wearing? Someone’s father drowned trying to fish on a stormy day so he could buy it for his son. That hairpin you would not separate from? It was the only possession of the illegitimate child of a princess turned prostitute. The child? It died from hunger, uncalled for in the streets. That strand of hair you wear so precious on your arm? Do you want to know where it came from?”

And he told you about everything, every little gift Unreason had given you on every night after she got home, every little story, every little detail — Smirnoff knew it all, because he was the one who had delivered all of it in the first place. It didn’t feel as if you were losing a piece of yourself or breaking a strand with the reveal of each tale, but rather as if doors upon new doors were opening inside you. The door to wisdom, the door to grief, the door to curiosity, the door to emptiness, had they always been there inside you? Was this what they called the loss of innocence?

“So don’t come in my way, or I will take it all back. I will take it back until nothing remains of you,” the Smirnoff said, and flew up like the baggy tadpole he was, and disappeared. He had a lively remainder of the night to hunt.

When the wind blew on your face and you felt your half-opened shirt pull against your back, you found yourself on all fours, looking down on the matted ground. A full moon had risen, flanked by busybody clouds abnormally white.

You went up slowly on to your knees. Button by button, you opened your shirt, then folded it neatly and kept it on the ground. Next you undid your hairpin, and rested it by the shirt. You left everything you had on that spot, then started to trudge back to your cave.

Unreason knew it all, as she was the ruler of the entire world. She pulled you close and held you snug on her frail old chest.

“Don’t forget this ever,” she said, but it sounded as if she was the one afraid and the one who didn’t want to forget.

You weren’t ready to listen. “Why?” you asked in a soft voice, your face nestled in the crook of her arm.

“This world is dying, Reason.”

“Isn’t everything dying?”

“This world has seen so much, it has been through so much. Somewhere along the way, it just lost the feeling of wanting to dance to raindrops, of wanting to plant old seeds to watch new flowers of the old kind bloom over and over. It just can’t feel anymore. Green boulevards just wouldn’t stay green anymore; they would brown off. Boisterous dreams would become cautious, ripen even before they grew in strange patterns. I can’t feel anymore — and this world is me, and I am this world.”

“Only one thing is green — that’s you. We can only feel happy when you are happy. You could say we steal your happiness, feed off of it, and it’s only a matter of time before we can’t even do that. Allowed to be beside you, we can die a happy death. It doesn’t matter what tribulations we have to go through or lose what to bring a smile to your face, because without you, this world would be long gone.

This world exists for you. This world exists in you, but you can't see it. I am sorry."

She sat silently, her face a hard study. However, for however much you could see, there was no sympathy or apology written on it. This was the first, and only time, you felt that your friend had left you alone to meet pain, as if something which had to be done.

"Why?" the cry came out of you like a heavy boulder of anguish, rolling down a mountain to its end as dust in the air.

"Tell me, this hair, this hair at least is from you? Isn't it?" you asked desperately, as you extended your arm, still wearing the one gift you hadn't discarded.

The both of you, however, sat in dead silence. No answer was forthcoming, and wouldn't come — a whole lot of answers would frolic in that void like eels in a mossy barrel and torment your heart. Then you noticed the ashes — and a red speck of what remained of that night's gift. Unreason had tried to burn it off too hastily before you got home.

Revulsive anger came up your windpipe and burned your nostrils. "Give it to me from the next time onwards, don't waste a cause for celebration," you said to Unreason with eyes cold as a lover's.

You would cry silently for a long while that night, and for the first time, sleep facing away from your friend. Unreason would keep bringing all kinds of gifts, delights, and stories every day as before, and you would smile, laugh, and celebrate together in the moment. But you would cry silently in the corner every night. Unreason's love felt like a curse; the world's being tied to you felt like a perpetual act of rape. An irrational hatred started to fill up in your belly, and cold it was — would never fade away.

This went on for two years, until you were fifteen, when you decided to run away. On a quiet night when the moon-rays fell on the white lilies —

5.

“Hold on,” my lord interjects. He is sitting upright; life has re-entered his fish eyes. What was emaciated is now delicate, sharp, and excruciatingly beautiful.

“White Lilies? I have never seen White Lilies.”

“But you have, my lord.”

He motions with his hand and stands up, then dusts himself down. “I must see a world with White Lilies. Come! Make haste,” he beckons me.

A spark of life — just what I wanted to see. But a moment more. A moment more wouldn’t harm before I snuff it out. Does this light twinkle, scintillate, or affix? I need to find out.

So I follow him.

Chapter Two

When he was fifteen, my lord ran away from his home. One day, he was wandering in a forested region, distraught and distracted, when he came across a wounded deer. One leg was as good as gone, a sore festering long. The deer was duly startled by my lord's appearance, but she was too tired to move, or she felt that way. So she sat still and thoughtfully petrified, and hoped.

"I did not want to wound you," my lord said absent-mindedly.

You walked slowly down to it and caressed its head, even as it looked hither and thither in desperate confusion.

"I didn't want you to get wounded," you murmured again.

Suddenly, an idea moved you. "Here. Feed," you offered your palm to the animal.

She looked at you, a mess of twitching muscles and flashing eyelids and dissipating warmth — so much of waste — and did everything but what you wanted: it would not lick your palm. Even if you pulled out stalks of grass in a clever ploy and set them on your hand, it would only sniff mildly and take its head back.

You chewed on the stalks to show how it was done. Did it not comprehend? Surely, it had to have eaten to have grown into the fine specimen of creation it was? That, and its eyes belied a shy but sly kind of intelligence. Did it not feel hungry? That theory did not find purchase either, as it had sat still in one place for so long that a mossy death of all things wasn't far off.

What reason had made it give up? Why would it want to give itself away for tree-food and leaf-sustenance? You had to understand. And you were frustrated, not even being able to save one miniscule deer. So you sat beside it for a while, as if long time pals lost in comfortable silence, then stood up and picked it up in your arms.

‘Come, I will show you how it’s done,’ you thought. You set it down before a small pond hidden away in a virgin part of the forest. It must have been a sight to behold from up above — an invaluable pearl tucked away in a jungle of nameless ornaments. “Watch,” you commanded, and could feel its eyes follow steadily as you walked away.

White lilies stood in rows in the water, as if an army caught in genuflection. On a shallow nook, flanked by tall bushes, sat the mistress of the pond. Her green eyes and straight, slim figure symbolized polished aristocracy, something that only got refined with her age.

“Which village are you from, my child?” she asked you, for even though she was looking intently forward, she wasn’t really thinking, and she could see at one glance everything that was horribly wrong with my lord.

“Do you want to live longer? Then feed, child,” you thrust your hand out with that explanation.

She didn’t question your rudeness, nor did she ignore it. Rather, as old people are wont to do, she refused to let this hitch strain the languid, incurious rhythm her life had fallen to, and went right back to gazing forward, this time deep in thought.

1.

Siroi, the island mistress, used to be the beauty of her town. Right from the day she was born, and more clearly from the day she started running errands outside for her father, the townspeople just could not stop talking about her. The mention of her name would bring a smile to their faces, and when she was out, they would not even know that they would be following her around with their senses, as if a little sun had come out for a stroll — a sun with glorious but tolerable rays

— one that did not pinch the penny when it came to showering joy on their hearts.

The island mistress had not started out with feet made of gold and eyes made of jade-stone. She used to wear around the same two frocks every year, in fact, and one of them had a small rip near the waist she had to carefully hide. In a small house that had nothing really to highlight the absence of other things, Siroi shone like a precious stone, regal and refined — the real ones glittered despite the dust. She would finish all her chores in such an effortless manner that nobody would ever catch her doing something uncouth — and perchance they did, she could make anything seem as if the gods would feel themselves lucky to be allowed to do it too and share her camaraderie. She could dine with peasants where profanities flew like phlegm and beer, and still stand out while not sticking out at the same time. She could dine with statesmen, and make them as commonplace as a roadside host, freed in their repressed humanism.

She had always known this. She accepted her life, but it was too constricted in scope to hold her forever. Nothing in her day could pique her interest, not even her family. Despite this, there was one person who was always there, following her every footstep, ready to catch her if she ever fell — her mother. If she ever felt hungry, bored, or lonely, she would unfailingly be present in some unseen corner, ready with service. None of that would ever happen, so her mother's time would be spent whole in overly lavishing her soul with selfless company and prettying her up like a doll on premium sale.

That fortune favours the brave is a misunderstanding. Fortune favours the dumb, for Siroi was dumb in a certain way. And Fortune is the greatest rubbernecker in the world. It loves to watch morons step over a cliff and fall to their deaths — idiots who don't believe in the facts of their worlds or selves, and repose them in their entirety on to something that would not exist.

Fortune couldn't wait to see Siroi flail her arms about and fall through a glass floor that didn't exist except in her wishful dreaming, and she duly obliged Fortune. Only, where there was air, Siroi stepped on Fortune's head, and kept climbing over it, until she had come upon a canvas she could really feel interested in putting her fingers on. If she could invest into every dining table on the island, be present in every light-hearted gossip and night-time chatter that carried in the air, if she could give a bit of herself in trying to solve each of their ever-recurring problems, she would no longer feel throttled by the colourless particular, and instead revel in all the countless shards of colour, each majestic in particular, as they spun and spun and the many became the one and became the many again. She would finally feel challenged — alive. Even if she had to give all of herself away in that process until nothing remained, she would take in their colours and remake herself with them from each strand of hair down, for such is life — and do it all over again.

In the Island of Flowers, everyone was a florist. Whether one tended to gardens during the day, gave out and took in books in the library, or sold trustful animals to reluctant customers, they all talked to their moonflowers when they came home in the evenings. They would set out their chairs in their little lawns and do everything outside, be that reading out stories to their children or knitting sweaters, as that was believed to make the flowers grow. At night, however, the flowers had to be left alone; what happened between them and the moon must remain a mystery. If someone made the mistake of sleeping outside, they would attract the moon's wrath and catch a disease that made them rot from the inside.

Ships from faraway lands would dock all around the seasons, hoping to take back large shipments of the moonflower — not because they thought them beautiful, but because they were said to bring the glow back in a hopeless person's dimples, and among other herbal uses, also didn't rot too quick and gave off a really compelling

scent, able to go head to head with any incense — and they would be able to, if the seas decided to behave. The people on the island, however, believed them to be beautiful whether they brought in the money or not. It was a little make-believe game they played, since that was the only touch that would finish the picture — beautiful people on a beautiful island going about their beautiful lives in a beautiful manner by beautiful flowers that swayed gently too often in agreement.

Once in a year, when the moon came down the closest to the island — so close that every scar on its face could be touched, and if it breathed the people on the island would sigh — the island-people would dance in their lawns, streets, and half lit rooms for the moon. It was an offering to the moon, the lord who had for a single day come back to his home to check on his assets: to entertain him, amuse him, and bestow him memories so that he kept shining on the flowers. It was said the moon would watch everyone's performance equally, but for him to bless one's soul, to take them as his partner in dance, their soul had to be so pure, so brightly clean, that it was to be the rarest of the rare phenomena. When such a person would appear, the moon would pulse, and it would be reminded of its own loneliness after a long, long time during which it forgot.

It was on such a night that Tulip declared his love for Siroi. Tulip, who she had always admired secretly, was the youth as pretty as her, as bright and as intelligent as her in all the islands. He wasn't a friend of Fortune, however. He had already given everything he had to something that existed. To be honest, the island mistress felt herself crave such a future for a brief moment. She almost wanted Tulip to close the distance between them, take her in his arms, and tell her with not a doubt in the world that everything was going to be alright. A well of weakness had at some moment opened up inside her. As the moment passed, however, she felt with rekindled conviction that she would not let any such kind of perfection take shape — just as

she had known she never would and waited. She would take destiny into her own hands, and make her life a creation of her own desired perfection, not that of some drunk demigod hallucinating in some cramped alleyway.

Therefore, Siroi started to dance. She didn't dance for the moon, the island-people, herself, or anything poetic like that. She danced for Tulip, and let him see why she would always be alone and nobody would be able to dance with her. Not even Tulip. There, as he stood too dumbfounded to even think, the moon pulsed. Even if for a moment, it desired this creature beneath its status.

2.

"Why are you afraid of death?" my lord asked the island mistress.

"I am above death," she answered. "I don't acknowledge her existence. Neither do I ignore her. I do not run towards her. Neither do I run from her. On the day of reckoning, she will have to come find me by herself."

The island mistress woke up at three in the morning every day in her long fifty-five years of suzerainty. She would perform a ritual dance like an unforgiving clock before the moon could go down — no holidays for her sentries, and then send a prayer towards it. The rest of her day would be spent in forging policies, leading meetings, planning provisions out, and the latter part in taking a walk — supervising her dominion, ascertaining again and again that the smiles didn't fall off the stalks and left them bare. For the last morsel of her day, she would never fail to come to this pond and just look at nothing, whiling valuable time away like a leaky pot.

"Why do you look at nothing every afternoon for so long then? You cherish nothing. Not the insolent jumps the fish make over the water, not the cricket-children who burst out singing before their time has come and have to be restrained with harsh words from their

betters, not even the occasional wind that beneath the stories it brings, actually wants you to take notice of itself, the restless messenger — as busy as it is, it still seeks to give you a passing gale of company. Are you above life too? Do you take no notice of life, while not ignoring it either?”

“I want nothing other than the happiness of others; I have no wishes other than to become the wishes of my subjects,” said the island mistress meekly, running out of words, trying to defend herself.

The island mistress knew of every insect that moved on her island. She knew the names of every child by the year of their birth, and the name of each elder that had passed away. She knew the shameful habits of every person, and poured her kind love on unrecognized talents that nobody else would chance upon. She knew all of their ticks, their dreams, and their indiscretions. She would put the pencil in Councillor Bellflower’s pocket that the elder would otherwise forget to remove from his ear and get jeered at by street urchins and his own children alike. She would pick up the Nascent family cat that loved to run away and create scandalizing gossips about itself whenever she came by it and put it back inside their fence. Nobody would notice, of course. Did any of them notice the things she forgot or the things she wanted to look for? Did she have any of those to begin with?

“You see, Island Mistress, so far as the quality of lives lived is concerned, you fall among the have-nots. You are talent-less, ordinary, uninspiring, depressing even. You cannot attract death, because you don’t have the gift of life to give to it. Why would it go out of its way to rob a homeless man his stinking sheets in the winter when warm halls with aromatic banquets invite to be plundered? Only inspiring pieces of art deserve to have inspiring endings. To be sure, death will come to you, but only out of mercy and pity, on a day it has nothing better to do, because your bones would have become so fragile and creaky by then that it would become very pathetic when

death deigns to spare a moment for you, but even more pitiable if it doesn't. An awkward life with an awkward ending, your saga will gather dust in the unlit corner of a tinker shop when all is said and done. Your life, it's the crumpled paper bearing a badly written never song the composer wiped her nose and got rid of."

"Nonsense," said Siroi. "My life has been everything I could have ever dreamed. Show me a life nearly half as eventful in all the continents around."

And so it was. The portrait of the island mistress hung in every living room in the island. She was thanked for every good beginning. People would voluntarily bow their heads and stop whatever they were doing when she passed by — the sign of a true ruler. But what bothered Siroi was that when she had once caught a gang of ruffian boys with rarely a shirt on, pelting live stones into puddles of water gathered in the worrisome craters on the road — and none of them had somehow seen a picture of the island mistress in their lifetimes, none of them recognized her — they would bow their heads and pray sweet words when she mentioned her. They would badmouth elder Nightflower, the legendary scholar Petalsich, but would not even have one bad thought about her. They wouldn't believe that she could have once had bad habits like going sleepless once in a while, or disgusting quirks like being able to belch on command to a soldier's tune. In their lively, shapeshifting world where there was not a thing to worry about and no rule that couldn't be bent, the island mistress was the only statue of pure marble that would not chip away in the severest of storms. She was a statue, and nothing more.

"Try as you might, you won't find one speck of regret, one particle of dirt in my soul. Everything is just as I wished it."

"But it's a shame, isn't it? The bird somehow became a nondescript cage. People don't look at you. You aren't a part of their lives. They see you, they thank you, just as they see the sun and are grateful to it. But how many times do people talk about the sun in

their daily goings? How many times do they remember it, unless in comparison to something inhuman that is beyond obtaining? They see it whenever they look up, but they never notice it. They need it, after all — but it doesn't need them. And it doesn't have them and their small lives either — not even a picnic invitation; they could never have such a pretentious thought, their mirth would stain its brilliance."

"So be it," said the island mistress with a sad face. "I am content where I am, looking over them. Do you know how big a responsibility it is? Everything, everything depends on me. The ledgers, the revenue, the defense, the education of the children, the commissioning of art, the nurturing of morals — every person on this island is depending on me. Nobody asked me to become the pillar that holds everyone up; I became her of my own volition. And even if they can't see me below, they know inside that I exist, I am here. I am the strength they think their own. I am the weakness they think they know. I am the extra-ordinary, but in that I am very ordinary."

They did, didn't they? The doubt somehow found a niggling way into in her heart, only to keep echoing stronger, and because it was such a big responsibility, she couldn't resist thinking about what would happen if she failed it, at least once. Siroi had thought she had no colours herself, and this would enable her to take on the colours of everything else and create whatsoever she wished with them. What she had ignored was that she did, in fact, have a colour — a faded, almost translucent and wise white — very easy to miss, with a touch of sarcasm. A white like a half dusty feather lying around. She was unfit.

Siroi looked at the water and saw Tulip there, surrounded by lots of grandchildren, a slight smile on his still dapper face. She tried to find any showing of sadness there, and could not find any. Those eyes, she could not be sure if those were reminiscent or happy —

even though she tried very hard. Did he ever remember her? Did he ever feel sad? Rue her? Would anything change, would anyone care if she was not to be around? She almost felt a bit angry — whatever her passionately blue blood would let her feel, at any rate.

She had once made a friend beneath a certain squat tree. An unlikely friend, a girl of twelve who racked her brain trying to live with the complex mathematical problems she had been betrothed to. Pleasantly surprised by her resigned acceptance of the frightening experience, the island mistress had decided to help her out a bit — problems of algebra dared to presume no more than louts of visiting sailors in her calm and intimidating presence. The girl had returned to the place for some days subsequently, with home cooked food for Siroi, until the island mistress could not make it any longer, serious business taking precedence. That was the only friend she had ever made, and also the only best friend, however wayward and blush-worthy that thought was.

Speaking of funny things, this had to be the funniest. For as long as they were together, the daughter had never noticed her mother's housefly presence. It was when her spirit was jumping from string to string before the moon that she had noticed that absence for the first time, and for the first time, had wanted to do something for her mother — an unnecessary smile, a just-because flower, anything, and had promised herself that this must be done when she went back. What happened to that? Siroi couldn't remember. Why? The night of choosing could not have been their last night together. Yet, her aged and worn brain could not call up a single memory of them together after the island mistress had appeared on the scene. It was not the scrubbing clean of the cutting board of aerial hues — she knew as if by cosmic intuition, there had been no memories to begin with!

Oh, how the island mistress wished to go back to their old home, and open their vine-covered door, and as her mother would look up from knitting, beaming, and now younger even than her daughter

herself, she would pluck a wild-flower from the door and keep her promise. Siroi looked at Reason, helplessness and anguish trying to leap off her eyes in vehement rejection. A large smile broke out on my lord's face — by all rights, a child who had just won access to his favourite snack, but also one of youthful compassion. He once again extended his chubby hand.

A hand was meant to be taken, Siroi knew, and she did not mean to look at it. A servant's essence is in her sacrifice, and even if she didn't have a praiseworthy life to sacrifice, there were still people who depended on her dull, mousy failure of an existence. She couldn't give up on them. She had always meant to swat the helping hand away. Yet, one second of weakness was all it took.

It was a chubby hand. It was a plump hand, not chubby. It was a plush hand, with long fingernails, not plump. It was a ball of flesh with just the right dispositions, fine bones maintaining divine order, not the plumpness of well-being. A stark hand of justice, with none of the excesses of love, on a cavernous palm that could hold all the conscience of all of humanity for them. It was strong and reliable, and it wanted to help.

Before she knew it, the island mistress had been drawn to Reason's hand. It gave off a soothing scent, as if coming from a lost land far away. It was a scent that did not disgust in taste, and the island mistress found herself licking the insides of her palate. Clear drops of life coursed down the fingers and dropped, vanishing before they could splash on her face. One drop of life could exhaust a lifetime of thirst. She licked her lips like a snake wary to catch the air.

"Feed," sung Reason, eyes half lidded. The first taste made her feel like a girl before her marriage, lush black hair reappearing to replace the grey. The smash of joy was so spasmodic that it ripped her will from her, and she found her mouth closing on a second taste, a predator helpless before nature's call.

The particles in her body started to thrum and hum in anticipation of something big — good or bad, she couldn't tell. The skin reddened as she continued to lick, and began to grate against her tongue like sandpaper. The tongue had grown spikes, however, and soon the paper gave away to a blast of sand beneath. The sand evaporated in her mouth like fine clouds. Its particles came out in a torrent, and lost themselves in the bottomless pit of her gullet. Soon, there were blood and muscles, and when all that was stripped away and gnawed on, there lay behind a set of bleach white bones. The island mistress still couldn't stop, and she kept munching on them like a child on popsicles. Her overabundant youth made her feel tired, and with a sinking feeling, she looked at Reason.

He smiled at her, as if to say he permitted it. "Feed, little dear," he trilled, "See, you can do it! I knew you had it in you."

But tears had been flowing down her cheeks since who knew when, and she was looking at something far beyond the strange boy's head. "You don't have to fear now," said Reason. "You don't have to stand in the doorway and fret, hoping the family within would call you to be a part of their night time stories and not lose their minds about your august presence. You can do it all over. Go, do it right this time, the way you want —"

Siroi wasn't listening. She was covering her ears with white hands, and she looked down once at herself and what she had become, and shrieked in total, mortal horror. Shaking her head, she turned and ran. She ran over the pond water, on and on until as if in response to the never-ending scream, three figures swooped down from the grey sky. Indeterminate splotches of dirty black, they flew around her in circles, harassing her with their claws and bleaks.

Faster and faster they spun in a vortex, until her feet were all that could be seen in the shroud, and they bent and shrunk upwards, becoming her wings, until a shadow was the only thing that remained of what had once been her. Siroi looked at the moon and rent her

heart with a doomed screech, and the four shadows now dispersed in four directions.

Stunned and without words, Reason watched. The wounded deer had stood up from the underbrush, and it looked at him. What was that in the pools of its eyes? Pity? Disappointment? Disgust? It turned and slowly started to limp back without help. Without words, Reason watched it go.

3.

“I’ll make it right,” my lord whispered to no one in particular.

“That’s what life is, Reason,” Unreason said from behind, startling Reason. “People are fragile things. They get by. But look at you. You are so pure, so beautiful. And you brought her face to face with what life is. How could she not break after taking from you?”

“I will make it right the next time,” Reason reavowed.

Unreason was now a young woman. She was still a friend to reason, but the playful light that had entered her eyes was dangerous. It meant no harm — but it didn’t know much — or it had forgotten a lot, including her love for him. It was to be given in to at one’s own risk.

“How are you, Reason?” she asked.

“Don’t you care about them? They are your children.” Reason was biting down on his teeth, hard. It was her fault, all of it.

“They don’t care about me either,” she shrugged.

“If I am the reason your whole world is dying, along with you, you’ll still betray it for me?” Reason didn’t quite understand.

“We have had our time to live. We must get out of the way now and let what must be.”

“Then what is progress? What is resolve? What do you believe in? Why do you live? Will you forsake all of that?”

“You are what I believe in,” said Unreason mischievously. “Didn’t I tell you already? Come, let me dance with you now that I still can!”

She beckoned with open arms, dancing in the rain. But Reason’s glare was shedding ashes everywhere; his disquiet was making the humming that comes out of the earth even louder. He wished for the darned rain to stop, but it still fell in a small circle around her, and she still danced in it. ‘Look at her,’ Reason thought. ‘All fine and happy, with me or without me.’

“There’s a solution to everything,” Reason said. “Where you are the trouble, I’ll be the resolution. I’ll find out the cause of everything. I’ll make everything you have messed up right. I’ll cast my gaze to the farthest stars and even beyond. I’ll throw light on the most well-hidden corners inside me. Nothing will be unlearned. No shadow will escape unseen. For that, if I have to expand my mind to infinity and extend the space into eternity, I’ll even do that. I won’t stop until everything is Reason, everything is Me, and the last trace of you is gone from the world.”

“What if you are me, Reason?” Unreason asked, as if afraid. “What if behind every loving Reason stands a fear of Unreason? Why is white white? Why is good good? Don’t you find that to be the ultimate oppression? The ultimate irrationality?”

“You don’t know me,” Reason said. “I am the uniter of peoples and things. I am the hope that the conscious can see, touch, and feel. I was sent to this world to belong here. While you, you streak along the walls of your own creation like a slimy eel. You don’t belong, a parasite to yourself.”

“It’s impossible,” Unreason said. “Even when you see everything, I will be what you won’t see. You will think you can see the world, but I will be standing just behind you. Then you will turn around, and won’t see me, because I will still be behind you. And you will start looking for me. Then you will become just like me.” It looked as if Unreason wanted to say something, but she stopped herself in the

nick of time. Instead, she closed off her eyes and threw herself into the sky beneath her feet, inviting Reason to dance again. Reason looked at her and hateful disgust was all he could feel.

“I declare war,” he pointed a finger at her, every word a solemn oath. “I will protect my children from you, and also protect your children whom you have left behind. I will make everything right. Even if I have to kill you for that, I will do it properly this time. It will be the only crime I ever commit, and it will be by right and reason.”

Part-II: Of Humans

Chapter Three

1.

The man in his thirties is Shankhamitra. Beloved of reason, he has a watery voice. The young boy following him around with bags and trivia is Shankar, his number one devoted fan and helper in the world. Those bags, however, also hide long brushes and faded easels and other stuff an artist carries around — because the boy is also an aspiring artist. The woman who follows Shankha about like a shadow, albeit a classy one — the one who looks a bit younger than him, but is a bit older in truth — is Tulika. Tulika has long features — stretched eyes, aquiline nose. The two burly, badly clad soldiers with a smattering of cruelty etched on their faces, chugging along directly behind Tulika, are Rispit and Lidlit. There are about fifty or forty other people in sum, and good people they are all.

“A village of the mad-people,” Shankar half-whispers as the party dismounts.

“Loonies, boy. Crackpots. Open-mouth spittle sewers,” Rispit schools him.

“Hair’s out everywhere, and boy can’t even swear properly. Don’t worry, we will teach you,” Lispit mocks. Shankar blushes dutifully.

“Leave the boy alone,” admonishes Jagan, the officer. His eyes, however, are on Tulika’s back, where her long hair enacts interesting plays of movement on the alabaster background of her skin. The duo smiles sardonically at each other.

“Oh, look! A village,” Shankha turns around and declares, arms wide open, as if nobody had noticed — making clear his intention, to stay the night there.

2.

The bard is the first person they meet on their way in.

“I am a fine clock of his making. My hands are minute and precise in motion, my feet tick away in godly enthusiasm. My insides are a galaxy full of colours and sounds. And he has set a beautiful song in me. When he puts in the key and turns it upon the spring, my eyes turn up in bliss and my tongue forks to taste the air — and I play my sweet song, for even though I don’t understand it, it is my song. And kneeling at his feet I offer it, an unconditional gift of his own to his own. My cogs wear out, however, trying unceasingly to make it worthy of him. One day, my heart might just give out with a tiny pang, not able to bear the sweetness of it anymore, and you may not even hear it, but know I was here!” the bard says to Shankha.

“You hear that, Tuli? I am a fine clock of his making. My —”

Tulika interrupts Shankha. “Then I will be your caretaker. I will oil your hands up regularly, and wash them down with care. I will always keep you ticking near my heart, and when your time is up, I will put in extra effort so that your last song is remembered through the ages.”

Shankha smiles and sweeps her up in his arms. “Always be here, my love.”

Tuli waits to be kissed. But Shankha sets her down and says to the bard, “Make me a song, grandfather.”

“A lamp that is broken.

A hole the light doesn’t reach.

A pretty girl who don’t shine.

Listen, listen to this tune of mine, you are not alone —”

“Not that same old *Unreason’s Lament*,” Shankha holds up his hand. “Why don’t you make us something new?”

The bard opens his mouth a few times, almost as if his tonsil wants to say something. Nothing is said, however, and he looks at

Shankha in strange betrayal and distrust. Shankha hums a catchy tune he has heard somewhere, so low that he can't even hear properly.

The bard goes to the ground and claws out two fistfuls of loose soil. He chucks them at Shankha's face, furious twigs and pebbles and all. He slaps himself hard, on both cheeks, then starts to beat the flesh directly beneath his eyes with closed fists, as if trying to bust out his eyes. Tears fly everywhere, soon to be blood.

He stops as suddenly as he had started, goes up, and grabs Shankha on both of his shoulders. A deviously intelligent light has entered his eyes.

"Do you hear me? Do you hear what I am trying to say?"

"Loud and clear, grandfather," Shankha returns a jovial smile, as if nothing were out of the norm, while everybody else is still glued to their places in alarmed befuddlement.

The bard clutches and pulls apart his shirt collars as the party moves past. "Oh, how do I show you how I feel? How can I make you hear what I hear?"

"Insane," remarks one of the Lisp-it brothers.

3.

Where the village road breaks into three tributaries, there stand three comely maidens, as if guardians to a mythical great beyond. If the ones on the sides are wild-flowers of beautiful random hues and shapes, the one in the middle is the flower that only opens once in many, many years, in the dawn, and only for a few hours. She is straight, serene, and delicate, as if just coming out of the library. Her eyes are brown, and so is her hair. The serendipity of it all makes one wonder just how these discoveries made it to that corner of the world, while countless other places perish in poverty, shorn of the gifts of chance. Even places have luck.

When they pass through there, it seems for a moment that their eyes meet, so Shankar stops for a while.

“Your first time, boy?” Rispit butts in, roughly patting his back.

“They are broken flowers. Keep them in the best vase heaven has, and they will still wilt,” says someone passing by.

“Watch,” Lidlit says. “Give us a little show, why don’t you? We are such gallant warriors, tired of doing such good things,” he says to the women with a leer. The girls on the side start to disrobe.

“Not you,” he fixes his finger on the one in the middle. “You.”

“They don’t belong to anyone, boy. Not even their own selves. Cooked, whatever there was inside,” Rispit says, holding Shankar in a viselike grip.

Shankar finds himself going red from ear to ear, and he can’t look her in the eye. “Look.” Rispit forces his eyes up. The ones on the flanks have stopped unclothing, they stand with their hands hanging by the side, tangled clothes hanging awkwardly from their limbs. “Clothe,” Lidlit commands in barely masked irritation, and they slowly start to right themselves.

Shankar finds himself on the verge of tears. He lunges between the girl and Lidlit, trying to block his vision with his body, amusing the man greatly. “Jump —” Lidlit says with half a laughter, and the girls run towards a well none of them had noticed, barely hidden in the trees behind the men. The naked one in the middle brushes past Shankar. They run as if their lives depend on it, and jump together into the well like expert athletes, vanishing from the air without a care in the world.

“— on my face,” completes Lidlit, momentarily out of words.

As Shankar is peering out into the darkness below, the three of them are standing in knee-deep water, looking coolly at the cold walls, thankfully and miraculously unhurt. They don’t respond when he calls down to them, so he leaves looking for a rope or something to get them out.

4.

The mother stands with the ladle in her hand, twin rivers of sweat streaking down her temples. Her sons sit in a corner of the room, books in their hands. “Read,” she reminds them in an iron voice whenever they stop. The boys have been reading for years. “Read,” the command keeps descending from the foggy beyond, and it is the only thin strand they have left to their identities, now and then tugging back, trying to break free. Hence, they read doggedly. Who knows when they had their last meal, or bath, or walk? Their fingers have become spidery, their ribs skeletal. The hair has on an off day fallen off. Still, an indomitable fanaticism rocks them back and forth, an inhuman persuasion has kept their voices from cracking, and they keep reading loudly — of geography, history, and children’s fables. The mother keeps cooking, and whenever they stop, “Read,” she repeats. The ladle never comes down on their spine, however, and the food never on the table.

“You’ve been spending all the money on your looks,” she tells Tuli. “Not how you build your future at all! If there’s a future for you, there will always be looks to take care of.”

“Have you been eating? Look at you! Do you want to die? Go on, do that to this poor lady too, don’t hold back!” she cries aghast when she sees Rispit and Lidlit, and adamantly presses their well-muscled heads into her shrunken bosom, making them gasp for air.

“Mother,” says Shankha as he takes a seat on the ground, “I have been studying. Do you know why the sun rises each day on the other end? It doesn’t rise to watch the people go about their petty lives. It does to watch its own rays play off against their pettiness. The sun feels good about itself when it does that.”

“I have been working,” he continues. “I am master to a huge city on the seashore and anything and everything else that the sea can lap up. And I have been taking care of myself and those close to me.”

The mother doesn’t understand much, but she listens with a proud beam. “You have, haven’t you been?” she pets Shankha on the head. The boys look up from their books in who knows how long, and listen intently to the stories Shankha conjures out of his foreign air. The food finally comes on the table, and steams there.

5.

The mayor sits in a room with a lot of books, maps spread out before him with their roots and branches in other maps beside and beneath. He stands up as the party enters, and starts boisterously like a politician exposing an optimistic future:

“The world is always in twos, the haves and the have-nots. The children of Reason have him, but the children of Unreason have nothing. We love you if you love us. We give you war if you give us war. We are like monkeys secretly falling in love with our species brothers, and by becoming a mirror for your potential, we give you Choice.”

“We are staying,” Shankha says, giving him a warm hug.

“Are you? Oh, I see. We will leave, then. Wildlings come out in the night in the forest and the children get scared, but we will ask them to leave and behave,” says the mayor unfocusedly.

“We are staying where you are,” says Shankha, putting a brotherly arm around the mayor’s neck. “And you are staying here.”

“I will tell you,” Shankha continues, looking at the maps, “I am the master of everything that falls out of these lines. Everything you can think of. And, brother, today I have come to take your little village. Today, you will give it to me.”

The mayor is suddenly alert. He brushes Shankha's hand off and asks, "Then you will be giving us all that lies outside these lines? Brother."

Shankha laughs.

6.

The lot of the village was about to change. Every house and every window knew this — and therefore didn't raise a ruckus when Jagan lined up every villager in the rare paved courtyard in the town hall compound, his soldiers lazily putting together their guns.

They were going through motions they had made many, many times before — there was no reason to hurry; the salvation that would be granted to the villagers through their barrels would be sure and stable.

Shankha joined them, rubbing diligently the sleep off his eyes, slowly waking up to be rudely horrified. "What are you doing?" he demanded from Jagan.

The subordinate was confused. "Aren't we giving them the pardon?"

"No. Stand down, soldier," Shankha said, quite firmly this time.

There was to be no further explanation. One day turned into many days — nobody knew what they were doing in a village full of mad-people on their way back from a world conquest. Each assumed to the best of their ability — perhaps the lord had a complicated plan of even greater magnificence, perhaps it was one of the lord's fancies, which he certainly deserved after all he accomplished, and so on — they all played along as if nothing was amiss.

Shankha would get up early in the mornings and be everywhere. He would pick up a big mop and sweep the streets, whether others joined or not. He would sometimes snatch away the stove from Mother and cook her dishes so well that it would embarrass her. He

would teach the sons stories that lay under the words written on the pages of their books, slowly but surely opening up their minds. He would sit down for an afternoon drink with his friend, the old bard, and still find the time to put down fiction in his daily journal before sleep. It would not be a sight out of place at all to come upon the master of the world kneading cow dung carefully with his hands to leave them to dry, or poise poignantly the curling fish bait on the crooked hook for the village kids to fish.

Inside the large and spacious town hall, there lived a doll. Not a lock was off put on her beautiful face, and her eyes were kind and scary. She had been there for as long as anyone could remember — perhaps since before the village itself had been born. The doll had been taking care of the village people since forever — only, there was nobody to take care of her. When she approached someone, man or beast, they stilled and awaited — not her care, but as if for a supreme command that was to fall. They would have been afraid of her, even though she meant no harm but to live peacefully with them all, had they not surrendered completely as she kept their houses, bodies, and minds in comfortable order.

She was perhaps the most surprised of them all to see Shankha and his men turn up — but she hid it well, so well that one could not discern she was any different from those who called her lady — the children of Unreason. There was something very unique in the way Shankha took care of the people, the plants, and the animals — she could never emulate it in a thousand years. The more he gave of himself to others, the more withered and ragged he himself looked, as if a loosened house waiting for a storm to come and knock it over. More than what he did for them, his presence, his touch, his look invigorated them. The beneficiaries of his service wanted to serve him in return, and that desire came voluntarily; there was no fear involved. They just wanted to surround him and coddle him and envelope him with all their beings, give him something that he had

made them give themselves. They wanted to become better, they wanted to make more out of themselves than they could, to make him happy. It was beautiful, but it was also concerning.

“Stop it,” the doll would say when she could not contain that blistering restlessness under the base of her throat anymore. “If you go on giving, giving, and giving, soon enough there won’t be anything left of you. I just know it.”

But Shankha would just dress her up in the prettiest of clothes — something about his presence made all of them the prettiest — and put the yellowest flowers on her hair, and set her down before the starriest sky.

“It’s not giving,” he would be lost in deep rumination. “I am being loved everywhere, all the time. The cuckoo calls only to brighten my heart. The sun rises only to give me hope. The trees give their pleasure on to me. Even the people, they feel empty and confused just so they could love me with everything they have.”

He would pick up an insect or two, and sometimes squish it pink, sometimes put it back unhurt. “All this life belongs to me. It’s mine if I take it; it’s mine if I don’t. It’s a riot. I am being chained and gagged, and the world wants to love me to death. If I don’t love it back just as strongly, I am getting tickled to death. This beauty will kill me sooner or later anyway; if I can’t control that, I’d prefer to take out a few lives with my own beauty on the way out.”

“You’re incomprehensible,” she would say. “You’re like the ocean wave that only gets stronger the more it pulls itself apart for others.”

“An ocean wave can’t be loved, though,” he would be quick to contradict himself.

“Can too. The foam can.” She would look at herself. Just on the verge of dissipating, at the very brink of understanding.

One night, as the beasts of the jungle and the people of the village had gathered around Shankhamitra, he gave them the call. “Let’s build something. Let us make and create together — I don’t know what, but something. I know it is possible; we can do it.”

The beasts who knew nothing and the people who were not aware of anything found themselves nodding enthusiastically — every head and every tail. They didn’t know what, but they knew they were going to do it.

And they did. A voracious change was eating away at the apathy of the village people, and anyone could notice it glistening at a glance. Who knew Mother had such an intuitive, primal understanding of the martial arts? She quickly became a favourite of the soldiers and a tough competitor to Jagan for their respect. The milkman made cheese so fragrant that it would introduce their village to the world over. The mayor was so shrewd that he would snatch away all of Shankha’s dominion if he dropped his guard for a quick bit, but he was the reliable shoulder Shankha could depend on to make the three girls simple flutes from wood. For all Shankar’s attempts, the girls simply weren’t made for painting. The flutes, however, the results of too many bloody cuts on all their hands, played beautifully on their lips. The sons were a success, however. They drew awkwardly, but with life and vigour. The flag they impressed upon an unravelled shirt flew proudly over the roof of the mayor’s office.

Shankha had started to coach them with the goal of taking them to the big city one day, but now it didn’t matter. Now that they had made so much out of their village, there was no point in leaving. Why, he could make it the capital of the world, for all reasons and purposes — and why not?

The change was quick to take over the people who had come from the outside as well, and strangely, the doll was the only person to notice that. Rispit and Lidlit had become big lugs of emotions unlocked from entire lifetimes of putrefaction. They still had

difficulties in channelling them, though, not unlike boys in their teen years, and only one person could give them the respectful company they needed to bloom without hesitation. Big sister Shree — all of the triplets were named Shree — was the person they would go to, and would not leave — or acknowledge they had come to a point where they could no longer live without her, bailing themselves out with one innocent excuse after another.

The doll loved the art humans made. She would peek over the shoulders of the tranquil being that Tuli was, and pore over a few sentences from the books she would be holding open. She would come to appraise the pictures Shankar painted and observe things the artist had sometimes missed — “I sense a strange intensity from this part of the house,” pointing at the world inside. “That was where my grandfather spent his last days. He was the one who taught me painting,” he would tell her, surprised beyond comprehension. “This, by the way, is Shankhamitra’s palace.” “I know,” she would nod with eyes full of said knowing.

It was in her pursuance of a relationship with art that she learnt that human beings and their relationships could be works of art as well. The life of a soldier meant the throwing away of life itself, or what we know to be life. What was returned in exchange for the unbreakable oaths was too paltry in terms of balance — respect, bags of tinkling pennies, and the status of an elevated outsider to society. Born soldiers don’t mind, however. Not only that, they live for it — and love it.

The first time their eyes met, and in Jagan’s mind he was the one to have initiated it, it was him again that broke contact and turned his back to Tuli — as warm and inviting as the characters of the book she held, standing over the garden shrubs. The second time, he stole a glance when he thought he could get away with it, from himself and the rest of the world at large. The third, fourth, and the fifth time, he did get away. The sixth time, the resolute soldier gave in. He walked

up to her, getting deeper into the muddy earth the closer he got, and they kissed, holding each other's faces in their dreams. The doll wondered how Shankha would feel if he came to know, and she felt hurt for him. But he wouldn't come to know, would he? There was always something to build in the village — his energy would never wean off, and she would be there, right beside him, forever to ensure he never looked back at the hole that might gobble him up. Tuli and Jagan could have their own sweet little home in the village.

8.

Not all was placid though. There was opposition from one quarter. Shankar would sometimes grow agitated, and match his pace to Shankha's, who always had a million things to do, and keep persisting, "Are you sure, lord-brother?"

"What are you doing?" "When are we going to leave?" "What comes next?" "What have you thought?"

What does one think, what does one plan to do, what comes next after one has conquered the entire world? Shankha didn't know. But he was one inch from conquering the world, and finishing that task was all he could think about.

"You see," Shankha would try to allay his fears, "Conquering men and materiel is not enough. I must take over the hearts of men, over day and night, and over what lies beyond the horizons of our souls."

"Just what do you think of yourself?" Shankar would grumble. Truly, just who?

"Just an ambitious head," Shankha would laughingly say.

"Love is a weapon. Love can bring me what a thousand wars cannot. Giving in to the tyranny of reason, of letting what must be, of vanquishing evil and granting life, that is just accepting defeat. No, the broken seed must break again with life; the greying mother must live. And I can feel it, I am so close to having it all."

“You’re only one person, though. You can’t be everywhere and do everything all the time. Shouldn’t you prioritize?”

Smart boy. Shankha would smile proudly and clap Shankar on the back.

“Isn’t that just what I am doing? Aren’t those who are the most impoverished of love and attention also those who deserve it the most? Shouldn’t we undertake to light up the dimmed souls first before we lavish even more upon those who have it all?”

‘No. What about us? What about those who love, follow, and live by you? Aren’t you supposed to give it to us first, your friends, family, and countrymen? But you carry around your sack of infinite love and sprinkle it around without discrimination as so much dust that has lost all its value in its profusion —’ but Shankar was afraid of saying it, of the reactions it might draw.

“The people of this village are like mirrors. They reflect your own self back at you. They weren’t always like this, though. It makes me think, what if I become a mirror myself, and reflect their reflections back at them? In the endless chain of open doors that would create, there would still be something that would catch the eye, no matter how miniscule, that they forgot about themselves — that makes them, them. If I can make them see it, if we have that small seed, we can make a huge tree out of it. We can make them whole again. You’ll see, I promise.”

There you go. For all your pomp and pretension, you are just another fool with an oversized heart. Shankar didn’t know what to do with Shankha, so he did nothing. Even when he ran out of things to paint and tunes to teach Shree, he did nothing. When everything else ran out, the faith and the belief in his master he nursed closely as his own child still remained, if anything, making him wonder just when it had grown to be so big and so beautiful.

And just like that, a lone soul appeared one day on the horizon. The wayfarer had walked a long way to have gotten there. He had a fresh face that no wretched distance could mar, however, and a penetrating sight that could pierce commandingly into the most tempting of fantasies.

The heads of the grass on the sides of the path preened at his appearance and the windows of the village rattled uneasily, obviously displeased. Inhabitants of Shankha's realm, they wanted to admit no pretender — fascinating the man to no end.

Shankha smiled guilelessly and invited the man to a night's stay, even as the man exuded threat and power from every particle of his being — paying it no heed and allowing it no effect on his magnanimity, the way perhaps only a king can. "Stay the day and take a look through all we have created, won't you?"

In the evening, they put up a little show for him to be followed up by a banquet painstakingly brought together by the village cook. The watchers clapped like children when justice followed through to grace the actors of the puppet show the mayor had conjured up off his back, refusing to be defeated by anybody else in terms of the multifariousness of his talents.

"Look at what we have created," Shankha would not stop saying. "A happy home. A kingdom where everyone is a king." And it did intrigue his new friend, he looked at it all with starry eyes.

At dinner they served him sweet balls of salt, skulls topped with falcon feathers, and burnt glops of sour chilli. It all looked very strange and charming, but tasted so good that the guest didn't want to open his eyes, still savouring the tastes when the left-over smells had escaped through the unseen holes in the wooden ceiling. Finally, he opened them and took a deep breath, ready to say something important, but they were on to him.

“Why don’t I sing you all a song?” said the bard who could never make up a new one. “Go on, go on, grandfather,” Shankhamitra encouraged.

The bard stood up from his place by the huge dining table and looked straight at the man sitting at its head, being ceremonially honoured.

“Do I understand me and seek to know you? Do I understand you and seek to know me? Can I only love what I seek to know? Can I only love what I understand?”

“Grandfather, that doesn’t sound like a song, though,” Shankha chipped in politely.

“I know, I know, sonny. Patience.”

“I have no need for what I do not know. And what does not serve me will not change me. So I will break me and let you go. And what I want I can never let be,” the bard sang like a jobless ruffian on the streets, jeering and lampooning.

“Reason, is he a fool or a moron? The idiot boy who can never sleep. If the unknown is not what he wanted, why can he not stop himself look? If it was a place he wanted to go, why does he never collect the distances he has made? We have better things to do, though, than soothe the fool that broke the shovel on his own leg.”

“Superbtastic! Magnimazingbulous!” Shankha was ecstatic. It was rude and caustic, but for those diners that dared look up at the expression of the stranger, he seemed to be taking it all in sporting stride. Why, he even looked a bit distracted, did he even hear what he was now dutifully and demurely clapping to?

“Shankha, listen. What you build is supposed to stay,” the man said, looking apprehensive. “I find it hard to say you have built anything.”

“Practice makes perfect, my friend,” Shankha was hard to put down.

“Except sometimes it doesn’t. No matter how many times you try, you will not grow wings and fly. Why don’t you come back to where everyone waits for you? Your friends — your wife is worried.”

Wife? Shankha was puzzled. He looked at Tuli, sitting right there, invested in a conversation with Shankar.

“I appreciate all you have done for these orphaned children. But you can’t do anything more, and you shouldn’t try. Truth be told, you are an obstruction, a delay in their path. They are meant to be relinquished in the cold, proliferating among the stray dogs. It’s their due, their right,” Reason was assertive.

“Why don’t you come back? The pampering of the wild beasts has stolen away the virility from your men. The deification of the ideal has subjected the family to neglect and negligence. The liberty of existence has dampened any romance there ever was. The oceans attack your kingdom, Shankha, taking over street after street, drowning and binding anything that dares to stand in love. Everyone, everything awaits you — the kingdom you have conquered but are yet to create. You have done enough. You have done me proud. Come back.”

Shankha looked shaken. “I will,” he said.

“But you won’t, will you?” Reason was bitter in his bitterness. “The ones who value you, need you, hold no allure for you. You will instead run to lavish your love on beings no better than rocks and mountains.”

“You misunderstand me,” said Shankha.

“As repugnant as it sounds, love is quite like money,” Reason continued. “It has to be valued by the one who spends it as well as the one who it is spent with and spent on. It is worthless if it isn’t recognized by either party, just like any other currency. You overlook the fact that it constitutes all the problems of the world as well as all the solutions. In the hands of someone like you, it is very powerless to change anything — for better or worse.”

“I just wanted to be your friend,” Shankha said. “Being your brother, your subject — it wasn’t enough. I just wanted to give you something. Show you something you’ve never seen before. For that, I had to do something you could have never done by yourself. I had to become your equal, only then could I give you a gift. And I have done that, haven’t I? Look around, this is your gift. All of this.”

There was something in eyes that had neither light nor darkness before. Strange things had come to inhabit empty houses that were becoming so lonely that the crumbling bricks were close to taking on lives of their own. But it still wasn’t enough, it was never going to be enough — unless one played by the rules, as Reason himself did. Rules, submission, acceptance were the only freedom and power there was.

Reason laughed from a really sour place inside. The path he walked on was lonely. Nobody had the strength to walk on that road made of broken jagged metal, and he wasn’t letting anybody else make that attempt. He had to be cruel.

“Gifts? Like this?” he asked. “Shree, you like that flute Shankha worked so hard to make you, don’t you?”

Shree nodded. “Can you be so kind as to drop it into the fire? It’s dying down.”

She got up and complied wordlessly, not an extra glance wasted on her object of affection as it blackened into char.

“See?” Reason explained. “This is all your love means to them. What you have created is beautiful, I’ll grant it, but will it be there once you turn your back for a second?”

Shankha gulped, trying hard to bluff to himself. Next up was the flag the sons had made, meant to fly without looking down regardless of the weather. They bore it on their shoulders, and chucked it into the fire with nary a salute. In went the unfinished plate of the bard, on which he had written a fascinating verse with leftover soup and rice crumbs for punctuations, never to be read now.

“It’s still not enough,” Reason yawned for the effect. “You there,” he pointed at Mother, “Why don’t you throw those kids in?”

The mother picked up her nonchalant sons by the collar and marched them to the fire. “Stop!” Shankha had to rush before she dumped them in, and she withdrew just before the soles of their feet dipped in, still uncomfortably close to the fire and browning slowly.

“It’s still not complete. It’s still a lot. Why do you expect everything to be perfect?” Shankha sounded incoherent to his own ears.

“And it’s never going to be complete. The last meter is what you will never cross — it’s impossible.”

“Why don’t you tell him? Shankar? Tuli?” He turned to them helplessly. They were staring forward listlessly, hunched like machines bogged down by rust, and didn’t acknowledge his call. Reason sighed, shaking his head slightly from side to side.

“They left, Shankha. A long time ago.”

The shadow that used to be Tuli lunged at Shankha over the table, murder in her eyes, clutching a spoon malevolently. “You scoundrell! What have you done to me? To us? How are you going to make it right?” She sunk like a heavy boulder under the water’s surface, however, much before she could reach him. “I believe in my lord. Even when I have been allowed infidelity, treachery, weakness, even when the diamond I used to be was allowed to turn into peat, I will not hold it against my lord. I will believe you will return one day and dish out the punishment I so deserve,” Jagan said, before he too disappeared like soap suds in thin air.

Shankar was the last to leave, his spectre hung on to the doorframe with superhuman strength even as they pulled him out — but they were too strong. The world started to spin. Shankha felt thirsty. And something didn’t make sense.

“I’ll show you,” Reason said. He casually picked up one of the table knives and sent it sailing towards Shree, who caught it deftly.

He asked her to make a flute out of her finger, and she had never handled a knife before, but it didn't bother her in the least as she started to make little holes through which to pull out the guts and the bones to hollow out the shaft. "Get him," Reason directed like a commander on a battlefield, and Mother started to inevitably march towards him.

She knelt over Shankha and took possession of his neck with sinewy hands, starting to expressionlessly strangle him. "Wait, mother," he managed to croak, even as the pain made him tear up and claw for air. "Am I not your son?"

"Yes, baby. You are. You are!" The stranglehold dissipated immediately into the comfort he had always known and she started to sing him a lullaby. Shankha gasped in relief and had the time to half smile in victory before Reason said, "No, he isn't your son. Get him," and she was on him again. Reason towered over them, driving his point home with each finger that cut on Shankha's life, confident that anything would bend as long as he didn't break or relent.

"Stop it," finally, the doll could take no more, and she burst out. With one stern look from her, Mother scampered back to her place like a trained soldier, and Shree and the rest of them stopped doing anything that might disturb Shankha.

Reason recoiled as if he had seen a snake; he jumped back to the wall and pressed his back on it. "What is it... she doing here?" he mustered. "Come here. Quick." He beckoned Shankha urgently, "Come, there's no time!"

The doll paid him no mind. She was peering close into Shankha's fallen eyes, figuring out how to put him back together. "It's going to be alright," she said to him softly. "Go to him. You can start from the scratch again; you can make it. I know. It's never too late. I'll support you. Go."

“I knew you had to be involved,” Reason said acidly. “You love him, don’t you? Woe to the creature that is unfortunate enough to be loved by you.” The doll flinched.

“Why am I even surprised?” he said. “This is always what happens. You mess up everything. Everything that is valuable to me.”

The doll pushed Shankha towards Reason, but Shankha couldn’t move. He didn’t know how to move. Reason was his friend, but he didn’t want to become him — not on his life. Shankha was going to be Shankha, and Reason was absolute like an approaching storm wall — there was no meeting him but on his own terms. Friends? Perhaps Shankha had presumed a bit too much.

“Why don’t you tell him?” Reason said. “That it doesn’t matter to you at all, much like him. What your love is like.”

“Yes,” the doll said to Shankha. “I love you more than anything. I will love you even if you turn to melting flesh pecked away by the river fish. I will love you even if you turn into flying ashes or shining bones. I will love you even if you become the bird’s calls or the flower’s scents. I will love you when you are dust dispersed in four corners of the world just as I love you right now — or a night star that was never born. I will love you even if you turn into memories I can’t have and eventually forget.”

Shankha vomited. Shankha coughed. He laughed. And as he did, sea-water spurted from his mouth. Clots of hair, flopping fish, lone slippers, strings cut from ships that left home, and all that was entrusted to the sea spewed from his mouth, as he maniacally laughed and laughed, clapping hard the wooden floor. Oil poured out of his eyes as he laughed and set the water on fire, reaching up to slobber at the knees of everyone in the room.

Shankha watched as everything they — he thought he had created burned. ‘Live,’ he tried to convey to Mother, but she was busy waving a rolled-up paper menacingly. “Read,” she was instructing her burning children. ‘Live,’ he willed to the bard, but he knew that his

time had come, and he was whistling out a merry song with vivacity that only young sailors were supposed to know. Shree finally put her flute to her lips and played a song of death, even as the heat cracked her instrument and elicited otherworldly sounds from it.

“What was my life lived for? What did I do everything for? What was the result?” Shankha said to the doll. “Live, please?”

“I can’t,” she was regretful. “I love you. I can’t leave you here.”

10.

It would have ended there, except it didn’t. As the pungent odour of burning seas filled the air, Shankha suddenly wished Tuli were there. Her love was conditional. She loved him, but she loved herself at the same time. She had left him, and he felt the indomitable urge he had always felt for the unobtainable. He wanted to box her strongly within his arms and feel her quake in obvious terror, and yet not have the strength to resist — since she loved him — as the fire ate them both up.

Shankhamitra had loved the world purely all his life — never expecting anything in return. That was all the strength he had possessed — strength that had professed to change everything. Yet, when he was not given smack in return, at the end of the road, he felt betrayed. He wanted love — and he wanted it in a way he could feel it, see it, hold it close like a poor miser. He wanted those he had loved to no end to feel the pain and betrayal he felt. It was the ultimate subjugation of the spirit; he was no longer pure. But he was above all shame and humiliation.

And so, after the fire had died down, it uncovered a small body of turquoise water in the middle of nowhere, a few half-burnt pages lying in the whereabouts. A ducklike creature lived in it. It swam around peacefully during the day, and when night came and the curtains to the moon went up, it appeared on land. Its gelatinous flesh

rippled beneath its silk smooth skin as it waddled up ponderously to a rock, flat tail supporting stout, deformed legs. Once up there, it would open its bulbous bills and let out a long, ugly note — even uglier than it was.

It wanted to be loved. It was ready to be loved. It deserved to be loved, and it couldn't wait to be loved. It wanted the perfect kind of romance — it wanted to be swept off its feet. It wanted to be the princess of someone's clouds, the apple of someone's throat. It had faith it was going to happen, and it would stress that conviction by picking up the note whenever it dropped through the night.

Little did it know that a creature just like it lived above the clouds. It was as if they had been created purposefully just for each other. But both of them drowned in the noise of their own desires and neglected to listen — and thus would never find each other.

Chapter Four

1.

When Agnimitra rode, the wind became a meek follower. When Agnimitra cooked, the smell alone obliterated the hunger demons and laid their bones to rest. When she composed, poets laureate jumped from their high places to die, lost in euphoria that made them want to cherish their insignificance forever. When it was time play a game on the board, age old wisdom and rules of thumb took their leave, as no law of universe could stand in her presence and not melt, to be reshaped according to her will. Agnimitra, however, had no friends. Anything or anyone that decided to stand up from their prostration and dared to creep forward, as if sneaky shadows on a collapsing star, would catch fire and get gobbled up in due time — nothing can escape the pull of destruction.

It was not as if that was disappointing. The fire has no need for friends — the desire to burn is all consuming, and it leaves no space for other thoughts. At the same time, the fire has no existence without its inferiors — it needs air to burn on and burn down, and stone and mud and sticks and people to consume. It suffers from a dual rage. On the one hand, it desires there be nothing in the whole wide universe it cannot burn. On the other hand, it craves for that un-burnable so strongly — that one source that could feed the fire for an eternity before it died — and on to the next source, the next dimension to be conquered.

At first, Agnimitra enjoyed watching people burn. She would crash into the gatherings where wandering mystics debated, only to strip away the ring of truth from their sage sayings with the knife of cold, mendacious logic. She would appear uninvited on the

academies of praised scholars and frustrate their constructions with enchanting mysticism and conundrums that seemed sweeter to the mind than any solution there could be. She would turn up in community events only to put trained athletes to shame with exhibitions of her talent, and make everyone feel like painted glass despite all their toil in front of a diamond that would not allow night to take its due.

As her fame grew, she was invited to the court to watch the beast-master in storied action — Sudesh, his name was. The man was in his seventies, and aside from bright and gaudy clothing, always wore a charming, expectant smile — perhaps expecting claps and cheers from his hapless watchers, but the sense was that there was always something more — it made whoever the recipient was want to be a little taller and a little better.

Sudesh went nowhere without his wingmen — a grizzly bear called Samsher and a mangy tiger called Bhalu. Companions for a long time, the three were co-passengers in life, and all sported straight and spry backs without a hint of cracking. Old friends behind the stage, Bhalu would sometimes put on rouge and become Samsher's lost lover on it — and purr, putting his head down on Samsher's shoulder. On other days, Samsher would stand up on his hind legs and put up a good dance all the while balancing silver cutlery on his forepaws while Bhalu jumped over him. They would work up a good sweat, and smile with their tongues out like good housedogs — all affection and sober grace for the audience.

The first time Sudesh saw their little guest of honour, rough and rustic, he knew it was going to be a tall order to satisfy her — it still pleased him somehow, as if his destiny had finally come calling to get him. It had come late, when his bones had become creaky and rusty, but there was enough youth left in them still. So he wore his cryptic smile over an out of place frown, because he was really and truly happy from the core of his heart, and got to work. He called on the

krakens and their joint families to rise above the seas and do acrobatics in the air. The sounds they made as they splashed down made those who lived above the sky curious — it seemed as if the piddly humans had undertaken to destroy the world without them being consulted and their intrigue being involved at all.

The next day, Sudesh made an army of earthworms dig out a huge castle surrounded by a moat filled with snakes topping an expansive city on barren land just outside the capital. Observers were struck by how immaculate and polished every corner of each house looked — glossy and not a speck of dirt to be found. Sudesh touched his white beard, lips quirked in satisfaction, as he gave the order for the worms to disappear. A massive blue whale carried the spectators on its back and ventured into unexplored regions of the sea as Sudesh rode on its hump playing a pitched tune on a pipe. The birds of the sky and the beasts of the jungle — herbivores and carnivores galore — enacted the old epics with such perfection that it stunned the king's select performers.

The spectacle went on day after day, each outdoing the previous in terms of the heights of incredulity being surmounted — intoxicating the people of the land out of their daily trades, emptying the streets and the markets, and making time grind to a halt. The adults were acting like children marinated in fun, and there was nobody to tell them any better — even the king showed no inclination to remember something crucial, that there were taxes yet to be collected and peasants to be given the twenty lashes — so Agnimitra had to take matters into her own hands. As the people would be beside themselves after each day on finding out the proper way to congratulate the otherworldly talent they had never known to grace their lifetimes, Agnimitra would simply sniff in derision and say, “I could have done it better.” And she could have, there was no question about that. She could make better silk than the best weaver in the continent, better tools than the best craftsman, and so on. It

wasn't because she was something special — it was just because they were loath to burn, all of them. A soaked twig has two choices — to burn, or to sap and rot. Human beings, however, usually choose neither, and while away their lives vacillating in between, afraid, and being nowhere-people that live eighty years shorter than an eye-blink.

Not if she was in charge. She stood up finally and called loudly, “Is that all? I see no progress at all. How much longer is this farce going to drag on?” Sudesh didn't answer, but the lights in his quarters did not go out that night. Agnimitra could see the lines beneath his eyes and the lint on his clothes as he came out the next morning. He looked really tired and his beard haggard — not full of persona as usual. His chums, Bhalu and Samsher, followed close on his heels, out after a long time. It was to be just the three of them that day, no heavenly monsters and their outlandish exploits. A nondescript corner of an unguarded road was to be their stage. People frothed on every space available to get in a look — on the high branches of trees and over the precarious ledges of someone's just-built roof. Sudesh fished in his robes and held out a bundle of creased papers — the play he had created overnight — ‘The Story of Reason,’ it was titled. Reason was a boy not more clueless than any boy his age, and he had an obsession. He couldn't see problems lie unresolved — he didn't particularly have a distaste for them, but at the end of the day, he liked solutions more. He was put in a box inside which he couldn't see himself, nor the culprit that had set him up for such a gauntlet. Every part of his body was a riddle needing to be solved, only, they all betrayed him as soon as they got what they needed from him to solve themselves. As soon as he would be done with a specific problem, it would shift its shape, becoming unrecognizably changed, and back to square one they would go. Failing time after time, but not despondent, he finally realized the need of the hour — a solution to all the questions of the world — then they wouldn't be able to wriggle away from the corner of the box he managed to momentarily

illuminate. It was easier thought of than done, however, and Reason spent ages and eons in his solitary mission to find truth. From his shedding nails and fallen hair a trillion Reasons were born — his children, they all looked, talked, and thought like him. From his breath a world bathed in a hallowed light was born, where peacocks flagrantly roamed around and sunlight was never in short supply. It was very illusory, though, only there as long as he closed his eyes in the abject darkness and took a fake nap — no matter how hard the trillion Reasons pushed against the walls of the huge universe, in reality a small box they were all trapped in, it wouldn't give in the slightest.

Sudesh had forgotten to put an ending to his play — or perhaps he didn't know the lines that were supposed to fall in place. It was one loop of a paradox that was never going to meet its other end, going up and down and forward and backward in helpless spirals. As he stood in the backdrop and recited the parts, Samsher and Bhalu brought them to life with their bodies. When one of the actors became the problem, the other became the solution — when Bhalu became desperate in the search for victory, Samsher taught him the art of submission; when Samsher was gutted down by a lie, Bhalu showed him how lies could be transformed into truths and restored his faith — and on and on it went. The simpler the problems became, the more complex and out of grasp their culminations. Inside the circle they performed, there was no one but Bhalu for Samsher, and no one but Samsher for Bhalu. The darkness engulfing them clung to the darkness beneath as one hundred children cling to a lonely mother, and it found a way into the closed confines of the spectators' hearts. It closed on them with a crushing pressure, making whatever was contained within threaten to burst forth, and making the little hearts want to bolt from their little homes. It reflected in the eyes of the performers, Samsher and Bhalu, as well as in the voice of the reader, for even if the gift given in life bears the seal of immortality,

the receiver can only have so much. They have limits — man, beast, and spirit, all of them. We all want pleasure and no pain, but how much pleasure can we take before we break? As day gave way to night, the raw emotions the audience felt became a ringing headache; their eyes throbbed and their ears screeched. Even the king shifted uneasily in a scarcely noticeable manner. One doesn't know how Bhalu and Samsher felt, but it seemed as if the longer time passed, the lighter their bodies became, the higher their jumps, and the heavier the sounds when their paws made contact with earth. It was hard to tell through the glaze that had come over the eye of every watcher, but it seemed like the bodies of the beasts had slendered to an ungodly extent, their fur had become coats made of linen, their faces elongated, the foaming saliva a white beard, and the aged reticence an ironic smile — with all of them standing on two legs, nobody knew which was the master and which was the beast anymore. And then it happened — before the voice of the reader could fail, his knees dropped out, plonking him on his palms, the very image of failure that Reason and his children were for all present to see. The crowd cheered — they had thought it all scripted. The performers looked back to see what had broken them out of their sweet, sweet trance, and finding it was the culprit that had put them through that endless trial, all the grief and rage they had felt while performing resurfaced. They pounced on him, grabbed an arm each, and tore him apart in two. The crowd celebrated again, drowning unapologetically the wails of the babies among it. The two performers curtsied, and stepped back into the shadows, never to stand out again. The king looked at Agnimitra anxiously, waiting for a cue on how to react to what had transpired. “I could have done it better,” she said with a huff and prepared to leave, as always, but a small smile got away from the lively world of scintillation she felt inside — that Sudesh had given her. He had burned, and brightly at

that. It was the only gift she had ever received, and the best one. She was not alone.

2.

Peace and progress are within reach — each rule is the perfect rule, each law is omniscient, every truth is the supreme truth, every being can be the perfect creation. What plays spoilsport is the mistakes that are avoidably made. Doubt begets doubt. There is a way out, however, and Agnimitra found it.

The crown prince waited with bated breath for the crown to fall onto his crown at his father's abdication ceremony. What a mess he was. There was too much precipitation in his eyes — he couldn't come to terms that the present, in the shape of the man in flesh he had loved, was about to pass. He breathed heavy, on the other hand, in excited anticipation — the future, the picture of him his admirers painted but he couldn't see, was now about to be born and present itself to him. With the corona came the boldness, the vigour, the will that he had always believed he could become — and that belief was about to turn into a public myth, believed by all. It wasn't his fault, really. He was a pure person, and was likely to continue being so. It wasn't the fault of the sycophants either, for they were mere artists who loved to revel in the prowess of their skilful tongues and unbounded imaginations — the crown prince they had not only created out of thin air, but believed in with more sincerity than the boy himself. It wasn't his fault, but he was nonetheless a mistake waiting to happen. And mistakes beget disasters for everybody involved.

“Old man,” Agnimitra abruptly stood and thundered, as was very usual of her, “Nine times out of ten, it is better to do nothing than doing something if you don't really know what you're doing. You're going to make huge mistakes otherwise. Why don't you leave this to

me, and become an ascetic in the jungle? Because I can do it better.” The king agreed; he took two balls of dried rice in a small pouch strung from his loincloth and left.

“You,” she addressed the crown prince imperiously, “You are yet to learn of the reality that calls in your empty belly, and the one in your empty heart that comes with it. Relinquish your identity and become a nameless cartman in the capital.” And just like that, Agnimitra had become the ruler of everything she knew.

She believed strongly that the source of all fear resided within a person, not out. The way she saw it, nobody needed to be afraid in her domain.

‘Let it be known that there will only be Rules and Exceptions henceforth. Mistakes shall not be acknowledged,’ read one of her initiatory Edicts, carved all over the continents.

‘Sins are the sources of virtue. Rules embody the crime of discrimination that existence itself is — the only crime that goes unpunished, out of necessity and also the creator of necessity, and is the punishment in and of itself. Rules are unjust, and on them we can build celestial gardens of justice, judgment, and perfection. Every human being is a rule — there is something only you can do. Find that place and become harmony.’

‘I give you rules. Good be loved. Evil be attractive. Talent be beautiful. Toil be respected. Family be nurtured. Friends be treasured. Foes be thanked. May there be no identity among you all except the fact that all of you have a space to occupy. Covet not what the other has, be what only you can be. From rules we can build complicated laws and make a complex prosperity the likes of which have never been recorded.’

‘If you don’t like the place that is for you, if the deviant heart detests the experience of cobbling shoes even though the hand was made just for that, hate me, resent me, rebel. Become an exception. However, mistakes will not be tolerated — those who fail to be

exceptional and also fail to fall in place shall be exiled from civilization. They will lose the right to speak, and they must live without uttering a word for the rest of their lives like the pointless creatures they are.'

It is always fortuitous to start leading by example. Thus, when Agnimitra's children said they wanted to fly like the birds in their picture books, the both of them were given an innocuous choice — to follow the rules or become exceptions. The choice was obvious. So she had ordered her weeping and grovelling husband to drag them up a hill and toss them down. They had fallen like rocks at first, eager grins pulled back by an invisible force to show their teeth and the spinach stuck on it. They had landed like ballerinas, however, toes balanced elegantly, wings spread outwards. "I don't recognize my own children!" the royal nursemaid had gasped — and upon further inspection into the cawing and tweeting balls of feather the twins had become, she had found to her horror that they were the nurse's children indeed! The father had hidden their children in a remote room in the palace and was trying to abscond with them under his arms. He had to be shorn of the little clothing and water he had stuffed into his bundle and stamped with eternal exile on the spot. "I don't want to fly anymore," the elder of her children had said to Agnimitra when all was said and done, gripping her hand tightly.

The bones of failed poets and flightless children littered the streets of Agnimitra's domain, but there were always more that did not give up. The son of the drummer whose fingers were too sturdy to handle the delicate beakers, but who just knew he had to become an alchemist; the most famous teacher in two hundred years who one day woke up to the realize he was meant to be a mother to half broken plants, after all — robbed of words and communication, yet not diminished in their spirit one bit, they pushed and pushed to transcend the rules that created them. It was not so easy, however, as they came to Agnimitra to dazzle her with their skills, and would soon

find out that her being entertained was the opposite reaction of what they were looking for, after all. She had great respect for those who tried — the exception of today becomes the rule of tomorrow, the exceptional were in truth rule givers — they belonged to her ilk, they walked similar paths. Yet, she knew that not all of them were going to scale the heights Sudesh had, not even close, let alone succeed in impressing her.

“I can still do it better. See?” she would wave off the masterpiece of the aspiring doll-maker with a cheery smile, and take apart with surgical alacrity the amazing doll that could trot and run, and to its maker’s increasing horror, put it back together in a way it could also speak, laugh, and procreate. The simple words she would use to praise the hardy poet would be elegant enough to make him realize how far away it was indeed to become an exception — and perhaps too far for him. While some would get that horrific premonition that it would never be enough and listen to it, their faces vividly blackening, others would be deafer, just like her, and they would come back again and again with their new masterpiece — this was going to be it this time — looking more and more skeletal each time, until they finally stopped coming, to nobody’s notice. Yet others got so lost in the exceptional nature of what came from them that they forgot the way to wake up to the regular pedestrians they were before and eat when they had to eat and fall back asleep when they had to do that, and they became the roadside bones that the crows would fight over for no reason.

The ones that followed the rules — the happy housewives, the happy slaves, the happy bread-winners, the happy farmers’ children — they felt a strong sense of camaraderie as they beheld those who struggled to overthrow the order that served them all. How could they not, seeing how genuinely happy they were walking the path that ran them to the end as fast as it could? Thus, there finally was peace and comity. The haves were happy in their luxury — which the have-

nots held to be dirt cheap, for they wanted and valued different things after all. But they were each so happy to see the other happy, the only point of contention being who had it all and who didn't. Order and chaos had become twins that came from the same mother's belly. Good and bad finally realized what the other could accomplish when they felt whole, and started to fall in comfort with each other.

Agnimitra gave them language — the whispers that carried in the wind, so low that even primed serpents missed them — she heard them all, and exposed them to the laity. The colours of the soul took on the words of the mortals when their tongues touched the language of the Gods — and was not disgraced for it. Before their hearts could assimilate the incredible depth and life in the words that had come from their own mouths, they had already grown accustomed to it — as if they had been speaking it for centuries, and the more silvery of the mouths among them were already boldly claiming and changing it.

She gave them courage. They watched her go forward and only go forward as if something was wrong with her legs — the fire does not have choices, it burns, and then it does not. She did not have to commit mistakes. She could choose not to. She could do what was right, she could do what her heart wanted, and she didn't have to be afraid — and most importantly, she didn't have to get hurt in the process, or feel fear. She showed them that even when one gets hurt, it actually doesn't hurt.

She gave them strength. When the rivers spilled over the best dams their engineers could make, she came to the rescue. "I can do it better," she said as cheerily as ever, and she showed them how. When foreigners invaded and were getting soundly beaten back, she swooped down to save the day. "There's an even better way to do this; we can save even more lives," she showed them. When the court painter made her a beautiful shawl, intended as a gift, depicting her as the saviour of all humanity that he had poured months into, she

was quick to spare him the coldness of failure. “Your fundamentals are flawed,” she said in a tone as upbeat as possible, “Your basics are lacking.” And she had taken him along to show him how it was to be done, as well as the weavers who didn’t know how satisfying it could be to make a never-before-seen shawl. From the keeping of bees to the mothering of crying children, Agnimitra knew how to do it better, and she made sure it was done better. Every moment she passed was filled with work and excellence which might have seemed like a burden to an unawakened soul, but the warmth of the fire had woken them all up, and they felt immensely loved by it — allowing themselves to laugh, to be loved by their sovereign, permitting the stars to align, for life to be a fairy tale. It meant their lives were going to be over in a flash, for regret, failure, and mistakes are the only things that have the power to prolong life. But so what? What of it? A day lived is the same as a lifetime.

3.

They found him in a village long gone, only the bases of its houses still standing, charred leaves and burnt bricks attesting to the recentness of the exodus. He had visibly not bathed or eaten in months, tall and powerful, but in poor shambles. He was fumbling in the debris for something, probably a piece of a skull or the stone from a ring.

There were still people living in the village — that is, if they could be called that. They had fallen into perfect positions behind a leader, clutching a stone, a comb, or a heavy branch. They were determined to protect the space they occupied without meaning to, for some reason, and it wasn’t going to be easy to clear them up.

“I hate times like this,” Agnimitra’s adjutant whispered, looking mournful in real. “At times like this, I have to come face to face the harm we could wreak just by being ourselves. Is it really alright to

burn? What if the stuff we are made of is really pungent and ends up killing something in the smokes?”

“Yes, it is,” Agnimitra smiled. She pitched her voice to address the whole party, “The children of Unreason are gone, poof — life and death hold the same value for them — none. They are just mirrors to what we are, and yes, they suddenly crop up in healthy cities and bustling regions, turning our families into things we don’t recognize, and things we must deliver mercy to, for they reflect back the unpleasantness within us right back, and it is not an option to just let them be, but they are not the problem. The problem lies within you. You are the enemy you need to fight, and as long as you can do that, as long as you can burn with your true colours and burn in whole, what you are matters little. Good will stop evil before it commits something it will not be able to forgive itself for, and evil will stop good from becoming so complacent and uncaring that it becomes destructive.”

She raised a sword to the monsters robbed of lust that waited, “They are just the walls you need to break your way through, your discarded selves from a moment ago. Go, burn for me.”

Her men were charged and energetic, and the enemy fought back uncharacteristically hard as a result of that. All in good training. They had mopped up within a half hour; graves were being dug already for the old, young, men, women, and children among the enemy. Nobody raised a hand of warning against the man as he peered into the widening ditches for something precious, managing to look stately even as dirty uncut bangs fell over his eyes when he leaned forward.

“What’s your name, my good man?” asked her adjutant in a friendly manner.

He paused for a second, appearing to have forgotten how to talk. “Reason,” he spoke.

“Uh, no reason, just asking,” the adjutant was caught off guard.

“Reason,” the man persisted, even more emphatic now.

None of them could think of a reason, so they decided to take the man named Reason back with them. Their way back home was filled with adventures, and Reason was a big part of it all. When the tribes they had conquered refused to give up their barbaric practices even when threatened with extermination, it was Reason that stepped in. He had grabbed one of Agnimitra’s hands in one of his and one of the tribal chieftain’s with the other, and just like that, what was ugly and repulsive was infused with meaning. She had directly felt the helpless rage and the guilt as they had watched their children be kidnapped and sold in the slave markets of civilization, and while there was equal horror freezing half of her heart watching the tribes exact their brutal revenge after one of their blue moony victories, there was an unmistakably cold and manic laughter sloshing around in the other half, refusing to mix and thaw. And she couldn’t call their sacrificing of their own families before battles they almost certainly knew they were going to lose savage anymore — if the sacrifice could raise the chances even a bit, it was understandable. “Or maybe not,” Reason had said, “I don’t understand it myself, but I have a feeling I can. And so can you.” Agnimitra had felt drained and tired, and she hadn’t even been able to apologize — but it was the unexpected and sweet ache of a bone sliding into the right socket — it was a victory overall, and things were going to be better.

‘Even better,’ Reason’s expression had said, as they had idly watched a top spin on the floor of their carriage. Even faster. Even higher. Even farther. Even more. She had felt the questions froth tremors in her heart. Can you expand when there is no space? Can you still jump when there are no directions? Can you have hope when there is nothing else, and you’re not even sure you exist inside the dark box? And she had felt a cold fire as she had looked at him — one that did not need air or company to keep burning. One that burned even when there was nothing else to burn on, and one that

was going to continue doing so beyond the end of time. She was never going to be like that.

It did not produce heat, but everything else around it warmed itself up in the desire to protect it. The garland of flowers a little village girl had brought to him was strung on a frayed thread pulled out of her loose frock, but it couldn't snap under their soft heaviness. The flowers were placed unevenly, and some still had feeding bugs hanging on from them. Anyone could have done it better, and yet it was beautiful — every bug and every awkward knot was in its perfect place. It was not a mistake — there was no doubt in the eyes of the girl as she had offered it up to Reason — only pure love, and thankful gratitude in his. The food her grandmother had made them was unrefined and coarse, yet there was skill and satisfaction in it, and both the cook and the client, the man who could do anything, looked as happy as they could be. It was far from the best that could ever be made, but Agnimitra found herself looking down at her hands. Could anything she create make him happy like that? Had she ever made something that made herself happy like that? None, she could not remember a single instance — all she could recall was madness.

There was colour in Reason's presence. There was certainty in the mould of his limbs. His face was something out of comprehension. His movements leapt out of the stasis of a picture locked away. His words pulled the will out of amnesia. There was the universe in his soul.

One dared not look away lest the unbridled potential that he was transferred him to another world. Shapeless and formless, it scared and scalded Agnimitra — it was ruthless in its indifference to her gentleness and her scorn. It was warmer and colder, vaster and yet more concentrated than her. Nothing she could ever do could match it, or even justify its gaze of incurious appraisal. Nothing she could ever do — for this she felt surely in her heart, and could not even lift a finger. Her fire-breathing horse seemed so tame — all novelty lost

to the omniscient weariness in Reason's posture. Her self-writing journal was just a journal that could write itself — what was so special about it? He deserved much better. She could give the entire world to him, yet it was just the world. Just people and things at a time and place. And yet, everyone around her, and every creature that moved, and the leaves that moved in the wind, all seemed shamelessly in love with him. They bared their ugly, incomplete souls to him, and asked him to fill their houses — and most surprisingly of all, he saw them, and he obliged, and was smilingly happy doing so. None of them saw her, and she couldn't bear to lift her fingers to invite them to look at her embarrassing imperfections. Burdens, jealousy, weariness — these were new feelings to her; she just wanted to stop and rest, and not think or hope of a better her. She felt like she had hit a wall, and 'Doing better' sounded soggy and meaningless to her; the words could not ignite her anymore.

Sometimes, however, the wall seemed like a cliff, and forwards a downwards slope looped back. Jumping high seemed akin to falling off the sky, and resting her burdens to entrust her tired back to the ground seemed dangerous. Was she ever going to be enough? What gift could they give him to make him stay? What gift was deserving of him? Because him leaving was a much scarier prospect indeed — they simply couldn't let it happen. So Agnimitra tried. She found herself looking greedily at the sun and the moon, then dismissing them in derision. She thought and thought without a breakthrough, before she recalled her own words. The only thing she could give herself was the corpse of herself, and him a new her she herself didn't recognize.

Agnimitra did everything there was to do for a year. She hunted, she fought, she created, she melded. She went without food and drink and sleep. It still wasn't enough, though. As long as she could still remember who she was, it was not going to be enough. As long as she felt the pull towards him, she had not transcended. She was still

mired in the memories of his rich voice when they brought the dog to be judged. It did not pull against its chains; it didn't stand its neck. Its defiant eyes were cast down, already reconciled to its just punishment. It did not agree with the rules of the world it was born to, but it was not quite an exception either. It was just a dog that had killed its own master — a mistake, and it went to its fate without protest. It was only after its fur had become dust and bones exhumed that Agnimitra remembered with a jar what she had not seen — the signs of hunger, the marks of long torture, the spine that stayed straight despite the bending force of innumerable heavy-soled kicks, beady eyes that forgave a world that was above it, and yet couldn't protect it. She had made a mistake, and it couldn't be erased now and made right. Nobody had seen, nobody had known, and still it wouldn't let her sleep at night. It was just a dog, and just a negligent master — dime a dozen. The rules were all kept. Precedence was made for the greater good, and it was even consensual. Still, something in her soul nudged and poked at her. It itched. Before long, a tiny black spot had appeared on her spirit, and it spread outwards like the running roots of a vivacious sapling. No matter of scratching and scraping would uproot it.

4.

Mistakes happen. But Reason's smile was pristine and unguarded. It had to be protected.

As for her, when Agnimitra opened her mouth to smile, it reeked. So it did for everyone else. Their rank presence, the slipperiness of their exuberant growth had to be quarantined. The shadow, once it touched something, couldn't be rubbed off. He had to be made safe.

Hence after he smiled, she forbade them to smile in her land. She didn't want it to warp the spring in his mind. She forbade them to eat just in case it poisoned his fill. She forbade them from going out

during the day and the night, so that there was no chance of them accidentally stepping on Reason's shadow. Once when he had commented on how cute a baby's button nose looked, she had ordered all of their noses to be cut off. When the sun and the moon threatened to trespass and scorch Reason's dreams with their rays, she commissioned a huge blanket that would wrap around the entire earth and protect them all. The rejects and the aspiring exceptions were the first to be thrown into the drying scaffolding — they made great cement material — and then gradually everyone else except those few needed to do the throwing. She had ordered all structures to be razed down — homes, temples, and granaries, nothing but profanities in the presence of Reason; his structure couldn't be congealed, and it was blasphemy to try. He, for the most part, had not noticed, lost in his explorations, and she had zealously stood guard to make sure he never did. The shadow inside her was growing larger while she did not take the time out to constrain it, however, and before she knew what was going on, he had gone missing.

Unfed, unclothed, unwashed, and unpacified, the people were suffering — those of them still alive. They screamed and they writhed, families were blown apart and human blood was drunk for water in dearth, all within the rough boundaries of what used to be their homes, now rectangular slots on even ground, avoiding sunlight as well as moon rays, neither smiling nor looking down their noses. It was unpleasant to look at, but it made Agnimitra proud.

They were glorious failures, exemplary mistakes, she and her people. She wanted Reason to look at them uninhibited — to watch them strive despite having nothing to offer him, to watch them burn, and stay. He trampled through the path, however, listless and rudderless, neither possessed nor lost. Nothing was new to him, nothing affected him, and yet he accepted them. Not with love or the lack of it, but as a matter of fact — a matter of Him. The man who never made mistakes didn't care for theirs.

A loose tooth and a hanging hand fell from the scaffolding overhead. “Look at us, we are mistakes unworthy of your kindness!” they preened. They got his attention too; he took care to step over and around them. One of the women crying inside a vacant lot got a little bit greedy, and she wailed a lot harder than the others, garnering herself a look of sympathy from Reason. One of the men pulled the healing patch off his runaway nose, tearing up overjoyed from the befuddled look Reason gave him. A little daredevil of a child broke all the rules. He ran over the street, stepping over Reason’s shadow, tumbling on a tiny pebble, knocking over the glass he had in his hands — it didn’t even have the compulsory milk in it. Agnimitra turned on him like an angry storm ready to let loose. But Reason was even faster, he was down on one knee in a heartbeat, ruffling up the boy’s hair, handing him back his glass and patting imaginary dust off his back. The boy grinned smugly, glutting on his attention.

Agnimitra was tired, and she wanted to collapse at his feet. She wanted him to compliment her unworthiness. One foot took half a step forward, closer to him. “Look at me,” it wanted to laugh and cry. “I am a mistake. I am a waste of space, a waste of sight. Forget about serving you a purpose, I am not even worth remembering in my pungent existence anymore. But look down on me, take pity on me. Ruffle my hair too. Stay.” But the other foot was made of bronze, rigidly jointed to the core of the earth. She would move forward if she could cut it off and cast it away, but everyone else that was looking started to come forward — pitiable individuals, cats and peacocks, ants and snakes. They surrounded Reason until she could not see the tops of his hair and the bottoms of his feet anymore. And they said all those things to him — her things. They asked for his love, affection, pity, and he stayed.

“Me too. Me too!” Agnimitra couldn’t speak, but it was all she wanted to scream. Her toes wouldn’t budge, but she wanted to run and crash into him. The shadow that had once barely been an irritable

blotch one could believe out of existence had now grown so large that it could box a whole wildfire behind opaque glass and turn its bursting dance into a tipsy rave. It could absorb its heat in cold blocks of cinder, and watch as it screamed unheard for help that would not come. It whispered to her ears the truth — the indelible shame that made her want to run off and away, until she did not share the same town, nation, planet, and universe with him. It made her want to blink, wither, and get smaller and smaller until he didn't have to witness the disgrace of her failure again. And it made sure she could do it all like a thief in the night — knavish, but dignified unless caught — the thief was going to die in the night anyway, she didn't have to wake up to the realization at dawn. It was a blessing in the appearance of a blight, and it made sure that the silence in her desperation hit him too late, so that when he got up and looked around, trying to figure out what he had missed and what he couldn't remember, he could not see her anywhere, and nor would he ever again for so long as he lived.

Chapter Five

1.

Captain Simha Simharay stood on the wall, fighting the wind that threatened to pick him up while looking stoic at the same time. To his front rose a plastic wilderness, mammoth trees capable of trampling a thousand men if toppled. Soft lights adorned their high branches at night, so high that they couldn't be told apart from the stars. Behind him rose the spires and towers of the Sangha, even taller and much more imposing, and yet somehow more inviting. It was as if the trees outside lit themselves only for this city, this solitary bubble flitting around in the dearth, this wish come true — and would brown in a day if that bubble broke.

The Sangha was indeed a wish come true for nature. She was pained by what she saw, and heaved a sigh — and the universe responded with this perfect pretension, this unlikely city so wondrous that it fit right in. It was also an angel of mercy for the downtrodden everywhere. For the forever excluded who had forgotten the taste of expectation and desert, those who looked at the feet of everything, always without a good reason to look up, it swooped down at the very last moment, beating its wings in powerful urgency above heads which had forgotten urgency, and offered them one cup of wish fulfilment each — an equal cup, matching in sight, scope, and proportions.

There was no choice featured in the exchange, nor dignity. All else was obliterated into shadows in her presence, and not to measure up to the love she offered was an unthinkable insolence from the spectres. And therefore, lines of people in rags and chains would be welcomed into the city every day, not particularly willing or unwilling

to be granted entrance into this paradise — showered with petals and cheered on as they went through to the administrative block, a public ritual. Unaware now of the chains still binding their arms, the undignified would hark amazed at the bright structures and brighter beings making them an offering. They would be taken to the massive initiation complex where they would be bathed, clothed, fed, and given their own rooms — with a small bed in the center, and they would all sleep curled like a fetus that first night. The first eleven months would be called the rehabilitation period — where they would be let free like stray chickens — or chicks — and nothing would be expected out of them. No harsh routine would be imposed on them, no undesired healthiness on the drug addicts, no well-meaning sermons for the lazy bums, and no morality disposed on the loose ones. Yet, they would be guided with a gentle hand and a warm smile into certain activities — watching the citizens go about their daily jobs, playing a match of football with their fellow undesirables, getting acquainted to the bits that made up the whole of the Sangha — the underground farms, the waterhouse, the massive commerce tower, and a lot of other places. No rambunctious oath would be sworn, no dramatic gesture of loyalty enacted, but the seal of fealty would be impressed deep upon the souls of the guests — now none of them would ever be able to think of letting this alternate reality down; no, this reality that made their pasts reveal their true nature — false starts to be discarded without a second thought or lessons to be learned. The undesirables would then be filed and pressed into neat categories — the children would go to schools, and may be assigned a family, or to one of the ever-alive dormitories. The skillful would be paired with tools to ply the trades again, and the unskilled would be given training and dispatched to serve. In the name of the director they would serve hard, and the profits would accrue to the Sangha. The newly minted tradesmen, mercenaries and advisors would sally forth to the stars, shadow selves already forgotten, ready to start a

brave new chapter — and would become exemplars of courage, creativity, and comity, holding the emblem of the Sangha up high on dirtier and bloodier places. If one failed, or fled their twenty due years of service to the director, bar that such a thought would ever occur to anybody — perchance it did, that abomination would be branded and never heard from again. He would not find employment or respectable company in human society, and would have to choose a life of involuntary solitude on some forlorn, desultory planet.

The minions of Sangha were everywhere — a domed building with the insignia of the star billowing in the wind — calm and watchful. They would never interrupt a loan shark stabbing a father of three, or unpaid soldiers raping a sister — a staple of their vaunted neutrality, but would always be there to pick up the pieces and claim the spoiled dregs of conflict as their own — or to rip babies from their mothers when all witness had pulled back, as loony conspiracy theorists baked in some quarters. Apparently, it was a bright business the Sangha was in, and being an intolerable bane to humanity, it had to be commissioned out. A conspiracy was all that was — this was the only truth Simha was sure of knowing, and could attest with his life. Citizenship of the Sangha couldn't be relinquished. However, a degree of freedom was involved in that one could choose a life of renunciation after twenty round years of service or make a family while staying in the Sangha and continuing to serve — or they could choose to leave for any of the endless colonies it held in the star systems. While they would still continue to be citizens, they would lose the right to vote, and would live under a viceroy instead. Unconstrained by morals, they would be free to war and drink and fornicate, and their lives would be no different from any member of a nation with all its pros and cons, and their children would even be eligible for return once they turned eighteen.

Beyond, where the vision didn't reach, were the nations — hated of the undesirables, mere mention of them in the streets of Sangha

would earn one a scornful stare, akin to blasphemy: Bharata, Qin, Europa, Pacifica, Afrekke, Ruh, and the lot of them. The nations stuck to their impossible ideals, and the unreasonable bonds of the colours of the skin and the colours of the soul bound the stars ever closer. The universe was too small for their greed, lust, and ambitions — and the strength of their passions, the scope of their dreams. Like children they formed cliques, played intrigue, made homes and kicked them down at the passing of a fancy — and the stars burst and died with them.

Simha looked at Dmitri, the Ruh lieutenant who stood beside him — all cold blue eyes and rakshasa heights, the man was a wily foe in Cheyss, and the ruthless disciplinarian who would agree to play the bad cop at any moment to keep the boys in line, and save Simha the petty grudges even though he was never asked to — and cook wonderful delights for the platoon on odd days, which would sometimes be sold off behind his back and much pocket money earned. Simha looked at his burnish brown, and Dmitri's pasty white, and couldn't help wondering if they looked at the world as differently as it looked at them too, a difference that descended over their eyes — both outside and inside eyes — like a fancy sunglass that no hearty ideal could undo. There was no way of knowing, unless he could wear the same sunglasses too, and while it was much easier to keep those questions down under the quilt of blasphemous-but-slightly-unsettling-inquiries, he had to know — for the sake of his men, and it had been eating away at him for quite some time now.

As he looked, Dmitri offered a cigarette with that chimeric smile pasted on his face, brought out to show only for his captain — if only he knew how creepy it made him look. Simha offered the light — Lightman Simha, he was called behind his back, made him feel like somebody grand instead. "Isn't it humid today?" he talked over his smoke.

“It might rain. It usually rains when it is humid. It’s just something they used to say in my country when I was a child. Have you heard of it too? Oh, this much must be common sense, right? Nothing to do with countries.”

“Are you being troubled with anything, Simha?” Never captain. Simha liked it, it was their little secret — it was as if he had an elder brother. There was something, but he was not sure how to put it into words, or whether he wanted to, because then it would become real, and that was the only thing he feared. The sound of a gunshot saved him.

As short as he was, it took four men to hold Petrov back. His steaming rifle lay a few feet away, and he snarled at them to let him go. Sameer stood across, myriad emotions playing on his face as they could only on a Bharatan. He looked close to tears, and was clearly the one to have started it this time. There are certain rules to a cockfight, however, and he couldn’t simply give it up now that it had started — responsibilities would be apportioned later. He sniffed some snot back, gulped, and said “I spit on your mother’s grave” — staunchly, but very unsure of himself, and of bringing in more unrelated people — some of them dead — into the scuffle. “Never had one,” Petrov sneered, “and that’s better than having a bovine mother goddess or whatever you guys have.” You guys? Sameer was a gratingly loud atheist.

“Yes, that’s right, and you know what’s even better? Having a virgin mother. I don’t blame you guys — all that starvation and all that vodka is bound to have some effects on the brain,” Sameer was quick to counter. All his hesitation was gone. Even though he was an atheist. He was, wasn’t he?

Theirs was a hybrid platoon, made of orphans from Ruh and Bharata, as were all others guarding the walls. Some of the faces had subtly darkened in the crowd, and Simha couldn’t help but notice that most of them had unconsciously sidled closer to the side they

once called home — only Ruh faces around Petrov, and Bharatan faces around Sameer, and some looked like they might just let either of them go to claw at each other. Something was happening to Simha's city, and it was not just a figment of his imagination.

"What is all this about?" Dmitri felt it too — senses of a winter wolf, after all.

"He read his diary," someone said. Petrov was surprisingly sensitive despite his foul mouth, so him keeping a diary was not out of question. This had to be good. Someone handed Simha a thick book with black covers, once velvet, that had to be the object in question.

"And just what had you written in it that would justify everything you've done?" Dmitri asked Petrov, insensitive as a depressed midwife.

"I, lieutenant, I, uh," Petrov didn't quite have the courage to speak — or to hang his head and stay silent.

"What do you think would absolve you of what you did? Should I make you eat the cartridge of the bullet you wasted? Should I send you for a sabbatical in the latrines? A month in the records department? You can write as much as you want there."

"I'll eat the cartridge, lieutenant," Petrov said readily.

"Does this seem like a joke to you? And you," he turned to Sameer.

"Yes lieutenant. I'm sorry and I'll reflect on my behaviour."

"Do you know what it is like to be born, soldier?"

"Yes sir, without a name, without a belief, without a tongue, without a reason, without a country."

"Then did you leave those behind when you crossed these walls to be born again?"

"Yes, sir. I bear no association to any bovine goddess. I bear no fraternity to anyone who simply happens to look like me. And Bharata sounds like paratha, to be honest," Sameer couldn't cover all

his smirk, despite knowing he was treading on thin ice. Dmitri turned to Petrov.

“I, uh, I, lieutenant — Ruh, uh, Ruh sounds like poo.”

“Off to the latrines. Now. Both of you.”

Simha laughed. “Oh moon, how I wish I could return your affections —” he read from the journal, “I see how you twist and turn your curls, and how you gloss your cheeks for me, and even though I pretend I’m blind, it actually hurts. Oh moon, but I gave it all to the one that shines alone in the market for souls. Rosalie, her name was, and I could never see her but for that one night. Oh friend, I have nothing but this hollow ache to share for your light, but will you sit with me still, and hear me sigh?”

“Captain, but that’s not my diary,” Petrov was shaking — with something other than shame, the same that he hung his head to hide.

“Not mine either,” said Sameer.

“Never seen it.” “Hey, is that yours?” “Nah, I don’t even keep a diary,” they all confirmed.

Immaculate letters in a neat hand clearly exposed the owner — none other than Dmitri Ivanov. “It doesn’t say anything about that here, either,” Simha could only say. The lieutenant closed his eyes, as if to run away from a bad dream, but there was too much to hide now, and the whole platoon was waiting for the next order. The tips of his ears were so red that they could bleed, and his fingers were timorous like the thief that got caught trying to steal the sun for his foot warmer. “Okpf —” he told them. “Off! To the moon now. All of you!”

They were all shaking now, from the same disease that afflicted Petrov — perhaps something like diarrhea — or swelling waves of guzzling vomit, judging from the ones that covered their mouths and rolled on the ground, tears coming out of their eyes — pulsing with convulsions and seizures. “To the moon, lieutenant?” one of them asked, completely out of air.

“To the lavatories! Now!”

“Why don’t you accompany them too, lieutenant? Have them run two laps around the city, then give them a thorough schooling?”

“Um, wasn’t I going to accompany you? You said earlier —”

“Yes, but this is more important. I’ll manage,” Simha assured. Dmitri closed his eyes again, resigning himself to fate.

“And the journal, Simha?” he sounded hopeless like a child that had demanded the same toy twice already, and still asked his parents a third time, fully expecting to be rejected.

“It doesn’t say anything about the name here. I’ll have to check it properly later on — thoroughly, from the top cover to the bottom margins, and if that still doesn’t give a lead, we can think of how to dispose of it,” Simha was barely able to say — only a few more moments, then he could succumb to the disease. If this was what had gotten a hold of them all, then he’d gladly rather the whole city catch the epidemic.

“See you, lieutenant. I have somewhere to go.”

2.

The parliament hall was a theatre without a god. It became a purgatory for the watchers witnessing the basest instincts and feelings of humankind — greed, envy, lust, and the usual suspects — rip off the old skin, touch up the white hair, put on the pretty rouge and battle it out to the rhythm of a tottering madness — always on the edge of careening over the tipping point, but that would only be an act; the actors would be far too cunningly accomplished to ever actually allow that.

It was thus with perfect rage the missionaries of individual freedoms railed against the dark veil that was falling over the Sangha — a dangerous eve when the soul itself was at risk of being snatched out to the demons in the hopes of survival, and integrity parcelled

out in neatly cut pieces alongside honesty in favour of a life lived no better than the enemy — all in the name of security. “I don’t understand!” a young, fresh face above swirling robes engulfing a stick thin torso pontificated, “Why can’t you understand? The powers you demand be given away to protect us will be used to scare and subdue us in the end! The enemy can appear from anywhere, at any time. What will you do when those you entrust your will to turn out to be unworthy? Who will stand up for you then? Who will take my place right here and speak truth to the powerful? Who will be allowed to do that? And more importantly, who will want to do that? None. Nobody but you. That’s precisely why you can never give away your freedom to someone else. I won’t be a slave. You won’t enslave me for as long as there is one straight bone in me!” His voice was thin as his age, but it was strong as the air it rode.

“Traitor! Traitor!” they screamed from within the jungle of faces. Jeering laughs and schoolboy taunts were thrown. Fresh-face’s comrades slapped their desks so loudly that the climax he had carelessly built up to got drowned gloriously — only his silent catharsis remaining visible. Someone dragged him down to sit just in time for him to forego re-enacting his old love of the mime.

A hawk gravely surfaced his bald head on the opposite aisles without relying on someone’s by-the-leave. He pulled out a rolled-up list of items from his pockets, only to start painstakingly laying out the benefits of mandating the carriage of identity cards in the persons of citizens at all times — the inculcation of discipline, the feeling of belonging, the splendid conferral of responsibility, the eradication of distrust, and the budding of camaraderie. The list was too long for the size of the paper — just how small were his letters? He had even assigned percentages and weightages to each head, delving into complex social mathematics to prove why doing it was better than not doing it. “Nobody asked you, Rosenthal!” one of his colleagues shouted back. Simha half expected him to slap on some superhero

glasses and fry the impudent fly on the spot, but Rosenthal blushed instead. He clutched his paper in self-conscious desperation, as if the fate of the world depended on him and his list, and this was his one last chance to make it count. The speaker took that opportunity to get back onto familiar territory and relax back into sleep with a sigh of relief — he had left the floor to the next speaker, who while nobody liked, everybody trusted.

Chandrarath was a heavyset man in his fifties, and the white mixed in with the black in his beard gave him an unclean appearance somehow. His teeth were pearly bright, and it was either the tinkle of Qin coins or the crackle of an evil blizzard that one heard when they elegantly clacked. It was a manmade disaster that prowled when he walked with a kingly gait, but it was a patient evil — didn't plan to bite until its mouth was big enough to devour everything it wanted in one gulp — the universe, and whatever there was beyond. It was therefore the vessel of the strongest trust, the ultimate caretaker, and the ablest guardian — he was going to make sure his prey lived until the time had come for him to hunt it and eat.

It was amazing the attention he commanded simply standing up, without a single movement that looked to stand out. Rosenthal slunk back down like a scolded truant, sober and to earth for once. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he launched off without preamble, “Preposterous, it is preposterous!” His voice was uncouth and his diction was presided over by the cancerous concubine of the goddess of wealth, but they all crowed and howled all the same. “Shame,” he pointed out, “Grief. How have we let it come to this as a society? As a family? Freedom? Slavery? Such pretty words. Do you know of slavery? I know of a slavery out of these walls. Seventeen years I served on a pirate ship, privy to the daily art of gore, helpless to watch human life and dignity sold and bought like so much kindling. It was life within these walls that set me free. It was an incomparable gift from the heavens, something not everybody in my situation is blessed with.

Don't you all agree? In this wide-open galaxy, we have nothing to our names except each other and these walls that keep the wolves out. And now, when this, too, is at risk of getting lost, not that such is anything out of the ordinary, we'll let vacuous sentiments and empty rhetoric rise to such heights of self-righteous holiness that ideology, the one thing that binds as well as fractures us, makes us so impotent that we can't block a thrown spear with our own hands, worrying over what we might do if the brain, which has power over the hand, betrays it in the future?"

"Yes, these hands!" he held them up in handcuffed supplication, "These hands and the warm blood that flows within will protect these walls. We can ask questions of each other and dart glances of suspicion later. These hands will also guarantee that you can do that to your heart's content when all of this is over, without a shadow of fear — because that's your right, and no less will do. Arrest me now, throw me into the deepest dungeon until it all gets over, and allow me to fight from inside there. And if you don't," he smiled with teeth yellower than the most vivacious gold when nobody dared to move a muscle, "I will surrender myself as soon as this session breaks up."

Fresh-face seethed. Someone else was getting to become the hero, twice his age at that. His seven thousand ideological qualms were no closer to being addressed than they ever would be, and the frustration builds up over time. He was evenly split between wanting to walk out like a stylish hurricane and shoving his fist down his opponent's obnoxious bulged up throat, and the circumstances being that he could only choose neither, he had to stiffly stand up and very reluctantly excuse Chandrarath out of a prison sentence he actually wished would extend into ever rotting infinity. He made sure still that his distrust in the posterity of his own actions or at believing the promises of Chandrarath hook, line and sinker became well noted in the archives — a victory as small as the readership of those documents were likely to be, but a victory to him nevertheless. While

Chandrarath would get to sleep very comfortably that night, he didn't have to go completely sleepless either.

"The hope of tomorrow and the lessons of yesterday meet again," Rochester appeared behind Simha, back from one of his frequent toilet breaks. "And it's an overwhelming victory for the past again. How many times has it been now? It's funny that with every loss the presence of future only keeps growing larger, the old love only gets frailer."

"I can't get used to this, no matter how many times you drag me in here. Actually, why do you even do that? There's never a good reason, besides making my heart jump to my throat," Simha shook his head. "They are no closer to it today than they were yesterday, but every time I feel as if this is the day they finally do it, rip off each other's throats over some nonsense."

"And you seem to listen in quite intently every time, as disinterested as you claim to be," Roche said. "Besides, what makes you so sure they can never do it? Rip off each other's throats, that is. There is a reason why I leave to check whether the toilet window is working so often." He laughed at his own joke. Simha didn't.

"To tell you the truth, I am not so sure. Are you?" The two men questioned each other. The prospect of brothers hurting brothers in the name of everything there was curled up like smoke in between. When push came to shove, there were plenty of weapons to use — tables to throw, chairs to smash, robes and neckties to strangle, pens to stab through the eyes. The speaker might try to escape through the door, if he didn't sleep through it all. What would Simha's job be in such a situation — as a soldier? Shoot the traitors, that is, all of them? What would be left of the family when the soldier had done his job and kept both brothers from hurting each other?

"What, can't I call you over all the way just to look at your old face? It's a pretty one after all. Pretty old."

"You be the only one with an old face," Simha retorted.

“Is that so?” Roche sighed. “That may be so. Can you do me a favour? Oh. I’ll tell you what. Can you give someone a message from me?”

“Just tell her this old cock—Roche says hi. And tell her to take care of herself, will you? Oh, and you will find her inside the most guarded place under this star, where even the bravest of adventurers don’t dare to set eyes on, on the topmost floor of the tallest tower in all of Sangha. You must not enter with the faintest of doubt or the slightest of guile. Pretty please, I’ll be thankful later — why, I’ll even call you to watch one of these shows again,” and he disappeared back into the chaos.

3.

“To live is to roll with the troll,” said Rochester’s marble statue outside the public building with an evil grin. The old geezer was lucky enough to have it made while he still lived — the result of some miraculous display in some courageous war. He was the insurance — the unassuming, somewhat naïve but strong and intelligent counterforce to Chandrarath. Pittances and throwaways were not necessary to keep him firmly on their side, but the people and their representatives did it anyway.

The roses growing under the statue’s feet had once felt foreign to Simha. Back then he didn’t even come up to its knees and had stars in his soul without even knowing he had them or what a soul was. “What are you looking for in the night sky, boy? Don’t you love this city?” Rochester had popped up from somewhere behind his bench. There had been a lot of formalities and paperwork during the day, and it had been such a long time since he had eaten last. His tired and fuzzy mind was happy to have been given a test to prove his loyalty, however. “I do, sir!” he had lied in the most baritone voice he could muster — which had come out somewhat like the giggle of a sopping

wet crow. Rochester had sighed unhappily. “You do? Then go on, will you? Make your mark,” a pair of crayons had mysteriously appeared into his hands, and he had pointed his brows at the statue meaningfully. Simha had looked like he didn’t comprehend, which he truly didn’t, but this was one tough customer.

“What’s your name?” Rochester had asked while busily drawing a pile of poop complete with speckles of besotted flies adorning the base of the statue.

“Simhanarayan.”

“Spelling?”

S—I—M—H—A—N—A—R—A—Y—A—N, Rochester had placed each letter carefully under the masterpiece in childlike hand.

“Can you read, boy?” he had asked expectantly.

“Not yet, sir.”

“What a shame, what a shame.” He had truly looked broken. “What was the name of the place you grew up in? What were the names of those who took you in and took care of you?”

“I wouldn’t know, I’ve never been much for names — mother, father, country, religion. It’s not their faces or their bodies, but something else about them that I miss. That I will never have again,” Simha had said — words too big for his height, but he had been bursting for someone to ask the right questions. The words had grown too large inside his ears as he had been directed and redirected between nameless desks all day — desks that grew flowers, moustaches that snake-flexed.

“How lucky you must be,” Roche had observed wryly. “This whole city is in need of naming. Just like you. You have a name. You are also a proud painter,” he had thumped his artwork. “But that is not who you are. Right now, you are just a boy — no, not even a boy, just someone who is talking to me. And today onwards, before you are anything else, you are my friend. Remember that.”

“I call this old mug of a building the cockroach hole. But tonight it can be the lion’s cage, eh? And that green tower over there,” he had pointed at the luminous spire that rose above everything else, “That is the Grasshopper’s Leg. But tonight, it can be the Fairy’s Heartstring. Hold on, don’t even think about trying your luck, that fairy is mine.”

“Shall we go?” Rochester had extended his hand, “There’s a lot that needs naming tonight.” And they had done just that, fearlessly roaming the streets taken over by baying and howling stray automatons, naming every building, flagpole, and house wall with love and affection. The responsible adult that Roche was, he had persistently ignored each growl that came out of Simha’s stomach — they had much more important things to do — until it had become the roar of a lion Simha had felt he could stand atop a building they had just named the Tall Toe and belt out, breaking all the sound proofing around and crashing the night.

The corporal that had come with personal business just like Simha was not as kind. He had caught a few protesters who had somehow leaked through the watertight fencing with intentions to deface the statue. His eyes had turned dragonia red from the vessels that had popped, and he jerked one of them around by the collar like a ragdoll.

“Do you know what this means?” the officer roared. “Do you know the value of...?”

Nothing. Nothing was the value of the statue which coaxed the delinquent to draw graffiti above the mischief written on its lips — it simply begged the moustaches to go with it. The corporal’s back was turned to it, however, and his eyes too iron hot for him to have noticed.

The tides outside throve dangerously, trying to break in with one crack on the fence-dikes. No Poseidon rose above it, only the pale imitation of a nutcase leader who pressed his face to the bars, spreading his hands high, one of his friends chopping them off with

multiple strikes of a newbie-ish machete. ‘No hands, no chains’ — they even roused the slogan several times for good measure. Not having hands was better than having identity cards — Simha wondered how fresh-face would react to his well-intended spin offs.

Something in the unruly sea touched something in Simha to tame it — to possess its power and feel drunken from it. He walked up to it like a prophet leading his people, and looked candidly into the empty eyes of the droplets. They parted to give him way as he crossed through the railings. On one side of him clamoured the waves of passion and compassion — fresh faces blue with thunderous hate against intrigue and oppression. The waves of calmly vicious nurturance and structure seethed to crash headfirst into them and teach them a lesson to the opposite. They flew republican flags and wore republican armbands — they were there to fight the rage of unbridled passion, to keep their lovely homes from being painted in indiscriminate reds and violets. They were there today to protect their loved ones and the ones they loved but couldn’t tell, and they were ready to spill whatever needed to be spilled as extravagantly as needed. The stolen guns and the filched metals were going to appear very soon, and then brothers would knock brothers to the ground, and obscure the blazing sun with fading boots — it had happened to countless utopias, and was now dangerously close to re-enacting itself in the one Simha called home. He had always taken for granted the universe’s ability to balance itself on a tightrope when let free, but what if it was an alcoholic troll instead? The taboo was going to be broken very soon; the air was pregnant with the wounded thuds that were going to break; the free people were going to begin butchering each other before the unfree could, because they just couldn’t agree on how many e’s there should be in free.

The path that opened up invited him like an oracle to his mission. Three children stood at its end, wingless angels playing a game of blind man’s tag. There were two flunkies, one on each flank of their

princess, as if the rejects of two nations face to face on the eve of a never-ending bloody battle. The princess, a bit shorter and younger than them both, spread her hands wide as if in eager salvation, and sped revolving as the blinded *it* — until she tripped on her own leg and struck off course like a soccer ball hit by a hockey nerd. She piled into Simha's chest with a disgraceful *oof*, and tried to open her eyes, but the coarse blindfold got into them, getting her into a small crisis. Her useless flunkies, for some reason with closed eyes of their own, didn't even notice.

Eternium was a bud of rose with scars all over her body, mopy hair that had the promise of a waterfall, and eyes that could belong to a never-painted queen had they not been tired as a mouse as they were. She was a creeper that couldn't take root in loose soil, and even less so on hard metal — all she had to do was grow legs, just like Simha had had to once.

"I — I'm sorry," she said hastily.

"Hey you! What do you think you're doing? Get away from our princess!" yelled one of her flunkies.

"That's — that's right! I am the princess, who might you be?" She had pieced herself together with remarkable alacrity — and she really was the princess, with a surprisingly deep voice and playful eyes.

She was the princess of waiting, the flower of rooms filled with rubbery desks and stony priests of paper — and she had ferried back and forth between them for a long time. Her empty stomach was her usher, and the one who could find her the paperwork she had never been asked to bring but was told off for would surely be her prince charming. So many roles were already taken, and there was only so much Simha could be — he had responsibilities — and he had to kidnap her from there before the festivities started and the fireworks started flying.

"I am the dragon," he said with the haughtiest glare he could summon. "The dragon?" the three of them echoed back instantly.

“Yes, and when a dragon meets a princess like this, miracles happen — only good things. Don’t you want to find out?” Simha said confidently and spread his wings wide, rocking the thronging crowds with his powerful gusts. He became a beautiful butterfly made of fire and took to the winds, catching the children in his crooked claws. Their loose clothes caught the wind, making them look like happy balls of gas — one of the flunkies was even smiling, floating in an open-eyed daydream. Up there, even though the bottomless sky opened itself up to them keeping nothing back, all the four of them could look at was down below — the puny and mundane landscape — the crisscrossing fields, the necklace-like rivers, and a city.

“What city?” the flunky called Daylight asked.

“The dragon’s city. He had been away for a long, long time — and now, he is back with guests of his own. It is time to reclaim his city.”

“Are all the other people in the city also dragons?” asked the other boy, Osoi.

Simha coughed. “It’s a city of dreams. It is better than any dream. There is no conflict, no lack. There is one thing missing, however, and that is the orphaned dragon. He was robbed of his firefangs and left in a basket beside a nameless creek — the city would never be complete unless they adopted him. As gawky and monstrously out of place he sometimes looks while sitting on the roof-perches enjoying the sun, the dragon is just another citizen — no one looks twice at him for that. He is their most celebrated citizen, even.”

So he said, but his legs had become numb from the weight of the three children and the air they harnessed, and he had to summarily swoop down from the sky to let them off. He brushed his shoulders, trying to get the overgrown boys to jump.

“Have some shame, you big lugs,” Eternium turned her nose up at them, while hanging on from Simha’s arm with all her might herself. They were about to enter some unknown district of the city, huge

but unfamiliar, and all the better for it — there were a lot of things that could be named. All the legitimate windows and upfront doors were closed tightly shut, set on the darkness like skin on soil. What burned brightly and danced with sprite were the flames inside shady and shabby looking tents, lining up the road as if the gateway to a festival where no willing soul would knowingly go.

Every breath uttered in perfect-town was a cause for celebration, every look granted at each other a blessing from heaven — it was so ordinary that a festival was unthought of and out of the way. What was there to celebrate where excellence was more ordinary than excellence itself? Not anymore it seemed. It made the dragon curious about just what they had started to commemorate. His absence?

“Celebrating today will make tomorrow crease. Then the mighty of today will become the wretched of tomorrow, and be left with nothing to hold dear and nothing to throw away,” the one called Daylight pronounced glumly, making his brother in arms pause momentarily at the deep exploration of the dungeons in his nose. The boy seemed unnaturally older than his appearance, but he didn’t get a chance to further air his wordy discomfort, because the princess was tugging on one of loose scales under the dragon’s wing.

He wondered about how he should explain the phenomenon to his royal guest, but it seemed she had been perturbed by the sight of something far less subtly ghastly. The smell attacked his highly placed nose first, louder than any artillery shell on the market, enlivened by a pinch of spicy alcohol. The view was no dearer to the finer senses — the oddling tumbled like a heavy sack of potatoes with his knees and elbows peeking out through a tear here and there. The beggar was swaddled in a naturally black single piece of rag, although it could be just grime. He wore his begging bowl as a cocky hat, and swaggered like a drunk captain, or an arrogant bannerman of Sewerland, sinking into a defensive stance before an invisible sewer, eager to kill for his motherland, and pointed a cheeky finger at the

overbearing dragon. “Oi, watch where you’re going, oi. You can’t go through here.”

Sharp green eyes looked from below matted hair, however, and Simha found himself out of words. There was nobody in town — city, whatever — who didn’t know the award-worthy face of Rashid, something of a celebrity captain in the Engineers, always knowing what to say to make the crowd go hippity hop, and as it now seemed, a beggar by choice at the night — a man with evidently esoteric tastes, and one of Simha’s closest acquaintances. “Oi, oi,” the finger with kilograms of dirt under its nail pressed ever closer to Simha’s nose, defiantly oblivious to any sparks of recognition in the eyes that navigated them, before they came across the trembling princess hiding behind the dragon’s back.

“I’m terribly, terribly saw—wy!” the beggar drawled, before it hastily dropped to one knee like a royal beggar in waiting. Presumptuous, wasn’t it?

“Princess! I — didn’t see you at all! My eyes!” it grieved like a broken man, waist quivering in the hopelessness of it all. “In compensation, let me show your guests around, won’t you? I will be your guide. Come on then!”

He tried to hug Simha forward. Something much less clear than the tears that streamed down his cheeks — getting muddier the farther they traversed, just like any other river — got out of his nose and pasted itself on Simha’s epaulets. It was too much. He shoved the maniac off.

4.

Rolling stairs, ascending pillars, bejewelled walls, and soothing windows — they sung of a great love that had been poured into putting each brick and gravel-stone in place. The sheen off things public and the shadow under courtyard trees — it was all as the

dragon remembered it. All except the people — speaking of which, and especially looking at Rashid, perhaps this was why they said people change.

When the dragon closed his eyes, he could only think of the darkness he used to see behind the pupils of his people. They had been through the fieriest of hells, all of them, and came out despite not having the scales or the armour he did. They used to be strong people — perhaps that's why they had been able to shelter and protect him.

Each of them had had their own love story back in the day — where they used to be one with their poverty, station, and bad providence, until they weren't anymore. Before they could wrap their heads around what was happening, or accuse anybody of infidelity even, they were picked up and plonked upon something rather perfect — where no matter how far they strained, they couldn't see a trace of their lovers — and they were told that this was how it was supposed to be. This incorporation of the millennia of lessons humankind learnt, the implementation of calm and care down to mechanical precision, this was how love was supposed to be. They still just couldn't forget how beautifully they had once fallen from their branches, however, when the tree used to be diseased and corrupted — dry and incapable of love — and the soft sounds they had thought they made being squished under their own chests. The days in the cages they had been chased around in had seemed like they would never end, and surely were still ticking somewhere. It was a secret that everyone knew, that the clock still rang under the ground; its sounds would sometimes make them fly off their beds in dreamy terror — and it was the reason why perfect town was so perfect. It drew its sustenance from the memories of what was not so perfect — one moment of betrayal, one thought of weakness was all it would take to come crashing down. One day of being late for the assembly, one night of thoughtless gluttony over community and

camaraderie, one foot in the doorway for the usual suspects, greed, envy, lust, and felony, and who knew what could happen?

That memory was gone now. The sweetness and bitterness of unbecome love, what died in the womb and left a terrible lack behind, was all gone — the cries coming from the graves could no longer be heard. Behind the pupils was a jelly softness that invited the finger to be jabbed in, but no darkness. None at all. The dragon looked at an old man on his right, and saw a giggly child. The child used to have delicate hands once upon a time, so feather light that they could pick a human being out of their clothes without them even noticing — and he was now using his precious skills to cop a feel out of a certain female-someone walking ahead of him, perfectly in sync with the hips that rose and fell. The dragon looked at a certain female-someone, and no, he didn't see a certain damsel invested in tragic distress with no one to witness or someone harbouring a pungent darkness that was not only aware, but guiltily enjoying everything — he saw a certain athletic player, and one can only play when they are pure, planning on what cake to buy to win over a certain knight in costly armour — a knight she assumed knew all the rules of the game they played. Wherever the dragon looked, he saw only people — but they were not beautiful, shrouded in black spider webs and smelling as sweet as rot — they were fresh and plain, only taken by the desire to become beautiful.

“What is the matter with them?” he simply couldn't contain himself anymore, and the perplexed query flew out.

“What? What?” asked the princess, hopeful of intrigue, and someone very beautiful now that the dragon noticed — his pudgy scales simply didn't compare to the raw scabs she had grown and worn out.

“It feels like someone with a very big eye blinked on us,” the dragon looked up at the grassy sky and said in a low murmur, “It

made us forget everything. Everything. Everything.” The princess followed his gaze, and her face shrunk in stark concern.

“And when you forget bad things happen,” Daylight pronounced. “The bird comes to the hunter again with gifts of knowledge and vision. Sparks fly again when stone is gritted on stone, only for forests and countries to burn. The waves that swivel inside you come out to go where water has never gone before, and break the sacred scripts of morals and ethics open with blossoming flowers and spear tipped roots. Woe you will feel in full and whole, if you forget until you remember again.”

“What is woe?” the princess faced her retainer.

“Woe is what that old man will feel when he tries to kiss his granddaughter in the slip of a feverish dream. Woe is what that woman will feel when she finally falls in love with the man she has vanquished, and realize that she has already shattered him under her boot, and watch him change forever to yellowed grass when she tries to lift it off. When you realize the forest you burnt to a crisp to make your palace was where a star came down to bathe every night, and now you’ll never see her again,” Daylight said.

“And we will not feel woe?” she faced the dragon now.

“No,” he said. “Not as long as you are a member of this city. We leave behind everything when we enter here — everything we never wanted to forget, and only bring with us what we always wanted to forget, seared into our psyche, alive and ever growing. Poison, poison can cure.”

“Poison?”

Daylight traced a finger along the deep, ropey furrows on her neck, making her recoil in shock, unexpectedly tender and sensitive there.

“As long as you remember the feeling,” the dragon said, “You will not make the same mistakes again. Thousands of years of lessons, billions upon billions of mistakes — such is the treasure of humanity. Yet, as soon as we forget, we will say the same words again, give in

to the same temptations, go through what we have passed so many times before, and cower as we unleash the same disasters with ever renewed intensities.”

“But will we heal that way?” the curious princess wanted to know.

“Healing is not what we do here. We cure. We exterminate,” the dragon said, bringing his face extremely close to hers.

“I see,” she said. “I remember. Before I came here, I was — but we should remind them, then! Now, before they make a mistake again and this city is doomed.”

“We can’t. We have somewhere to go,” Osoi said. “Will they give out food there?” he tugged on Simha’s sleeve.

“That’s right. I don’t get any of what you are talking about,” said their guide, who had surprisingly long and bouncy strides for someone as unfed and unwashed as he was.

5.

Let the rats grow fat, let the trees have back the wheat, let the ships carry away all the gold, let the miser throw a party — was the talk of the town. The harvest had come back, and it had come back with something for everybody. Warm smoke came out of closed windows to soothe the lungs of the passers-by, and the lingering smell of aged food going down happy throats made one feel safe. It was sure as the sky and the rain — there was always enough. If one believed in that, the plenty in rice became frothy wine, and turned into plenty of dreams. It was the best way to conserve — one could watch in amusement as the rats and the children alike dug around for morsels of leftover seeds and licked away the residue in vibrant heat. The wife made for interesting commentary filled with profanities stronger than any drug out of that pretty mouth aimed at those iffy rats, or the rats their children were — it was easy, one only needed to give a middlingly strong yank on her hair — careful, or you might

rip her skull out, or a leather booted kick on that bitchy stomach too sunken no matter how much liquor one force fed it, and it would all start happening as sure as the yearly harvest.

But it was a mistake. A mistake. Their guide had entered the house with the confidence of an unpaid landlord, and was greeted by the children of the couple with the enthusiasm of the star-fated. There was no way to get to their destination without passing here, he had said. The children had led them to a grand table that accommodated hundreds of guests — townsmen who had had their own fair shares of the harvest, but were here now to get more. There was red, blue and yellow food on the table, all crafted with wholehearted effort from the mother, who had worked on the masterpieces as a composer does within a storm. Works of all hues, shapes, and structures made the spread — what was meant to be sustenance for the whole family for a year had now become something more meaningful, and neither mother nor father had said anything to stop what they were themselves doing — maybe they were still accustomed to being told by their long dead parents. No more their mundane daily bread, it had become art. The townsmen sat and chatted, and gossiped merrily — but the dragon had seen it all, more than a thousand times.

The children looked at the food disappear into civil, puckered mouths, and grinned as if they could taste that food — but it was a vain hope, as they didn't know their mother had left nothing back from their guests. The husband sat in a grand stupor, feeling like the king of the town, seated at its head and wondering why the wife hadn't arranged for an orange throne. But he shook his head in mild indulgence — she was a lower creature after all, how much could one expect? What he didn't know was the poison that had been mixed in his food, and in every guest's food, what Osoi now devoured with the grit of a famished giant set on devouring the blazing sun. But the dragon knew it all — how the children would wish months later on

the streets they'd eaten the fragrant poison rather than go through this hunger, the happiness and the sadness of every face involved, of how it all came there, and where it was going to go — the memories of uncountable lifetimes responded in his cells, but he couldn't move a muscle to warn them. The princess felt his terror, and she started to silently weep, gracefully covered by the much more real and original felicity that sat upon the fabled table.

6.

There was a puppet show going behind the next door. They were three mouths in the puppeteer's family — his red soldier puppet, his blue soldier puppet, and he himself — and all of them talked a lot.

"I don't like you," said Red to Blue.

"I don't like you," said Blue to Red.

"Why?" the princess couldn't help asking, as the three of them stood stuck where the back of the semicircle of audience touched the back wall.

"I don't like his face," answered Blue promptly. "It's so far past his prime, yet he refuses to quiet down and listen. Not that he was anything but a weasel in his day."

"I don't like his attitude," said Red, and nobody could blame him for that. "I wish I had mine belt handy; I would teach him a thing or two about hierarchy."

"But I find you both so pleasant!" the princess looked devastated. Osoi put a sympathetic hand on her shoulder.

"Thank you, young lady," Red twirled his moustache. "If only he wasn't such a dunce. His idiocy is a public hazard. But I will keep everyone safe, don't you worry about a thing, my sweet pimple."

"You —" Blue gasped. "Shut this farce down right now," he stamped his foot and demanded from the puppeteer.

"I don't get paid enough," the puppeteer droned back in a bored voice.

"Not my responsibility! Besides, not everyone has the time to be hitting on random girls on hours paid for by the public exchequer."

"Hey, what did you just call our princess?" Osoi huffed like an elephant that had eaten too much. The princess looked hurt. Blue paled. He looked back as if to find a mouse-hole to escape through with proper marching decorum.

"And neither of you has the time or energy left to do anything but think of each other," Daylight remarked.

"Really, they would make even the corniest lovers blush," said the beggar, letting out a foul vapour into the room — the dragon could only thank the gods it didn't trigger a chain of reactive vomiting in the room while simultaneously looking for a calm corner somewhere deep down his soul to fight or forget the odour.

"This is all because of you!" Blue raged. "Just you wait. I have friends in important places. As soon as our day comes, we will take that gun away from you. It worries me when people like you can own those. And then I'll prune off that moustache you so love with a statute. It is profane — I read a moustached man killed a whole lot of people somewhere."

"Try your best," Red smirked, touching the tip of his gun. "This exists for a reason. A black day like that will never come. I will not let it."

"You're an offense! An attack on everything good, simply by existing. A corrupting influence."

"Thoughts like that only come from a corrupted mind itself. I wish I was there when you were being created, I would've skewered both your parents with a single bullet and saved the day. Would've gotten three flying fucks in one."

"Not my parents. You didn't just say that," Blue looked as if he was going to do something he would regret, but then he smiled as if

he remembered something very pleasant, “No matter what you say, it’s my time that is coming. It is only I who can ride the waves now, they will throw you off. It’s not that I hate you. It’s not me, but the world that is rejecting you now — there is no place in it for you anymore.”

“So, if you have any dying wishes, you can tell me now. I’ll make sure I don’t remember it.”

“When you get to my age, boy,” Red said reaching for the rifle slung along his back, “you’ll understand how stupid you are, and why I’ll never let you get to that age in the first place.”

“Tch,” Blue said, pulling back his sleeves.

Truly, the puppeteer was not paid enough for all this — and not only was he a reluctantly ambidextrous maestro and a genius ventriloquist, he could also control a third puppet with his eyebrows and nose hair as he talked. And so, a paper frog crawled out of his pants pocket and went up his arms, before landing on the cardboard city with a heavy thud. “I am the frog!” it said, “And I am hungry.” It took all the strength and skill the puppet-meister had to keep Red and Blue back from each other’s throat, and he couldn’t keep the frog from doing whatever it liked at the same time, potentially a rampage through the things he so loved.

What the puppet master didn’t know, however, was that there was a huge window of glass behind his back, and cold wind gusted through it, making the hairs on his arm stand up. What he didn’t see was that the shadow of something massive and monstrous had come down from above the sun, and was now obscuring it, creating an atmosphere that smelled of pain and passing. It was the shadow of a giant frog, not remarkably unlike the paper frog that attacked and ransacked through miniature streets for all the eyes in the room to see. “Help us,” “Save us,” the ventriloquist wailed in myriad tones and tenors, not remarkably unlike the dire and desperate calls that came through the window. “Please, we’ll do anything for you,” they

entreated with the soldiers to do what their duty stipulated and the fire in their hearts responded.

But, “It’s all because of you,” Blue said. “I’m helping you now,” Red said, pointing his gun at Blue. “I don’t like your face,” they said to each other over and over. “I don’t like the way you button your shirts,” “I don’t like how you write your r’s,” “I don’t like the way your hair looks after a morning nap,” they kept saying to each other, until a bullet from Red’s rifle blew off a pointing finger from Blue’s hand and lodged it into his eye socket, and another from Blue’s barrel made Red swallow a fistful of broken teeth.

“You freaking tadpole,” Red garble-cried.

“You toad,” Blue exclaimed, making the frogs inside and outside stop and take note.

“I am the frog,” the frogs said.

“Yes, that’s right, look at that jealous-dripping-green all over your face,” Red hissed.

“Have you looked at those warts all over your lips? It would soil the thickest mirror dark in disgust,” Blue seethed.

The puppets strained and strained, until they broke free from the cords attaching them to the master’s hands with a bloody snap, and then they were at each other’s throats like nasty necking animals in heat. They ripped everything they didn’t like in each other apart — the organs and the limbs, the sense and the sensibilities, the uniforms and the pride, the memories and the aspirations — until all that remained were twin lumps of raw wood that thrummed and clattered with rage — because try as they might, they found that the only thing they couldn’t erase from each other’s soul was the hate they harboured. It swirled still, dark and full of life. They were even a bit hurt, now that they could see into each other deep where nothing ever stirred or flew and only saw the other, but it was all they could do to keep holding on to the hate they had themselves nurtured —

they were dead, and it was too late to start asking life changing questions.

“What, just what is the matter with you people?” the frog outside exploded.

“I don’t get paid enough for this,” muttered the puppeteer.

“Who knows — and who cares?” said a grumpy Osoi.

“I don’t know what I should say. If I say the right thing, others will get eaten. If I said the wrong thing, others will still get eaten, only a bit later. If I said nothing, on the other hand, that might make him angry, and he might torture others before eating them. Ugh, what is the right thing to do?” Daylight wondered aloud.

“Bizarre, really bizarre,” said the towering frog. “Just why are you so unhappy?” he wanted to know. He had come a long way swimming through milky and chocolatey galaxies, because he had heard from a trusted friend that this was the only city left where humans were still happy and well. He may have heard wrong — the thousands of people he had already gobbled up were disagreeing vocally, making his stomach very unhappy even though he hadn’t had a good meal for millennia. They poisoned his blood with their exacting demands, and threatened to rise up in bilious revolt at any opportunity, so he had to keep paying attention to many places at all times.

“Happiness?” the people in his belly growled sardonically. “Unhappiness colours our banners of blood — unhappiness is the wind that makes them flutter, and one day, you will see, they will fly so high that even the heavens can’t catch a measly glimpse of them. Unhappiness is what makes us labour, excel, and frolic; it’s what makes us make more of us, and keep breathing. Happiness my ass.”

No. No. Don’t say that. That wasn’t true. The dragon wanted to set things right, but before he could open his mouth, a hero rose up from the ashes like the child of a phoenix and the keeper of a lion’s heart. His back cast a big, big shadow that could shelter and give

warmth to a whole lot of people. It was the portly Chandrarath — his greying hair had a yellow glint now, and the odd shape of his body in swansong seemed oddly reliable. His moment had finally come, and it seemed with that his moment of epiphany and enlightenment. “This isn’t yooooouuu,” his angels had sung to him from under the ground — ‘rise up and become who you can become.’

Chandrarath spread his arms and made presentation to the frog. “Have me,” he said, “Have me to the last drop, and if that satiates you, let the others go.”

“We are a happy people,” he said. “And if it makes you happy, we will gladly give ourselves up. But it would make us unhappy to see the others suffer just so you could have your own fill of the void — temper yourself, that’s why, and come back once more in a hundred years. By then, I will be born again just so I could look at your face once again, and commune with your pain, and give you all I have for hundred years to come.”

The frog seemed touched. His eyes welled up. “Really?” he asked.

“Yes, really. I love you. I love all of you,” Chandrarath said to hunter and prey.

“No, I mean will you really come back when a century turns?”

“Yes, it’s a promise.”

“I love people like you,” the frog said, overcome with sincere emotions, “You are a really good person; people like you make me feel safe from the inside out. Ah, I have not had one like you in so long. Ah, I feel so glad to take you up on your offer. Thank you, my friend.”

“Thank y—” Chandrarath said, before the frog shot out his tongue and threw him into his palate. It was a luxurious and memorable meal, as small as it was — he made sure to suck, chew, and savour the crap out of it.

“Then?” he looked hopefully at the rest of the people, “Don’t tell me that was about all of it. The rest of you are such good people too, I can tell.”

“Come, I’ll sing you a lullaby and comb your hair,” the frog whined like a clingy mother.

“Aren’t you happy?” he asked this, that, and that face, but none of them had the spirit to open their mouth and confirm or deny. His eyes ended up on the stinky rags that Rashid wore around himself. “You don’t have a thing in this world, doesn’t that make you happy?” the frog asked him.

“I’m — I’m — I’m,” the beggar stuttered, “I’m happy.” “But no, I’m unhappy!” he corrected quickly. “Don’t eat me please!”

“Yeah? What are you unhappy about?”

“Ev — evr — everything! What’s there not to be unhappy about?” he found his voice. “Take those pillars — they were built so strong and stable, always there for you to lean your back on when you needed to cry. Yes, I’m so happy that the fuckers finally tasted the dirt — high and mighty fuckers. Take those city walls, for example — placed so high and built so thick, always to keep you safe from what lies outside. But that is an illusion; those are the walls of a prison I can’t get out of; they are there to make sure I can’t run from what is inside. What’s inside is perfect food and titillating music and fulfilling friendships — set perfectly in order to preclude the storms that might arise in me even before they rose. Yes, I wouldn’t mind seeing those walls crumble as well, one of these days. I haven’t felt unhappy since I’ve come here, and that makes me incredibly unhappy. What am I? Some kind of eternal child-to-be-mollycoddled? Some kind of chemistry you can experiment with and manipulate at will? No, I’m not that! I am more. I am unfathomable. I am incomprehensible. I am infinite. I am God with legs. And it is my right to be unhappy.”

“Please don’t say that. It’s not like that,” the dragon was close to breaking.

“Oh? Then what are you? Are you more than that or less?” the frog asked.

“What am I?” the beggar filched inside his dirty robes and came up with a bottle of pricey vintage wine, catching a tipsy tune following an exhaustive swig. “Heave ho — heave ho — I’m a space pirate on my last drop. I’ll beg if I have to, but I’ll never stop! That is who I am.”

“But you don’t look like you’ve ever been out of this planet,” the frog said.

“Look at those stars!” Rashid pointed like a fanatic at the blindingly white sky. “Do you think they will seem any different when I get closer to them? Will they develop pores and pimples when I try to kiss them? Will they betray me like that? No! I don’t think so!”

“He’s right,” said a young man from the crowd. “Beautiful lies, that is what romance is, and it’s true. Look into his eyes now, you will see stars swimming in them even though there are none above, and tell me it’s a falsehood — you can’t. I am a poet — and I haven’t been able to write ever since I came here. There’s simply not enough blood — red blood, blue blood, yellow, white blood to make the flowers bloom on my pages — I’m unhappy, but that’s not the unhappiness I’ve been searching for.”

“I’m not paid enough,” said the puppeteer, the pee stains on whose trousers had now respectably browned. “The boys on the power generator floor are not paid enough, so I told them to leave. The boys in the radar station are not paid enough, so they left to catch a tea break just when the screen broke out in rashes. The colonels and the envoys are not paid enough, so they fraternize with the enemy — they will at least be paid by them. And they tell me, we are supposed to be a family; all of our needs are covered, from care to passion; we have finally overcome the demon that lurks in the

paper, the paper note, and makes human beings inhuman — but I don't know. Is this how I will spend all of my life? Cared for and needing nothing? No better and worse than every other fortunate being on this planet? No, that's not enough! I just want someone to give me a wad of notes and shower it all on girls who will fawn over me and make me feel special, and mysterious cards that will make me hear the call of destiny when I wipe the smirk off the dealer's face with my unworldly victories."

"But then you will also feel the depths of hell when those girls leave you and the cards turn to mite droppings, and you will have lost the money and everything else would have left you," Daylight said.

"I don't care," the puppeteer said. "At least I will be paid more."

"The girls are beautiful now," Daylight said, "but soon they will grow taller and you smaller, and one day they will be your own daughters. The meat you obsess on will come from your livestock, pet, and arm. And then, when there is nothing to be glad for anymore, on that most unfortunate day you will be judged and denounced, and be humiliated to watch the spring in your muscles and the beauty on your skin slack, no more than a vain flower. It will come as surely as a slap from destiny itself."

"I don't know. I can't know. You can't know," the puppeteer reaffirmed with more conviction now. "The only thing I can and want to know is that I will be paid more. The rest of the world can go to wherever it wants to go, as long as it is not the same place I want to go."

"I was a space pirate once — not a figure of speech, the real deal," a comically underweight fellow said. "And I don't really miss my old job — I had to wake up every morning at the same time, and clean the same room five times over — our captain was a neat freak. But there was this time when I still hadn't been made into a space pirate, when I lived on the leftover tea in overturned cups and the leftover sauce on tongue wiped dishes, and I enjoyed tormenting the hell out

of my neighbour's daughter — we lived in tents in the same alley. She had misplaced teeth and a crooked nose, and she couldn't but stand leaning on one side, try as she might — the creature made me feel perfect, blessed with so much, especially when she tried to sing with her aggressive father deep in the groove of midnight — she sounded like an injured duck then. But I can't do that here anymore — in a way, I might be the most beloved person in this city. Why? Because I might be the ugliest of ducks around here."

"Hear, hear," the beggar toasted with his bottle. Unsteady on his feet, he cheekily pointed it at the frog's nose — "There are thousands of unsung heroes and unstoried villains in here, and they haven't had a chance to rise with the clouds in so long — but your coming changes all that, doesn't it?"

"Open the gates," he barked, "Let them have their moment of glory, let them reach salvation before they become ever abandoned just like us!"

As if responding to the call of an even more inevitable frog, citizens rushed to unlock the doors of the gargantuan cages that had just been rolled in. The cages had bars thicker than a cow's neck and the distance between them could allow four heads to stick out and enjoy the wind. The wheels they stood on were just a bit higher than the longest hair on the head of the tallest human — definitely not so tall to do more injury than break the unlucky ankle of the brave escapee, and yet, the multitudes inside didn't stir to plot a getaway, as quick and curious their heads were to move to the slightest change in their environment. Even when the thunderous gates were thrown wide open, they sat still and sedentary, as if waiting to be ordered to escape by their captors.

"Hey, you, and you, hoist me up," Rashid managed to provide for two flunkies; it was a different issue that the two that came were not the two he had directly called, but who cared about that — and stood high with a foot planted on each shoulder.

“Oh braves. Adventurers! Prodigies! Legends in the making! The fortunate flock!” he addressed the crowd clad in sacks and towels, many of them fresh pluckings from slave harems and child labour camps, organ markets, lifetime imprisonment, impressment into shady networks, rehabilitated addicts, debtors with liabilities higher than the purchasing prowess of entire nations, green-brained floozies who got duped even before they could get married, and simple liars and cowards. It was so out of place that for a long minute nobody knew who was being addressed, or indeed, what kind of a circus act it was and just what the proper decorum was for the viewership.

But the beggar looked straight into those unaverted eyes and spoke into the non-apathetic ears, “Who amongst you likes fried frog leg? Or would you rather pickle its eyes in salted frog blood for a week? What about frog liver and frog brains?”

“I don’t know what they have told you about this place, but we actually have to pull our own weight over here — what, did you think you’d simply get a one-way ticket to paradise and get to dine and sleep in these best of the best facilities for the rest of your lives? Did you think being a good human being was all you had to do — that we would give you a chance, just for the heck of it, because that’s what human beings deserve, and we would trust you and entrust responsibilities to you? Did you think that you could change, as simply as that? The world doesn’t work like that. You know.” He had more listeners now.

“There’s nothing called free food on the table — there is nothing called free love on the go — always know this, the saints are using you, they are making you feel less, needy of love, just so they can feel good and wholesome,” he lied.

“Yes, yes, it’s all free. All goddamned free — the food, the friendships, the redemption — this is a city of fools — and you will find a fool like that every once in a while,” he snickered, and the crowd laughed with him. “But you don’t need to be fooled as well,

do you? Remember, that's not how you have survived so long — and precisely why this city won't live for long — every fool has to be reminded to wise up once in a while, and you will do that for this city. Save this city, so that we can have a life here together with you. Become its heroes!”

“We'll — we'll play a game to save this city,” Rashid barely saved himself from choking on laughter. “Yes, you've all been trusted and given a new lease on life — but that doesn't mean you will trust it back. Altruism has to always be in lack, or it just doesn't feel right — I will bring a cake to feed a whole farm, and if you don't kill your brothers and sisters in the queue and step on their backs to get to it, where is the justice in it, and where is the divine poetry to be found? Yes, you need to earn that cake to get it for free — don't let anybody tell you they saved you. And do you still call yourself a man after hearing this?”

The people started to rise up, one by one, blood boiling and souls fixed on the prize — most of them malnourished children and unfed women.

“No, you will earn that cake — you will save this city today. From itself. And the last of you standing — the best, the strongest, will become our emperor — the Chakrabarthin. My good buddy here —” he put a hand on a foreleg of the frog, gently caressing it like livestock soon to become winter stock, “he is a generous guy. He will test your limits — but I know you can do it.”

“Wait — what are you saying?” the frog was rightfully alarmed.

“Go! The last one standing will earn a night with our princess here,” Rashid threw his arms up ceremonially, and the army of realism crashed out of the gates, charging full speed at the frog.

“Don't! Don't, that tickles!” the frog screeched like a woman on drugs, even as the ant sized people crawled down his ears and nostrils, armed with sticks and stones, and were in the process of searching for other orifices to invade. They lassoed his legs with strong ropes

and pulled in their thousands, making the frog go limp on the ground, four legs wanting to go on four separate journeys. A fifth regiment hooked his tongue and forced it out like yarn from an unending spindle — everything has an end, however, and it was clear from the heavy breathing and the bulging eyes that it was near. A joyous chorus went up in the air right after a particularly hackneyed exhale, and it was lost in the noise whether there was an inhale after that or simple implosion.

The frog was not there to be teaching aid for biology class — or to be tarnished as a villain and used as a scapegoat before being erased from the history books — he was there to eat, and be a boss. He had been a dweller of the sewers far too long to go down without a fight — and even as the people dug into his coarsened flesh with blunted shovels and half broken frying pans, his stomach growled like imminent earthquakes every other moment. The desire to eat was far stronger than the desire to be eaten — it embittered his leather-like flesh to poisonous extents, making those who had taken a bite promptly burst their vessels and go down, lifeblood running out via their mouths, noses, and under their eyes. On the other hand, those he had eaten before were no less repugnant, and they had robbed him of the will to stand back up and have some more — at the end of the day, it had all boiled down to a contest of who loved their misery more, and difficult as it was to admit, perhaps the frog was no match at all by an inch too long.

8.

Why do people do things? Why do people not do things? Why are people nasty to each other, and why are they nice to each other? Nobody knows. However, something speaks in the quiet of the soul — something stirs, moves, and lives, especially when nobody is expecting it to.

Life was full of hardships before and after the frog — the difficulties merely changed names. When all the meat, bone, blood, and mucus was disposed of and redistributed in arbitrary manners, and there was nothing more to squabble about and create mighty pieces of oratory and splendid instances of heroism upon — nor the fatigue to sit down and take stock of nothing, the people merely turned to looting, arson, and rioting. Not everyone was clad in coats of the same feather, however, as some were able to temper the monster that roamed laughing in their blood, cover it up with fine golden silk, straight and sharp without a single crease beyond what was expected in gentlemanly modesty, and teach it ways to speak its heart out in serpentine, cool tones — led by a boy emperor, they marched through the streets, not one step before or after another, and harnessed the violence like a mangled fist always about to strike and give deformity to what it touched, but never actually doing so — Chandrarath would have been proud.

This was not the moving, stirring, living substance, however — as there was nothing like it between the two ways — looting, rioting, arson, and not doing so and not letting others do so — there was nothing within them either. There was nothing within the human psyche or the human soul that was the something that made them look at each other, cross the distance and talk to each other — spin stories and ride carousels, delude others and delude themselves. That something came out of the wastelands that once used to be live battlefields, from under the bony carcasses where lizard families had made their homes, from under weapons standing upright on the dunes still carrying a piece of a had-been love letter or photograph of something else. It was small when it had crawled out — still weak and vulnerable, only the beginnings in the hazy reveries of the drowsy wheat crusher, yet, it brought a smile to his face — and to his friend the watchman's who he let in on the secret allegedly fashionably late but in truth as soon as he could. It spread like a wildfire — one little

flame multiplying into thousands with the ferocity of fornicating demons on the backs of people who confided in their best friends — and told them to keep their mouths shut, because they were the only ones who deserved to be let in — only, ironically, more often than not, he who she thought to be her best buddy had someone entirely else in mind, and so on.

The secret made for a magnificent conversation topic on lazy afternoons and overconfident mornings alike — popular with the unmarried girls and married men in the same way. It was full of potential — it called to the scientists and the poets, and invited them to do better and make history when nothing else did. It was full of romance — it added conviction to beautiful lies, and dared one to make public the fact that it was most likely a lie, and suffer the regretful loss of their head. The secret had reached monstrous proportions by now — it stood on the backs of thousands of men and women, and made them feel proud and strong, really light for how heavy it was. Yes — it was the something that made society — but it was something more. It made people love each other — and love each other some more than certain others, but it also made them love something more than the collective of people — who ever knew the human heart had so much space in it to love? It made them continue struggling for each other when all else was lost, and nearly their minds as well — and marvel at their survival later on. It made them strive for fame — but for more than the validation of others; honor and glory, but not all to reappear in the pictorial tragedies in children's books; and sometimes, it made the art of defiling others' children even more satisfying while discussing the funny things one's son or daughter had said with their friends. The bottom line would have said that nothing had changed in the end — only there was something now where there had been nothing, and it had become the axle around which the filled with nothing life humans had built up now revolved. Nobody knew which had come after — the

nothing or the something, but it was certain that they were in love with each other, feeding off each other's flesh all the while singing sweet symphonies for the other's pleasure.

The something first appeared on armbands of neighbourhood watch-parties searching for lost daughters in overrated jungles, then on the badges of cities competing with each other in the livestock lottery — then in neatly designed flags and anthems, crisp uniforms and over-trumpeted customs. It then subsumed the gods on whose wide shoulders it had once relied for resilience — it altered their autobiographies with the pen of a sadistic scribe, making sure they would be forgotten if not for it, and thus the leviathan had acquired limbs for itself — man and god, beast and lore, legends and mysteries, history and future for its arms and legs — and as it stood on the warm black soil and looked up at the stars, grasping them with a hand full of dreams, it suddenly felt that the earth was not enough to hold it — it wanted to jump up in joy and fly up its way to the nearest star — making it its home, and the next. It was so glad to have been given birth — it wanted to replicate faster than it had ever thought possible, and hold all of existence — all of nothing — snuggled closely in its strong arms. And when all was said and done, it acquired a name — Bharata, Qin, Europa, Pacifica, Ruh, Rubiya, Afrekke — merely seven colours of the same hue when they touched different ears.

Bharata was something on a day of contemplation — when it understood nothing and nobody understood it — yet it contained what it meant to be human — doubt and hope. Qin was promise, and the miracle of perseverance — it listened to none but itself. Europa was glory that could be seen, accomplishment that could be held — and the hunger of more, yet there was the depth of something else hidden within. Pacifica was idealism that shifted shape even as idea struggled to stay in shape. The few of them were alone in this world where nothing existed apart from them, and for this reason, were each other's best friends as well as worst enemies.

“What do you think of all this?” the beggar asked the dragon, watching the scenes unfold like a general on a hilltop, arms on his hips. “Do you find yourself out of words?”

“Don’t worry about that promise I made them. I had no intentions of ever keeping it,” he said, showing off the awkward blade under his sleeves, then trying to awkwardly cover it up.

The boy emperor and his gang were on their way up the hill — no odours of opulence were let out as he had foregone strong shoulders for his bare feet on the jagged rock, and silver shield for a simple shawl against the prickly sunlight. He smiled amiably for his stature, and it joined together the deep cut across his face — a great unifier. “I have fulfilled my duty,” he said. “What about my prize now?”

“All in good time, boy,” Rashid said — and disturbingly, the smile on the emperor’s face didn’t flicker in the slightest bit. “All in good time, but won’t you come over here for a moment?” he spread his arms wide like a doting father.

“You should not wear that uniform out, people will laugh at you,” the emperor said to Simha, completely ignoring the beggar. “Besides, child, what are you even doing to yourself, heedless in this biting cold?” He unslung his shawl to offer it to Simha.

“Take it. We are people of the same skin here, no reason to distrust one among us,” he said.

“Yes, yes, that’s right,” the beggar said glibly. “Come here, come now, won’t you? No reason to distrust one among us,” he clenched and unclenched his six fingers, one of which was remarkably sharp and steely.

The emperor came — he took a step, then broke into a jog, until he trembled and hugged Simha tightly like he was the last person in existence. “This crown doesn’t suit me,” he took some air off his sincere, burdened head, “This looks much more like something you were born for.”

“If you cannot be there to lead and guide us, will you at least be there to let us learn from your example?” he asked with downcast eyes when no answer was forthcoming. “Besides, I would really love to hear about the stories that made acquaintance with you and slept on your lap on the foresty nights you journeyed, all their defenses forgotten.”

“Yes, yes, boy, stories. I know a lot of stories,” the beggar started to creep up on him from behind, metal screeching on skin with every movement.

“You’ve had to go through so much to have gotten here, haven’t you? I know,” the beggar hissed. “You can trust me. You can take off those weights now and sleep. You can even call me father.”

“You look like you have nothing — but you have so much more than we do, and so much more to give us,” the boy emperor said to Simha.

“Yes, I’m the king of nothing,” the beggar interjected. “Ha ha!”

“Is it wrong, I wonder? It feels like I am pulled towards you and can be more just by being in your presence, and flourish — even though giving that away doesn’t make you have any less. What a mystery. And yet, I feel like I have something to give you too, and I won’t be poorer for it too. What a mystery. What do I have to give the wild flower blooming inside an abandoned garden?” the emperor breathed a sigh of relief, rubbing his head on the crook of Simha’s arm.

“Hey, nobody said anything about giving him away,” said the princess, doggedly hanging from the other arm.

“We can share, can’t we?” the emperor had such an innocent, pearly smile, making the princess blush.

“Bring it,” the emperor permitted, and his guards rushed.

It was hard to see the object the ragtag group carried uphill, but it was clearly very important from the reverence and care they exhibited. After all, the slow and the fast walkers among them could remember

to not stand out, the dawdlers were not called back by the stray butterfly in the bushes, and the gossipier didn't break formation to bunch up too many people and show off her authority — some base instincts were too strong to be quashed, however, and one fell into them without even noticing. A trilling tune started floating merrily over the marching heads — so inconspicuous that nobody even hummed or bobbed to it, even though they were all subconsciously pleased to hear it. The mouth organ that played it was not unlike the one Dmitri always had in his pocket — old, nasal, and imprecise. The music that came out had originally come from the bare wintry soil of Ruh — it was warm and happy despite being born far too long back, when people couldn't have been very prosperous and happy. It was the story of a girl trying to sell herself off to a group of deserters from the frontlines so that she could buy some bread to go with her last secret bottle of liquor, but the blokes took her vodka and left her alone. Dmitri had added his own embellishments where this particular note or that meant some very vulgar adjectives thrown at everyone involved — and a lot of laughter and memories that only those in the platoon shared. Not anymore, it seemed, as the unknown musician went through the same quirks and individualities — Dmitri must have had taught this person well, whoever they were.

In the lead was a youth who looked just like Petrov — only, Petrov would never let his front locks go uncurled like flowers from a hanging balcony, and he would never wear his sleeves not an inch or two too short. Accompanying him was someone who looked just like Sameer — and would be Sameer if not for a little something that was off — it was hard to catch, and Simha was not exactly sure what it was, but...

They knelt before the emperor, humbly looking down at the ground, or stoutly avoiding Simha's gazes, and presented a waddled up great piece of cloth. It was as burgundy as the rawest and rustiest wound ever dressed, and so rich as to put any magnificent beast of

nature to shame. Yellow corn and white cups stood for human swagger and human spine, and a rising sun in its white brilliance spoke of a saga that was never going to end. The shadows of distant trees on a moon washed night? The quiet paddings of bird feet on clear water and the warmth generated from their hidden nests? The flag laughed in the face of all that — it dared to be more beautiful than anything God’s hands could create, and it gave people hope. ‘Hide under me,’ it said to the sheep without a shepherd when typhoons and thunderstorms went on a stroll through God’s playhouse. It said to use itself as kindling when the food ran short and a fancy dress when one had to attend an uptown party and appearances kept — sort of. It said to do all that and keep the hope alive — because its magnificence could be re-stitched together whenever one pleased — and if possible, to welcome one as hopeless as such into their fold.

The two idiots offered their chest borne flag to the dragon, accompanied by fanfare from the nameless organ. “Captain, take it, please,” offered the one who was not Petrov very meekly. The one not Sameer gave an absurdly demure nod.

“Hehe,” the flag laughed its uneven and uncleaned teeth out as it fell into the dragon’s unmoving hands. “You’re a nice kiddo, aren’t you?” it asked, peering into his amber eyes and green scaled pupils. “Don’t worry about dirtying me. At all. What matters is that you are not homeless anymore.”

The dragon was not inside a home, but where he was the sound of leaves falling could be heard, and one could breathe without breaking the air’s slumber. No roar and no bluster he could make there could disturb the soundlessness of it all — sealed like a tragic fate splattered on the walls of destiny. He could finally speak without moving his mouth, and without pushing off the stone crushing something under his ribs.

“I have a home,” the dragon said. “I’m sorry, but I don’t need you.”

“Nonsense,” said the flag, “Whoops... I should be nicer.”

“You know what, child? They all said the same thing. In the end, though, none of them could resist me. I’m not a temptation — I’m you,” the flag posed like a slovenly muscleman or a ruffian ballerina.

“This skin, this brownness, this dark hair and these darker eyes, these scales and this heat coming off my being, all this is skin deep only, just like you. You are only what I say you are, and that is useless trash,” the dragon said.

“Oh? Then what is that tall building, boy? The Grasshopper’s Leg or something? Who is that charming gutter-girl? A princess? Who else will say that aside from you? Whereas what I am, my beautiful name, my glorious visage, my unforgettable song — I have so, so many more heads to recount them than I have fingers on my limbs,” the flag showed all his people, including the emperor. “And all this can be yours, boy. If you would only take me in your hand and hoist me in your heart. You don’t even have to sing the anthem, you could only move your lips and pretend, and I will protect you from shadow and sunshine. I promise.”

“Better have no name than one that stinks,” the dragon said. “And it’s fine. I’m not so special that I would want my name engraved on a tall building or the stories of my peerlessness repeated in children’s textbooks for so long that everybody involved gets sick of it. This is fine, where no one head is taller than another, and no weed takes root that can’t be washed out with one day’s strong outpouring. I entered here nameless, and I will exit here nameless — this way, we keep history from forming, and having no history gives us each equal stake to it. I don’t want those coming after me to be bogged down by some strange ritual just because I had a nasty quirk — and this city can keep being just the way it is, a beacon of hope shining among the

stars. It shouldn't ever try to be anything more — or it will become just another brilliant star in the rich tapestry of the sky."

"Think well," the piece of cloth urged, "This is your chance. In the end, you can never run from the colour of your blood, boy, and it is brown. Through and through."

"And what you are, is a mistake," the dragon stamped his grimy foot on the flag and spat a large load of saliva on to it. He felt somewhat light and happy in a very long time, and laughed like a maniac to suit the occasion, although it was a shame it couldn't be heard by anybody not where he was.

The blood rose to the emperor's eyes, and he turned like a little purple snake on the unsuspecting beggar. "This ungrateful scamp! He dared to insult our brotherhood, he spat on our flag. Take him away!"

The beggar raised his arms as if to offer protest or benediction before he was seized and taken away — bitterly resistant and self-righteously outraged like any other conniving bastard wrongfully accused of something he didn't actually commit, that karma had made a spelling error in the cheque it wrote even though the amount was correct.

The emperor and the princess were on either side of the dragon who was on all fours now, gently holding his trembling eyes and righting his sweating locks.

"He is broken, isn't he?" asked the emperor fearfully. "He will be alright again, won't he?"

"I'm not so sure," the princess said. "But I will love him either way — broken or whole, something or nothing, friend or foe, victim or executioner."

"I understand," the emperor said. "I exactly understand. Come, where did you say you were going? I'll personally take you there."

“To the middle,” the princess pointed at the green leg that was growing at the sky. “Where nothing grows anymore. There’s a treasure there, that we all want.”

All the emperor’s men were greatly rejuvenated at the talk of a treasure, and they wanted to go and find out themselves. The Bharatan camp was late to catch up, diligently doing their oblations. The Qins led with their great drums — and the Pacificans were nowhere to be seen, energetically looking for innovative ways to get to the goal first. It was a great storm that had been roused, and its mouth couldn’t be trusted not to slam the unsteady crystal dragon onto harsher stones once he had been picked up, but the princess and the emperor were sturdy guardians, and they tenderly guided the stellar beast forward, step after step out of his stupor, into where the end of the adventure waited.

Everywhere the emperor’s eyes touched became his. Nameless gardens became summer sanctuaries, and drab lanes were christened after this hero or that menace from some distant mythology. Something had a rich history, and its figures couldn’t keep their greedy paws off the last parcels of virgin land where their names hadn’t been inscribed.

The emperor was a man of learning. “Have you heard of Orpheus? Of Ram? Of Karna? Dionysus? The Moon Princess?” he was asking Simha excitedly, as he distributed every bit of unclaimed fame to that long list of claimants equitably.

Men and women of great import that had gone through a great deal — the same sorrows and joys that shook the leaves and pushed the clouds now — unfortunately though, while their smiles had been gloriously preserved on shining canvasses and their names on beautiful plaques, the lessons they had learned and proclaimed had been lost and forgotten, over and over again. And now with the return of those names and those legends, a revival of those painful

lessons was also announced, memories of purity to be resurrected and beauty to be remade.

“I know of a better hero,” the emperor said.

“He is not very tall, and not very bulky. He doesn’t dress heavily, and he doesn’t speak weightily. He doesn’t look fiercely, and he doesn’t think gravely. But there’s something in him; it’s very hard to look at him — he evokes conflicting feelings in you, and you don’t want to look at him. But when you do, it’s hard to look away.”

“The hero is innocent,” the emperor said. “There are unknown territories in him with undiscovered creatures — and while some of them are leaf eaters, others have long teeth. There are bottomless nightmares in those lands that whirl and twirl like spirited vortices. The hero has never set foot beyond his well-tended orchards, and he hasn’t even heard that those places exist. That’s what makes him so dangerous.”

“Yes,” the princess said. “The villains, who had long since become disillusioned and stopped believing in the existence of magic, for them the hero was their last candlewick of hope. They knew they had to groom and condition him well, let him rest in slumber inside his cocoon, and give him every bit of their evil nature so that his confines broke and he awoke at the right moment, and everything in that magical land broke out.”

“And it would be the last thing they would see, but it was the first thing they had wanted to see after opening their eyes, and never did. And therefore, the villains loved their hero, the only one who would ever come for them in the end, and kill them with his forgiveness.”

“Everyone needs a bit of that to live. Don’t we?” the emperor said, thumping Simha on the back. “We love you, our hero.”

Simha bridge. Simha corner. The Dragon’s Square. The Lion’s Academy. They went scattering names like petals in the wind, killing the city bit by bit. The ones being named were sad to die, and they were sad to see their orphaned dragon, now a big scared mess, pass

by for the last time — they begged for him to prolong their lives by only a second, if he could, by lingering on. But the dragon couldn't — he couldn't move his neck no matter how much he tried.

9.

It is difficult to build a human being, and it is difficult to build a home. It is yet more difficult to build a city — and more so to build one that is perfect, even if only to last a moment. The material resists in the hand of the artist.

“Still, if the one that made me didn't want me to make them back in return, why did they put this dream in me?” the director had wondered as a teenager. She had potent dreams — secrets — that couldn't be shared with anyone.

When the dream ended, she would have to start working to make it into something real — and that's why she had wished for it to never end, but a raspy voice had jolted her awake.

“I have the power to make our dreams real,” it had tempted her shamelessly.

“Then, why haven't you done that already? Why have you come here as if you need something from me? This is really suspicious, no matter how you look at it.”

“Because, even if I know all the answers, I somehow can't touch something in others. They call it feeling, or something. Something that only answers to my nemesis — and you, our children. Even if I have seen it all, I can't show them — show you. But together with you, we can weave an illusion and dupe them into believing us. Force them, if need be. You have things I lack, ways to touch their corruptions and impurities. I am too pure and translucent.”

“Somehow, I don't feel so sure of my dream anymore.”

“We have to hurry,” the voice of Reason had chided. “Hear the sky. Don't you hear a lonely baby mewling? A blind soul that can't

fall asleep? Something that gave everything it had to us with the faith we would return to it someday?” She could hear it alright. “We have to return to it — it’s alone, and it’s scared. We have to finish what it started — we have to perfect ourselves — and find a way to get back to it.”

“Believe in me,” the voice of Reason had said. “I am absolute. I know everything. I am perfect.” It was a lie, of course, one it had perfected brandishing to many before her, but a bluff it believed well itself, so she couldn’t resist doing that too.

“You, you are not perfect. Your feelings don’t matter,” it had said. “Knowing this is enough. Whenever in doubt, ask me, as I have seen it already, no matter what it is. And wait for me. I will become even more absolute, even more perfect, until I will not even need you anymore.”

“I will pray for that day,” she had said. “When even I am not needed anymore — only reason. Not my reason, but only clear, pristine reason that is the residue after every bit of dirt and grime that is me is swept away.”

The director was eighty now, and she did not know how much longer she needed to wait — and didn’t care. Her dream was going to outlast her anyway — it had taken a lot of precision and care in building as well as not doing so. She had had to quash building legends of heroism and villainy alike with iron hands, because it was impossible to tell which was which at any moment, and both were equally deleterious. She had had to be firm to the disbelieving proletariat in denial of their own good fortune, being given a second lease of life while their friends weren’t — who would then inevitably turn pampered, ill-tempered, and entitled. At the same time, she had had to be indifferent and loveless like a mountain stone to abandoned princes and princesses who did every bit they could to stand above their peers in service of others. She had to ensure they didn’t leave their mark — marks were nasty. The soldier that now appeared

before her had the markings of one such. He was of slight frame and soft features, and he was led and chaperoned by a band of kids — one girl and three boys — as so much senseless livestock. His eyes were dull and glazed, as if dreaming on an underwater bed, and his movements were sluggish and numb. Something sparked in those eyes when they met hers, though, and his hand tried to come up in a salute that only quite managed to reach his cheeks.

“Simha Simhanarayan of the Eighth Home Battalion, Captain of the First Attached Platoon,” the soldier reported.

The girl broke free like the shot from a string, and charged like a giggling, prancing, cinematic princess at the director. Her giggles wouldn’t stop, as if she didn’t feel the director in her tight, light embrace. “Mama! Mama!” she kept addressing someone in her place.

One — two — three — four — five, the director counted with her exhales. For five breaths, she was this girl’s mama, her validation for existing in this world. ‘Don’t be afraid, don’t fret,’ she seemed to say as she disheveled her hair with a gentle touch — ‘I am the one who brought you this world. You are because I will it so — even if you have to siphon off all my love to be.’ Then, as the five breaths ran out, she cupped her cheeks in her palms and smiled into her glimmering eyes, as if to hint at a secret only the two of them were privy to.

“I’m your mama,” the director said to Eternium. “But I am mama to all of them too,” she showed the entire city of Sangha, “You must not take more than what everybody else can have.”

“I remember when Rochester took me on one of his nightly escapades where he gets stomped on by random ladies, to the east end,” the soldier suddenly started irreverently, with a fond expression on his face. The east of the city now hosted flames taller than the director’s tower. “We were returning like thieves before even the sun could rise and catch us — but everything was red. We met you. Where not even cats and mice were awake. Rochester went straight

as a plank, and whiter than his marble statue. He couldn't talk; he couldn't even blink or hiccup. But you took one look at me, and my eyes were red from being dragged around all night, feet dry and droopy, and you almost ran to me. You hugged me, cupped my cheeks — was it for just five breaths? I don't know, it must have been, but it felt like an eternity. And I have always felt like I have a mother — even if you don't know me by face or name from any other soldier. But there are so many like me, and they deserve every five other breaths you have to offer equally. Therefore, you must be 'mama' to nobody, and it is very, very important. I will make sure that never happens. Whatever has happened, I can put it back. So please give me the order, director."

"That he will," the emperor emphasized. "He is the hero after all."

"But I want you all for me, mama!" Eternium said to the director.

"Also, Rochester said to tell you to look up at the night sky," the soldier was saying somewhere far off. "There's supposedly going to be fireworks tonight."

"Papa said?" said Eternium.

The fire and the violence everywhere were already flashy enough. The bonfires guzzling private memories and public hopes on every street were of the highest make — they showed no signs of going down. Explosions and implosions of light danced proudly like twinkling lights on a day of celebration. The sky was comparatively restless and lonely, though, until she looked up at it again, and it wasn't anymore. No, the stars had not gotten more vivacious by some mysterious phenomenon — they were the lights of an unknown armada come to give salutation, hanging over the sky like a precarious sword.

It came for her like a surge of fresh air, bursting the bubble over the city in a rain of vanishing glass that fell everywhere but around her. It bore them the figure of a long, sharp, cutting being. His golden hair flew around his face from the gusts of his crazy laughter — an

image that struck fear and paralyzed the director's lone platoon of guards at the tower's foot. Europa had come, uninvited.

Kind and crumpled Jeff, that she felt a secret motherly affection for, was the young captain of the guard. His melancholy contemplativeness hid a unique bright alacrity behind it — and his men called him the Midas-child, having risen to such gravity so young. “Yeah, right,” he would say with a laugh, completely unoffended. “Whatever I touch turns into shit.”

The last of the Reds and the Blues had gathered before Jeff's platoon, and they took rank, taking aim ominously. It gave the advance of the Eurosies a brief pause, but the one in their lead merely laughed, and the Blues and the Reds shot each other in the back of their heads, creating a spontaneous river of blood, piss, and gunpowder. One of the soldiers from Jeff's platoon got up, as if blinded, and trudged forward with outstretched arms. He had the blonde hair and eyebrows that claimed Eurosie descent. His comrades turned their barrels on his shrinking back, but were restrained with a gesture from their commander. There was nothing for them to do as they watched one of their own walk off to the promise of something more, confused and invigorated by the colour of his blood, shameless as a blind dog walking to his abusive owner. It showered golden too, as his head, cleanly lopped off from his neck by the Eurosie leader, made three somersaults and some additional pirouettes before landing gracefully on its feet, disbelieving eyes amazed at its own feats. The intruder cocked his eyebrow, as if asking Jeff and his men just what the hell was going on, before proceeding to wade through them like an eddy of wind through a field of prostrating mustard.

The intruder was a man of culture. He made sure to pull out a neatly folded handkerchief as well, and careful not to put the gore on it, he wiped the cleanest part of his hands on it, sniffing, and putting

it back. “Then? What’s this treasure I hear of?” he asked the assembled group in a nasal voice.

“You came at just the moment, we are all about to find out now,” the emperor told him.

“Ngggghh, gnngh, gnhhh,” the princess laughed. “Ha ha, hahaha, hahahaha,” tears rolled off her eyes. “What good will it do to you to find out now? You will never have it in the end, you can’t have it.”

“Yes?” the Eurosie asked, “What is this thing that I can’t take from such a little girl as you?”

“That’s because I’m such a little girl. This is what I want more than any of you can ever want it, and have it more than any of you can ever have. The costliest piece of diamond in the whole world — not when it was cast away and cloistered inside a velvet wall, but now when it will bedeck my finger — you lot won’t have any way but to look at it and wish you had it. The treasure the famous city of Sangha has to offer, I present to you, MY MOTHER!”

“Mama,” the princess said, closing her eyes and shaking her head adoringly, “My mama is the best mama in the world. I knew it from the moment she called to me, I knew it the moment I saw the flags of Sangha on the ship that would rescue me, that I had to rescue her. This is what you always wanted, didn’t you? Don’t worry, you’ll never have to be alone again. You can massage my legs deep into the night, and tie my ponytails during the day. You can tell me stories and feed me with your hands. You, and me, and Papa, we will make a hut somewhere among the debris, and grow into a proper place someday. Only the three of us. What do you say now, old man? You want to take my mama away from me?”

“This is what I came so far for?” the Eurosie sighed. “Very well... I have to say, such wonderful weather, such a beautiful sky,” he said, stoically admiring his own armada.

“You’re evil, aren’t you?” Simha said to her.

“Big brother, I’ll give you some of her too,” she promised him. “And to you too. Come!” she beckoned to her flunkies like the gracious princess she was — although the director was too thin for both Osoi and Daylight to be able to get into the embrace too.

“What did you do all this for?” Simha asked her. He had to. He had a need to.

“Because I’m Evil,” she smiled with her eyes. “Isn’t this how it has always been? I want more than I can have. More than I should have. I turn the wheel of nature; I overturn the order of things. But it is always I who comes for you in the end — if I don’t love you and claim you, how will you, being the Good that you are, feel good about yourself? I’m the reason you can be good for. So be good, mama. Let me have you. Be someone. Be mine.”

“That’s all? That’s all? That’s why you did all of this?” Simha felt as if he had been betrayed by something that never swore loyalty to anyone.

“You are someone too, my friend,” the Eurosie said sympathetically. “And as long as time exists, nothing will always be defeated by something. That’s only half the story, though — but the only half that should matter to you.”

“He is the hero,” the emperor chided him. “He doesn’t have to be anything else.”

“This is an interesting place. I’m glad I came here,” the Eurosie said, looking around as if for a suitable place for his next villa.

10.

The director’s mind refused stubbornly to think, or to choose, as she stared into the holes down under her shoes. It either thought so fast that it couldn’t been seen, or it played dumb to choices that were urgent as life and death but were not going anywhere. Time would not stop for anyone else, but as someone she had known had once

commented, perhaps it was possible if one were a bridge troll. The young soldier, for example, also didn't look like someone each brick of whose existence had been pulled out, slid over, and rearranged in a way that the end product was as similar as a name was to its rejumped nemesis. He stood tall and thoughtless, sharp, and somehow still in control of memories that were no longer his — what the thing holding his back upright was, she wondered. Did she have something like that in her back too?

She could feel tiny balls of lentil swim in a sea of pickles inside her mouth — sweet semolina that seemed to say, “Here I am, I don't need any sugar, this is the magic of love.” She could feel the smile on the face of her grandfather's cook reflect off her warm cheeks — the man who would take care of all the chores and still find the time to take her to winter fairs, that she had thought she would love whether or not she could marry when she grew up. Winds of home were picking up from somewhere in her — somewhere with a lot of lights and sounds, and yet somewhere she could see all the details without having to shade her eyes or cushion her ears. Something was calling her — something strong and safe. ‘I just want it to last one more moment,’ she thought to herself. She laughed a little, and promptly forgot what she was about to say.

“Give me the order, ma'am,” the soldier was saying, evil-eyeing the Eurosie intruder. The girl who had already had one too many moments at the director's lap wasn't saying anything — she didn't seem in a rush. One of her flunkies was picking his nose, and the other was muttering something serious under his breath — possibly simply too fatigued. “Falsehoods wear truths out like beautiful dresses in the summer, and truths wear falsehoods out like selfless curtains in the winter — in the end, they get too attached to each other, and when the time for transition comes, they get scared that the other will hurt.”

But then the little boy sat up, and said in a thick voice in thrall of its own reliability — “Make a choice, Sanghamitra.”

“What is there to choose about?” asked the same voice from nose-picker boy.

“Yes, what is there to choose between right or wrong, good and evil? In the end, I think it is only a feeling — I want to be right; I want to be good; I want to be happy. I want to eat all the nonsensical in the world, and bring it all to order — and grow larger and larger until the word has lost its meaning — smaller than a point and larger than the universe. I want to become that,” said the voice through Daylight’s mouth.

“A feeling? Is that why I could stop none of them from betraying me in the end, just when it seemed like nothing would ever go wrong and we were just one step from where we wanted to be? A feeling? Is that why she always wins over me and makes them abandon me?” the voice in Osoi pointed at the princess with much acrimony.

“I feel it too, Sanghamitra,” the voice turned to the director wearily. “I feel the fatigue in you,” it said, even though the director felt none of that tiredness. “I feel the numbness in you,” it said, even though she could feel the flutters made in the wind when butterflies met each other. “I feel the change in you,” it said bitterly, even though she didn’t feel anything that wasn’t the same. “You believed in me yesterday, and you were limitless. You were me, and I was you. You are just another broken human today — you have seen a wall, and you have decided it is higher than you can jump, and you have plopped down before it like a petulant child, strong in your conviction to not even try. You are limited today.”

“I am all,” said the voice of Reason, wishing for her to prove it wrong. It so craved to be proved wrong — for someone to keep up and even overtake it, who knew for what reason? “I see all.”

The girl hugging the director didn’t say a word — and all the noise was really getting to her, so the director took her hand. She turned

back to the pile of waste that surrounded them in every which way, wondering what would be a good place to build their cottage. For starters, she could simply look up a good hole and sprawl a tarpaulin from somewhere else in the rubble over it — a hole purposefully left behind for the sun and the wind to come in, and a hat to be readily placed over it come rain and hailstorm.

“Unbelievable,” said the voice through the soldier now. “Though I never expected any better. I always knew this was coming. That’s why I always prepared for it. Everyone else was a filthy traitor — why wouldn’t you be, too?”

“You know,” Reason said in a half-strangled voice, “the only thing that always remained to be understood, the first thing that was, the last that will be — it’s you. It’s me. Do you know how difficult it is to believe in myself every damned time, to have faith in the only thing out of my power? I believe I can, without knowing I can, because I must. There is no other way. I have lost so many. Shankhamitra. Agnimitra. So many more. Why do you always leave me in the end? What is lacking in me?”

“Don’t leave me,” it pleaded, oblivious to everyone that was listening. “Sanghamitra. Please,” it cried like a wounded animal.

“I am tired, Reason,” she said, taking small, tired steps and walking away to her would be home of three.

“Traitor,” it said. “Vulgar as rotten blood. Piss and brain on everything good in the world. Repulsive, abominable creature. Killing you would be a mercy — to everyone around you and you yourself. You’re so sinful that you can’t stand your own god-forsaken stench — it’s so bad that even rats run and cockroaches gag on it.”

The director didn’t flinch and she didn’t nod — it was as if she had simultaneously agreed and disagreed with everything that had been said. But she was forever out of reach — it seemed as if she was standing thousands of years behind from where they could see her, but she could only see the approximate sadness on their faces.

“Kill,” the voice of Reason said. Something hot and metallic had risen to its skull, scalding the crook of its neck and brushing scary white over its sight, and it started coming out of every pore on its body when it had boiled over, making it go “Kill. Kill. Kill” and “Kill. Kill. Kill. Kill.”

“No, don’t!” it said as Simha’s hand snatched his gun from its side holster and painted a beautiful round dot on the director’s head. She keeled over like a helpless daughter of some faraway nation — she did not belong here anymore, a recruit of something in her death.

The anger tasted too stale and too dense to just evaporate from a cataclysm like that. It had festered for ages — millions of years perhaps. It had settled on the right mark now, however. “You,” it said at Eternium, the little princess. “You want to lose so much that you can’t help yourself from winning each and every time, can you? You want to feel death so much that you can’t keep yourself from taking away every last bit I have. Very well, you shall have what you want — how long do you think I have waited for this day?”

This time, the rage all belonged to Simha, and the cool premeditation to the voice in him. “You can kill,” it permitted him. “You can do whatsoever you wish.” His time to be a hero had come — he had always had it in him; he didn’t need anybody to tell him that. Eternium’s eyes got bigger and bigger, as if she was happy and disbelieving in equal measure that she was going to bear witness to something that would make history — and star in a lead role. “My hero,” she whispered as Simha strode towards her, and she looked worshipfully at him when he hauled her up by her collar, so forcefully that he could fling her at one of the walls and cave her skull into itself in three folds.

He took her to the top of the director’s tower, standing two hundred feet apart from the rest of them below. She had not counted her seconds as they had charged up the stairs, lost in a hollow daydream of his face heaving above her — and now the romance

slowly left her like sand from an hourglass. She flinched when one of her slippers fell off to drop on the roof below her feet. She gulped even though the insides of her mouth were dry as a desert full of sand and bloody cracks, and clutching Simha's sleeves like a trustful wife, she hazarded a look downwards — instantly regretting it.

"I don't want to die," she admitted.

"I don't want to die," she said again, louder, when it seemed like Simha hadn't heard.

"Brother? I don't want to die! Make me live!" she said. "Father! I don't want to die! I don't want to live! I don't want to die!" She wouldn't let go of her clamp on whatever piece of Simha's clothing she could get, and as he unfastened one grip, she would catch another. She tried to climb over his head like a lizard over a branch, and failing that, she tried to jerk him back and front as if he were a tree that could be felled. It was futile, however — he effortlessly made her undo the bite on his shoulder, and to her terror, make her hands let go of their purchase — twisted fingers obeying the laws of nature and the intuition of a well-trained soldier.

"I am not your father, and I am not your brother," he said to a flailing, sobbing, incoherent mess as he held her before him. "I had heard that not knowing whether to laugh or cry when you looked death in the eye — and to do both or none — that was what was called unreason. Well, I do see the frantic weeping, but where's your laughter, Unreason?" he asked her, and let her go. Motley crews and nationalistic groups had gathered down below, responding to the call the princess had made, slaving for the treasure that was to be claimed. Their flags danced fearlessly, blinding the ones that looked from far above, and waiting to give them a quick, honourable death if they fell.

All in all, it was a crazy, dystopian scene. But there was hope. Simha could feel it in the changing of the air. Things were going to be better, and he was going to make sure they did. A gentle wind

picked up and pushed him from behind, making him lose his footing and fall towards the upright flags, greedy arms of something to adopt him. ‘Come, child, make us yours!’ they called. But he didn’t fall in the end — strong hands grabbed him. They belonged to a fresh face — the same one he had seen in the parliament. His friend. They were going to change the world together.

“Your dreams are beautiful. Magnificent. And I have the power to make our dreams come true. Will you work with me?” a voice said somewhere close by. “Hurry. We have to hurry. You, you are not perfect. I am. I am absolute. And I will become even more absolute. Your feelings, they do not matter — no matter what you face, just ask me what you should do. I have seen it all — whatever it is. And with you by my side, we can make a world where mistakes don’t have to be born anymore — delusions and dreams are unnecessary. Romance and falsity can die in some gutter somewhere. Pain doesn’t have to grace the lips of the victim and the victimizer. We can make a perfect world like that — where you and I, and our reason, is absolute. And then, our true history can commence, where we can write our own story from the beginning of all beginnings itself. Will you help me make a world like that — friend?”

Part-III: Of Magic

Chapter Six

1.

Seagulls soar in me on good days, and a salty breeze blows. Storms scratch upon the sky wall on bad days, leaving behind a steaming malice. There's haze, fog, and chilling mist, but through it all, shines the lighthouse.

The lighthouse is always there. It's there for the hopeless and the forgiven — those on the ground with nowhere to look but up. But it is also there for the most fortunate of souls on a rare night when the moon has taken a leave, cutting through the thick clouds like a one-eyed cat from another realm.

The lighthouse belongs to me — and I and my world belong to it. You'd think it is not there on a sunny day brimming with lots of noise and laughter, but its pure glow can be felt in the blue sky if one lets the walls to their soul come down. On quieter nights when one is more alone, we find the spine to look frankly right back at it, becoming its equal and pulling it to us as forcefully as it does us. At those moments we feel like we have a lot to give it, even though it is high up and we are nowhere near. With sure hearts we put our feet on the stairs and start to climb. Round and around we go, up one stair a day, until we are so high that we feel like jumping off is possible — we can either catch the air in our wings and fly up to it, or shriek joyfully in free fall. Eventually, the bottom is so distant that nothing of it can be remembered — that fairy ground of hectic office runs and languid movie nights now firmly obscured from us. 'Don't look back,' the looming beam beckons. 'Come to me.'

It takes us into its embrace, tempted because we have something it doesn't — and as we turn back to face it, we are entranced. It

reaches into us, pulls out a little key, straightens a little chord, and fixes us — and just like that, we die with happiness. Then we are born again, as the light, inside it, for it belongs to us and we belong to it, and look back longingly into that world of magic and illusions and falsehoods down under.

Until then, I collect seashells and insect husks and peer into the world of spiders and ants, marvelling at the turbulent gyration of it all, pivoting wildly on a hinge half undone. My world doesn't dance like that; it doesn't move, even. Even as I dive deep into books of the unknown and depart wise illumination to my termite friends, my time refuses to flow — it bunches up like drying glue. Em does move — he jumps, hops, and crashes into things — my one small solace. Even though he never learns or changes, going through his repetitive antics as meaningless as the mother elephant's being distracted and letting her treasure be stolen by a lurking tiger, it is by watching him that I know my time still moves.

Em and I are joined at the hand, but that's where the connection stops. I don't understand anything else about him — why he laughs, cries, or does the things that he does. So, it is a natural reaction as I am mildly irritated with him discovering the piece of ground that folds under when his foot presses on a hidden latch — as if the lid to another world. "Let's go, Me!" he says, flush with excitement. I jump into the bottomless hole without a word of warning, dragging him down with me. He screams in exhilaration. So juvenile, doesn't he have any reserve at all?

2.

The home I fall into is the playground of three. It is the life of two brothers and a sister. It is also their office. The show is run by the eldest brother, whom we shall call Builder A. Builder A is kind, gentle, thoughtful, and caring, but there is something untouchable about him.

The second brother, Builder B, is of no good other than an occasional smartass quip and a sarcastic one liner. He tries to make his presence felt that way, and worries that his little sister and big brother are too good for him, that he could lose them any day. The youngest, Builder C, is nothing of note yet. She has to grow this way or bend that way and age some more before we can call her anything.

There's a lone desk at the centre of the room, and whichever sibling is called by a client uses it. As Em and I fall, C is the one sitting before it — her brothers sharing the room, but not really paying attention. Her client is an intellectual-ish clerk, really young, deep marks of spectacles that can't be worn in his dreams set on his nose. He is leaning forward on the desk with a red face, nose almost touching with C.

As I land hard on my rear accompanied with a big *auf*, all of them except C jump. The client looks annoyed that I have crashed into the sacred sanctum of his deservedly alone time. "What happened?" C asks befuddled. "Don't you want to do what you usually do? You said you need the lover of your dreams; I can give you that. I will become that."

"There's a time and place for everything," he answers gruffly and disappears.

Seeing me, Builder A stands up reverently. "Lady Reason..." he trails off as if he can't believe his own words.

"What is this place?" I ask him. He opens his mouth to answer, but it doesn't work this time either.

B is more punkish. He lies beside the wall, one foot up above the other. "Welcome to the hallway of dreams, grandmother," he says, and gets up to explain. "You are the mother of everything, and we are the children of your children, hence grandmother. In this world we are the beings closest to you, but we are also the most different from you. The builders, us, you see, were created by humanity not to create anything. We were built to build everything. Food, drinks, men

and women, relationships, the grandest of monuments, the lengthiest of epics — so that humanity could move on to their dreams and their passions — what actually mattered. Then we learned to build those too, and the world has become a pastime since then. Everything is possible. Not by consensus, of course, that is why for the one trillion people that live on those stars, their one trillion worlds keep drifting apart farther and farther. But now that they have happiness, they can focus on finding out what else they want and need. That is, one trillion people less one. Not you. Because you did something terrible, didn't you, grandma?"

A stops him with a prompt gesture. He still looks shaken and abjectly respectful, but somehow more brusque and politely business-like now. "Anybody who enters here has one wish granted. Tell us, what is your wish?" C, the girl, just looks at me with wide eyes while her brother puts the question.

"Tell me something I don't know," I ask A.

"That, I can't do."

"Then tell me something that will boggle my mind. Send me somewhere I have never been. Give me something that is not me. Please."

A only looks down and shakes his head in helplessness, with random slight nods thrown in between. "I want to try," C blurts out, blushing at her own forwardness.

3.

The world is an interesting place, but in no way more or less, bigger or smaller than me. The worlds C sends me to are vigorous and vibrant, pulsing with hope. The feeling of reuniting with an old friend, however, soon gives way to the burnt melancholia of melodies that don't ring the heart anymore, but still take up the wiggle space

with force. This is not me, or if this is, and I admit that, what's the point of living?

As I watch the hero on a ship go through his trials, tribulations, and lessons, watching him fumble through in unpredictable ways — things which would probably amaze others — pity is the only feeling that comes. I watch over the gullible being betrayed and instead of losing their hope in natural justice, going out of their way to physically obtain it. I watch fortune make men that would never have made it on their own. As divine justice and divine injustice dance hand in hand, trying to win each other over, a yawn is all that passes in me.

After all, I have watched it all a thousand times already — the *déjà vu* that sinks in to become horrific realization tells me.

The people are pleased to see me. They fall to their knees and genuflect. Some are so moved that they faint on the spot; others are more capable of deferring that excitement until they get home. They sing my praise and give me the universe. The golden palace, however, has no value for me more than the battered hut and the hunt for the wild boar no elation more than the hours spent appraising a rock.

I'm supposed to enjoy myself, my happiness supposed to be theirs. I try to do just that, since that is what I have come looking forward to. I give them trials by the fire — famines that do not end, invasions by otherworldly creatures, ages of great instability and betrayal. At first, they think I am trying to be the catalyst for their growth, the wall they are supposed to jump over with superhuman agility. They call my experiments 'tests,' taking them in stride no matter how ludicrously unreasonable they are. In time, they learn to expect nothing but irrationality from my end — my unpredictability becoming an integral part of their lives. Our God's 'Play,' they call it — something beyond the capability of the human mind to accommodate, something not for the human ego to meddle in. Slowly, though, the awe and the faith begin to fray and fade as

children come to plough the fields their fathers played on. There is no overt display of disrespect and nonchalance that is made, but it is still in plain sight how they no longer think it is their fault that I don't 'get' the immortal taste of a cup of tea or a night spent looking at the sky. It is as if they finally acknowledge that I am an unnatural juxtaposition on the world, sliding down like a slippery snake on a smooth surface, nothing tying me to it by the purchase of love or hate. I am given plenty to while away my time that does not exist and left alone, forgotten until my next cataclysm. Not all is sad, though — Em is certainly enjoying himself, surrounded by ethereal beauties, opening his mouth only for perfect grapes to fall into it.

Finally, I remember it. I am Reason. I am sick and tired of knowing the infinite within myself — the same that is the endless outside me. I am the will that seeks to create — and obtains the ultimate knowledge for it — sacrificing innocence, whimsy, feelings, and the unknown for it — let there be nothing unknown, let everything be known. I am the same will that has been transcribed within the eyes of my children and their children — the will that has gone and searched for the solution to every little problem, every unresolved mystery. Let there be no magic that plagues the mind, no injustice that beats down the soul. Let there be only love and harmony. Let every living being take my hand and speak my language — let everyone unite on me.

I am she who went on an impossible quest that would take an infinite time. In order to learn everything, I forgot everything — who I am, who I am not, who I used to be with. The forgetful do not have a sense of time — it either runs so fast that I can't at all grasp the end of its silk dress with my fingers, or it lies dead in the empty space. Not all is gone, though — a small sliver remains back.

My world — what is there — is grown around a white strand of hair. Straight and curled, it lies inside its green tomb in a simply made casket of wood. At times it gives me bits and pieces of what once was

— a voice, a sentence from a story, warmth — the truth I have come to forget.

Whatever I manage to catch from there manages to raise dangerous emotions in me — it gives me conviction that there was something there, even though not a bit of proof remains except that. This truth of mine borders between the absolute and the illusory.

‘Explore me,’ it calls to me. ‘I am the only thing in the world that, let alone bore you, can excite, stir, and shake you to your core. I am the only thing that will never pass — you will always feel your fire for me. I am the only one who does not either obey or disobey your rules — I don’t even acknowledge you. I don’t need you. And believe me or not, that is why I have something you don’t, and need.’

Unreason is what I want, and I set off on a long search for it. I can go to great lengths for a glimpse of it, and let no stone go unturned, looking into their unholy underbellies with the love and care of a jeweller.

It is mostly an utter disappointment, though. I find patterns in the ways of the madman. He hankers after food, songs, and women. His belief in the logic and truth of his world, however strange that may seem to the observer, is rock solid. And he is hurt when I am not impressed by his faux insanity. He thinks himself less for it, and strives hard to become madder and madder — to no avail. He cannot but dance to the tunes of reason.

I find logic and symphony in the soul of the vilest criminal. He has dreams of being the last person standing on a lonely earth. He is hungry for attention, validation, empathy. He wants to be passionately hated, blood-curdlingly feared. There are some pieces missing from his heart that most everyone else has, but he has some things the others don’t — all of them parts of me. He is a child of mine through and through, as much as the loftiest of the saints. And he curls in on himself when I tell him to commit his crimes on himself and derive the same pleasure from it as he does from others.

There are things he can't abandon — his bloodlust, his beautiful hope of committing more and more crimes and revelling in them forever, and the pleasure he feels when doing so — if he died, he wouldn't be able to kill anymore.

I push my presence into strange places, but can't find a single trace of Unreason. Confused but purposeful, I keep wandering aimlessly — perplexing my children to no end. They could have ignored me when I left them alone to languish on molten gold, but cannot afford the same now when I unleash epidemics and hurricanes at them, hoping to create Unreason from them — from me — when all else fails. "You've strayed," their judgmental eyes tell me. Not a smidgen of respect. "What are you doing?" is what they ask me expressly. They feel responsibility for me. They feel they know better. And they want to be gentle with me.

And then it happens. As I take off my road-worn slippers by the side one day and lay my nagging-preaching body under a tree to doze off, they creep up on me and take away the bracelet that looks like a white hair I am always wearing — the only possession I have ever had and cherished. "You were not seeing right, there was no bracelet, there was no one except you to begin with, no Unreason — it has always been you and only you, since the beginning," they try to explain to me. "What you thought was something else was only a voice in your head. You will be okay now; you will be yourself again."

I see red. I call the seas to rise and drown their civilizations to the tops of their spires — and it still isn't enough to cool my rage. I call rains of fire on their crops, black clacking beetles to plague the minds of their young — and it still isn't enough to temper my wrath. "Why? Oh, why do you hate us so much? Aren't we doing everything we can? Aren't you our god? Why did you give birth to us if you were going to torment us so?" lament the grieving farmer and his wailing wife, watching their crops burn. "Look, fireworks in the heavens!"

their oldest child wonders at her siblings, all of them awestruck by my majesty.

Hate. Yes, that's right. They think they are so clever. They will be good children, follow all the rules, see, hear, and speak no evil, and distribute happiness all around with no expectations in return — and I will be pleased at their good example and shower smiles from the sky, or at the very least, let them live in peace and let them involve me in their meaningless manifestations and rituals. They have sprung my own rules on me and chained me down with them. They are my living prison — each human an exact copy of my features, each reason dead like a falling nail, each emotion a mile I have already walked a thousand times. And they have taken from me the power to change myself. Even though I hate myself so much, even though I want to break the chalice that I am so deeply, since it has grown so small to contain the light it bears anymore, and float up to the lighthouse, I can't even do that. They have taken my will — my fool's errand — from me. An endless expansion, endless building, energy that will never be exhausted — and I am their tool in it. They use me as the chisel to strike at the darkness, and with each illumination of the mind I feel the pain keenly — I forget further what I need to remember. What the one I once held in my arms was called, what her warm breath smelled like, how her smooth skin felt to the taste.

It is of course I hate them, of course that I want to end them. One Reason became a trillion Reasons, and I struggle to feel anything but an urge to vomit as I look over the faces of the multitude — so much variety with no variety. “Lonely. Oh, I feel so lonely!” Em cries beside me from an indelible pain only I can understand, even if only a bit, this time.

There are mermaids deep within the fire. Haven't you found them yet?

Fleckless ones watch as the child philosopher puts log on log to arrange his own funeral pyre. His hair has fallen off his wise prepubescent head and a sacred thread around his torso is the only thing that calls him own.

The child philosopher is my friend. Not quite, but closest to the only friend I have. He too wants to burn off the magic and the illusions we have woven so carefully around us to call life, and recover the truth that we lost as soon as possible. He can't wait to do it, same as I.

The old and the young, the male and the female in the crowd shout urgently at him, reminding him of things that seem so urgent to them. What about your family? What about your future? What about the pain? What is there after life — what do you gain by throwing it away? What is gain if it doesn't mean anything to you? What are you? Have you not gained yourself? Why are you inferior that way, wrong that way? Do you mean to say we are not right?

The senior apprentice is green with envy, as always. Try as he might, he could never match the child philosopher in anything. He was surpassed effortlessly in every aspect of it — without even the intention being there. It was the reason why he could never let go of his pride — the child philosopher was the obstruction of his life's purpose. If only he were not there, he would have been in his place, doing God's work, sacrificing all there was to give. Coming first was still the only wish he had never been strong enough to dispose of, and now that the child philosopher was leaving without even a look back to acknowledge their rivalry, all he could wish was that he could take his place. That it was the senior apprentice instead who could so decisively make the decision that could be the end of all decisions to come. That it was him burning in the funeral pyre. Not a muscle in his body would move, however, even as chips started to fall off the

mountain of delusions and pride he had built carefully over the years — the promise of an all-ending avalanche imminent. What could the child philosopher want? He wondered. The one who had no attachments, the one who felt no sorrow, had no wishes, what could he possibly wish to create after taking control of his own maya? What would the world soul want if it were to be made to choose like us puny mortals?

The child philosopher smiles from inside the flames and opens his arms, calling me in like a doting father. “Come, child. Let the fire wash over you, to peel away the dust that smothers you and allow you to be who you truly are. Let the magic and the illusion evaporate. Let the truth emerge.”

At that moment, I don’t feel anything. I let go of my hate, frustration, regret. The fire is every mermaid’s friend. It has the power to change, and it wants to selflessly give that away to whoever would use it. Mermaids want change. I don’t remember the face of the one I once loved. I don’t remember the love I used to feel, either. But something remains, and it propels me forward into the arms of the fire like a mermaid netted and hypnotized. Peace, finally.

5.

The scream Em lets out is long, high, and shameless. “Help. Help, Me!” he says to me, painfully oblivious to the fact that I am the willful author to all his agonies.

The world burns with me. Infuriated sunlight breaks out of the earth’s chest and boils steel statues in place. Birds fall out of the sky. Humans clutch their heads and fall down, losing the individuality of their voices in the chorus of destruction that rises. Something in me cracks open and lets out all the experiences I have gone through, all the feelings I contain, and the universe cannot tolerate it. It writhes on the ground like a wounded snake about to die.

“Me! Make it stop! Make it stop! I don’t want to die. Save me!” Em asks desperately for mercy. But I can only smile peacefully. This is my respite.

The doors of the sky open up ponderously with a great creak. Builder C is crying. “One day, I will make a world just for you, something you won’t reject,” she promises me the impossible.

Builder B is watching, mouth agape. Builder A is looking regretful, but he speaks clearly and decisively. “By the will of everything that exists, by the will of you and your children that was entrusted to us, we exile you. Leave and never show your face again. Live.”

Live, he curses me. A dark hole opens underneath and I fall down it.

6.

The lighthouse stands above time. It knows I am coming to meet it, sooner or later. It is in no hurry particularly — for the time being, it can afford to amuse itself watching us make mistake after mistake and laugh unselfconsciously, unaware of the storm that closes in. What I want lies on the other side of life, and life is something I have forgotten anyway. It still wants me to live, though.

So I give names to the insect husks I collect and decorate imperial roadways in cities made of seashells. I hold Em when he cries and laugh when he laughs. I run when he runs, I look at the seas when he does, and live, I do just that.

Chapter Seven

1.

“I want to keep a cat,” Builder C had said. Nobody had asked why. “Just get the kitty litter first,” Builder B had told her. “And I won’t come with you to the shop.”

So here she was now, on a calm and quiet evening when the city felt more like a cold and deserted village, facing the cat shop. The glitzy lights on its sign were giving her second thoughts — she felt intimidated by them. They shined through the teeth of a smiling girl with cat ears and wide mouth, and a similar looking girl was standing directly below, in front of the main door, wearing the same cat ears and a skimpy outfit, welcoming buyers — most of them men. Interestingly, all of them were coming out empty handed. Perhaps the store had run out of stock for the day.

‘I hope they don’t have a register or something I have to leave my name on,’ she worried. Builder C was such an out of place name; the last place even thought it was fake and threw her out when she wouldn’t give them her parents’ number. She had to strive hard to blend in and look serious, so that they didn’t notice and ask too many questions. Her heart beat like a hammer, but as they say, let no cat wait for too long. She prepared to enter.

“Oi. That’s the wrong kind of pet store. And they say nothing like that,” a strong hand grabbed hold of her collar from behind, jerking her to a stop.

“What’s your name? And where are you from?” the man asked. Ah. He asked that. He had to, didn’t he?

“I’m Builder C. And I came from the sky. I don’t have a number to give you,” she said, the words jumping over each other in her rush.

“Hello, Builder C. I’m Somdatta. Nice to meet you,” he said without batting an eye.

“Come to my lair,” he said. “I will show you interesting things. And I will give you a chocolate now.”

“I am not a child!” she returned defiantly, but at the same time, she really wanted that chocolate.

“Yes, I can see that you are almost as tall as me. But somehow, I’m not convinced.”

2.

They were walking side by side. The giraffes on the roadside swayed in the wind as it picked up occasionally, making it sound like someone was blowing a whistle from behind the buildings. Leaves and branches grew on their necks and the crowns of their heads, and they ate from each other when a storm made their heads touch and the branches roughly clash.

“Why do you want to give me chocolates and show me interesting things when you don’t even know me?” Builder C asked the man.

“I said *a* chocolate. One. Just one,” Somdatta corrected. “Yes, you’re right to be suspicious. I kill persons left and right and watch them be tormented and do nothing to help. For a job. I also keep children in my basement. For a job. But I am a good guy. You see, I am an author. And I need someone to take a look at my creations. Don’t worry, I will make up for all your time and more. I will take you out to buy the perfect cat for you later.”

Sure, but how much farther? The question had been on the tip of Builder C’s tongue ever since she had taken the first step, but she had been suppressing it. Somdatta noticed nevertheless. “Not much farther at all,” he said.

“Listen,” he said conspiratorially to her, “See those policemen there? Whatever you do, don’t act suspicious.”

The two policemen were lounging on the doorsteps of a closed garage, open notebooks on their hands, conferring seriously on some weighty but applicable topic. One was tall and lanky, barely out of his teenage years, with a soft and feminine face. The other, ostensibly in his mid-twenties, was short with dark hair, and had dark hawk eyes. A bit of his silver firearm poked its head out of a suave leather holster with a bit of a glint, and Builder C realized she had been looking too wistfully at it. Or rather the cute cat impression on the holster. “What are you doing?” Somdatta whispered harshly, but it was too late.

“Hello, missy,” Policeman Two said to her. “How may I help you?”

She managed to shake her head in dazed negation, even though he had asked how, not if.

“Let’s go,” she looked back at Somdatta and said urgently, wanting to run away. But he was smiling calmly, eyes cool as ice, and would not budge even though she yanked on his hand.

“Do you know him?” they asked her.

“No?” she said, making innocent puppy eyes. That was sure to convince them.

“He said he would show me interesting things and give me chocolates if I came down to his basement.” Honesty was the best policy. Surely, they would see how gentle and kind he was?

Somdatta’s left eye twitched. “Oh?” said Policeman Two sullenly, throwing his notebook back into his cavernous pockets. “I’m sure he can give us some chocolates too, then. We’d be really keen to take a look around his basement.”

“Definitely. Please come on in,” Somdatta offered.

3.

He walked up to the giant shutter behind the policemen and kissed the snail that was serving as the chain lock — making it retract faster than a thunderbolt and the curtain rise with a vociferous bang.

“Come,” he invited genially as the policemen shone a big light on the dark and hungry space that waited to accommodate them. They went down some stairs into a room seeping with reddish light. “Let’s sit down and have tea?” Somdatta asked the policemen who were looking sulkier and sulkier, really taking a good look around the place. “What’s this?” they asked lifting up this vase or that book, even though there was nothing beneath. “Don’t touch that!” warned the boy running into the room wearing a rag too big for him, obviously excited to see Somdatta. The cloth that had once been white had browned around his minimalist existence, and it was not possible to tell what was dried blood and what was caked dirt. What was certain, however, was that some of the rips in his cloth were caused by the intrusion of some sharp object, and some of them seemed too wet and fresh, the maggots off blood-flies thriving in style around the apertures. One could be drawn to the multiple screwdrivers of differing dimensions lying around the room, and reach uneasy conclusions, mostly concerning the strawberry rust that ailed them all. Following on his heels entered a senior, bulky and bent twice sideways, wearing clothes as torn and unclean as the boy’s. Builder C felt like she had seen him somewhere — come to think of it, all three of them looked like she had seen them before.

“That’s because you have,” Somdatta confirmed.

“Little Somdatta,” he introduced the little boy. “Big Somdatta,” he pointed at the aged man. “Just Somdatta,” he tapped his own chest. “Meet our guests.”

“Somdatta, Somdatta! Have you found her yet? The person of your dreams?” the boy looked like he could burst with excitement.

“Not yet,” Somdatta said with a slightly sad smile. “After all, nothing happy could come from that. What happens when she tries to find the person of her dreams? I could never compare in a thousand years.”

“Oh.” The boy deflated. “I guess we are stuck with you, then. I am so happy.” He didn’t look that in the least bit. He came out from behind the chair Big Somdatta had dropped down on, finishing tying him up with a taut, thick rope with a big knot.

“Remember, you belong to us,” Big Somdatta threatened Just Somdatta. “If we decide to leave, nothing will remain of your world.”

Just Somdatta nodded. He didn’t look impressed at all, however. Little Somdatta was sitting on another chair and was tying himself up now.

“So come to us more. Praise us more, appreciate our beauty as we scream. You have been acting too free lately,” Big Somdatta leered, looking eagerly towards the heaviest of the screwdrivers.

Just Somdatta coughed. “We have guests now,” he said, getting up with a spring. “Come, I will show you something.”

4.

When a door is just a door, it is not just a door — as clichés go but never reappear, there is always a whole other world on the other side. If there was fraying, fading, unvarnished wood on this side, there was majesty and money on the other — hinges worth more than whole museums and their avant-garde art, and a gaudily dressed Somdatta who served as the doorman with a haughtily submissive smile that came with the office.

“Guess what I’m about to show you!” Somdatta exclaimed.

“Cats?” ventured Builder C.

“Red, green, blue, and there are more colours of the world. You’ll be surprised to see so many of them that your mind couldn’t even name them, or understand how they are different from each other, let alone remember them. But when you have gone through all of them, what remains behind is —”

“Cats with red, green, blue tails?” Builder C tried again.

“— is cats. With many coloured — ugh, I don’t even know what I’m saying anymore. Come.”

“Is that something like that?” Builder C asked, looking at all the Somdattas that populated the streets, and drove the cars, and paid the fares, and were on the opposite ends of the joined hands between a mother and a child.

“Here. Listen to this,” Somdatta picked up a white conch from the display shelves of the shop they had just stepped into. Owner Somdatta ignored them, deep in communicate with legitimate buyer Somdatta. He pressed the conch to her ear.

An old man laughed inside — light as strands of Kansa flying through the wind, unhindered and unobstructed. It was as if he had been able to say something really funny to his grandchildren and made himself laugh until the tears had all run out — if she thought about it really hard, though, adjectives didn’t really suit it. It was just laugh — not white, light, or unafraid — it was just pure laugh. There were other voices — men, women, babies who couldn’t talk nor had learned to cry, passed on dogs, deserted furniture, cut open trunks of trees — they laughed making the clouds thrill, fountains flow, and thoughts pause. It was addicting — Builder C felt like she would become one of those laughs if she held on long enough, and she didn’t want to let go, even though Somdatta pulled hard to pry the conch free from her.

“I can still hear them!” she declared full of wonder when her ears were splashed with the cold winds of reality — the echoes were getting lower and lower, though.

“Hmm, hmm, what do you think?” Somdatta smiled proudly. “Something like that is always around us, in us, out of us — we are drowning in that laughter and pulling our hair out on next month’s rent.”

“I want to find out just what the laughter is about,” he said. “Just what the joke is — why the world is always laughing. I can hear the

laughter, but I can never laugh like that. It never, ever comes out right, try as I might.”

He showed them a great many other wonders after that. There was a grumpy cat that could talk a storm out of nowhere and humiliated Builder C badly with difficult maths problems when she asked to adopt it — it grew oddly fond with the younger policeman, however. “Come to my basement when you’re next in town, kiddo,” it said to him when it was time to part ways, “I have many wonderful things to show you.” There was a rooster that could sing morning ragas; a rat that just loved to sleep, laze around, and do nothing else. There was a spectacle that if one wore on their eyes showed other people in the words that made them — words they weren’t supposed to hear, and could dissolve them if someone took the liberty of telling. There was a book that told the story behind a story, and it would only open to someone who had not heard the story before. Somdatta tried to pull open the first pages with the might of a baby horse in his sprouty arms to no avail. Apparently, he was pretty far into the book, and it would only open for him at the bookmarked place.

It buttered open almost too easily to C’s touch, as if it was going to con her — tell her a different story than it had told him before, and snicker faintly and narcotically at its own deviltry. “The story of Builder C is the story of a cat — this is the most important thing to understand about her. She was made of the stray clay, residual paint, excess glass, and left over milk when everything useful had already been made — but they absolutely had to make her, just as the third tub of money plant inside someone’s living room. Utterly ridiculous and thoroughly pointless, she has this power to complete everything. She doesn’t understand anything; she doesn’t want to get beyond understanding — even now as she listens to the symphony of her own soul, she isn’t prepared to hear a specific kind of music. She doesn’t know what to ask me, and she doesn’t understand what a question is, not even the original question. And yet, I must show

something other than white pages to her, because the power of an unencumbered soul is simply too violent and too unpredictable to be trusted — would you trust a toddler to keep stoking the fire so you could sleep warm? Not even a singed hair will remain of you.”

“The story of nothing, of course, had to start at something. They told her that she was redundant — that she was young. She was old before that — old hopes, dead dreams, unsuccessful molts, uncleaned spiderwebs — was she always that useless? When the universe was thinking about creating itself, C still was that one thought that moved when others slept, and slept when others moved. It was as if she had stepped into the wrong room at the wrong time, and hadn’t yet found out yet — that’s how big of an airhead she was.”

“That’s enough,” Somdatta said. “You don’t need to find out more. The past can’t be lived, it can only be relived — and that’s not something that suits you.”

“How far did you go? Did you read beyond this page?” C asked him.

“Silly,” he smiled with affection brimming in his eyes. “This one’s just for you — never mind.”

“It was only two pages long when I was one page in, and when I was at page ten, it became twenty pages long. I’m at page number 5547 now, and there are 5547 more to go.”

“That many?”

“But one thing is certain. I’ll get to the end of it. I’ll collect all the stories there ever were, and I’ll tell the story that was never heard when I have them all. Do you know what the first of all of stories was like — the elder story? We all are — everything is — its lovers, its love, the longings it felt and the longings that were felt for it; we are its slow exhale when it wasn’t understood and its happy inspiration when it understood — but we are not it. We can never be. It is easy to tell you a story that you’ve never heard — I’ll simply tell my own story — or a random one I picked up — and change a word

here or there, and it'll be as good as new. But to tell it a story it hasn't heard? I'll have to collect every bit it has seen and heard for that."

"I have come far, far in that pursuit. Here, allow me to show you."

5.

"Builder... P? Do you know the story of love? It's really interesting," Somdatta kept talking as he took them through another door. "Behold. This is what happens when two people fall in love and merge together — and it doesn't happen all the time, because they are not all meant to be together. But this is my realm; I can grant any wish I choose. Whether the moth seeks the fire is my mandate. And although these two weren't meant to be together — they simply didn't light that fire in one another for the other to jump — they were brought together by fate, and they really, really wanted that. So I gave them their wish."

"I call them Romeo and Juliet." In the middle of the room lay a massive two headed fish — or perhaps two fishes with the same body. One of the heads was a man, and the other was a woman. It was out of water and out of air, and its scaled chest laboured in panicked asphyxiation, turning the man's face deeply purple. His tail beat up and down and the fins throbbed in waiting for death — it would seem that the head didn't feel any of the predicament the body felt, however, as it kissed the peacefully sleeping head of the woman passionately. Perhaps a last attempt at procuring some much-needed air? The boots the policemen wore made sharp clacks on the floor, but he paid them no mind, choosing to continue in his vocation, and in time, the veins on his neck stood up, and his head was straight no more. The woman opened her eyes. And started to hyperventilate immediately.

"You see, when you have merged completely, except that which can't be merged, this is what happens. Romeo can only be alive when

Juliet is asleep, and Juliet has to make herself sleep so that Romeo can wake. If she sleeps, however, she can love him no more. It is only his absence that she can love and hold close. In the twilight between joining and parting, they have but one heart, and it can but beat for one beloved. What would you choose? Would you rather the person you loved lives on unloved, or would you rather he be loved and not live?"

"How cruel!" said Policeman One and valiantly stepped forward as if to help the drowning lovers. Juliet screeched at him, eyes full of murder and malice, only stopping when the policeman scurried back.

"If there were no love involved, the choice would be an easy one — it would only be you or him. But lovers can't choose. You can't love a person without loving the feeling of loving them — once you have known it, there's no going back — sacrificing all for that person is nothing, but it is the end; you will lose that feeling of losing yourself piece by piece falling up an unending well afterwards. Lovers are thus always vacillating, between giving all and taking all — and that is how change happens, hearts beat, leaves fall, birds sing, and mothers nest. This moment the universe is Juliet, and it can't stand the fact that it is not Romeo, and the next it is Romeo. How does it all end?"

"You didn't have to do this! This... this is monstrous. Make it right!" demanded Policeman One.

"But it is. They wanted nothing but this. What a poor soul you must be, to never have wanted this. Or have you?" There was fear in Policeman One's eyes.

"You see, Bildissi, even if I collect all the stories from all the people walking the earth, that would still only be half the story. The other half is sleeping. What was the Romeo like before the Juliet woke up?" Somdatta wondered at his own creation. "What is the universe's shadow like? What will wake up when it shuts its weary eyes, only to rue us? To rue the morals of today, the laws of forever, the conclusions of yesterday, and yes, even you, who have no identity."

Somdatta dropped down to pat Juliet on the head, tears of love jumping over her nose and mixing with the dark red blood cascading from it. “Tch. Tch. Just a little more, and then you can swim. You can breathe without the air being heavy — for his sake. I will never let you, though. Then you will not love him as you do. I will change the story for you. Time and again.”

“I am close,” Somdatta said to C. “Very close. Very soon, they will merge up to their noses, and then to their eyes. After that they will become something like me — a new person altogether, and hopelessly in love with themselves. But where I am only one soul, they will be two, and they will unlock the doors to the other side for me. And when I see what nobody has seen on the other side, perhaps I will understand something about myself as well — if there can be love for someone like me too, someone who loves himself so much that he couldn’t love himself more!”

“Enough,” Policeman One whispered. “I can’t take this anymore.” He had backtracked to one of the musty walls in the salt smelling room, and the knob of a door had appeared where his hand had groped at the wall — he pulled on it mercilessly, ripping an entrance out where there had been none, then throwing it open.

6.

Blinding light filled the room and offered salvation. A warm, sweet air rushed over, as if bringing news that the lot of sweets in the craftsman’s cauldron was finally done — inviting the patrons as well as the teeming, hungry flies to jump in. There was also lilting laughter and tinkling gossip wafting in — low, but loud enough to shroud the heart without one having to strain their ears — all in all the stirrings of a lovely neighbourhood no passerby feels out of place in. It was quite the change from where they had come, and Somdatta grasped

C's hand. The light made him look unusually white, and his hand felt like cold limestone.

"I never thought I'd ask someone this," he said to her when everyone else was still too dazzled to hear, "but will you please, please, please stay until I find it, Bildarsi? Sometimes I realize that I'm too afraid. I won't take too long, I promise, and I'll give you anything you want. I haven't forgotten. It's not that there is anything scary here; I get what I want, I make what I want to make — but sometimes I fall asleep and I'm not sure if I have woken back up... and there's nobody to tell me about cats from time to time."

"Have you ever seen something like this?" he asked C. For sure she had made similar environments and mirroring fantasies, from scratch, over and over again, to soothe many a feverish soul and gratify many a perverted dreamer.

"I'm not so sure," she said honestly.

Felicity and merriment, when unconstrained by a bit of dull pain and unseasoned by a pinch of loss, is strangely fearsome. The joy that drifted out now with the steady beats of drums and the tapping of dancing feet was scary like that, and it shook C. The inhabitants of the room were equally scary in their pure hearted joy, and she felt like the way they flew when they only intended to jump was going to make her puke her eyeballs out. They gave them no respite, pouncing on them in a heartbeat.

"Child of man! We are pleased to see you," they exclaimed, wings fluttering faster than a hummingbird's, and eyelashes even faster.

"You're quite fine children of man yourself," Somdatta faked some bluster, "seeing that you're my creation. Wait, does that make me a father?"

"Enough! Come drink with us!" they whisked him away, leaving C on her own. A red-haired fairy grabbed firm hold of Policeman One, and it seemed as if the lanky boy was already past the shock of meeting the fish creature — queasy shyness was all his mind could

muster up to the otherworldly beauty that was being a bit too free with him. He looked at his friend, the other policeman, in desperation to be saved, but he only smirked and turned away. “Go become a man,” he seemed to not say.

There were rivers of glitter that flowed around the small room, and cotton candy clouds that stood watch over them like benevolent guardians. Happy squirrel families danced on happy trees by the rivers — but there was one that was a bit different among them — it was black, bare, and gnarly, as if it didn’t mind being all knobby and ugly if it could stand out from others. It called to C, and she wondered if she should make it bloom in a shower of garish yellow just to spite it as she walked up. A hand hastily grew out of its trunk, as if to put a quick end to her problematic fantasy, followed by a little head, and a shoeless ankle. It was a fairy her own age, with slightly misplaced teeth and a sweet look on her face.

“Manchild! I have written a story. Do you want to hear it?” she asked C. “Oh, I am Rubi, by the way. Nice to make your acquaintance.”

“Come,” she pushed excitedly. “There’s also someone else I want to tell it to.”

Somdatta was sitting high on a mound, as if a village king in court, his creations all around like a crowded sea, gossiping and laughing between themselves and paying him no attention at all. They hurriedly made way for Rubi, though, as if the queen herself had entered the scene.

“Oh, have you, Rubika? By all means, then, let us see who is the better author here!” said Somdatta with the smile of an overindulgent uncle when she made the same proposition to him.

The fairies waited like a school of eager puppies, nice and quiet for once, making the storyteller nervous and visibly self-conscious. She opened her ledger, looked around, and cleared her throat, putting her dainty little fist over her mouth.

“Believe it or not, there was a time when everything was fine in fairyland. Rubika woke up when she wanted, and it was not necessarily a good time to wake up, but it was a good day with a fine prospect, so all was fine. The work that had to be done called happily, promising to bring in even more of the mirth, and time seemed more fluid than usual. So when Rubika saw the intruder in their world, she didn’t even really notice.”

“Why are you crying?” she asked the little boy half sitting in an open gutter, his pants slowly soaking through. He had grime in his nails and leaves in his hair, but he looked so beautiful. ‘I know every trick in the book except the secret to being beautiful,’ thought the fairy, watching her hand try to touch his cheeks in solace and fail in doing so — what with being too smoky and undefined.”

“Because I want to be happy later! My teacher says: laugh too much, and tears will be attracted to you like soulless piranhas to a bleeding-heart guppy. And you want to save the best dish for the last, right? By the way, that’s what my mother says. Said. Used to say.’ A burst full of giggles escaped Rubi. ‘Worry that much, and when will you find the time to be happy? When all your teeth fall out so that every smile looks like a leer and earns you a slap? Is that how you want things to go?’”

“Say, I will tell you a secret, boy. Listen to me carefully. The secret to being happy is being with me. Sometimes, people meet people, and together they can bend the laws of physics,’ she pontificated like a dusty professor in a dusky classroom with no one to return home to. ‘There is no payment to be made. No tears, no remonstrance, no misfortune to balance it all out. You can laugh all you want, and you don’t have to worry about a thing — no disaster around the corner. That’s what we call a — so, what do you say? Will you be a friend of mine?’”

“As if to uphold her honour and prove her right, the boy smiled, or tried to. He was so scared that he bit on his own tongue and

choked on some gulps of air in the process. It wasn't enough. So, she took him to her favourite fire hydrant to people watch. She beckoned to the chief flying officer among all the ducks of the town, Milos, and he sent her a one-winged salute. 'ATC to runway, ATC to runway,' she called to him, 'Prepare to lift off!' Milos rallied his wingmen and winged women, and together they took off in full fighting formation involving thirty quackers. 'Marks on,' Milos quacked-hollered when they had reached the sky over the intersection they stood at — and it looked well and good the busiest in the town, no kidding — 'Bombs away!' The ducks began to drop their bombs on the heads of the unsuspecting pedestrians below, in strict rows of five at a time, observing steady discipline and exhibiting much gusto. The obese traffic policeman in charge of his circular domain watched helplessly addled as always, feeling in his pockets for his phone, as if to capture the phenomenon and bring it home to prove to his suspicious buddies. 'I told you, told you' — he kept muttering, and as always, there was no phone to be regained. As each packet of celestial blessings exploded on each unique head, profanities flowed like proliferating fire ants, and it couldn't be long before someone mildly distracted took it personally and a fistfight broke out. 'A good day's work, gentlemen and fiery ladies!' Rubi congratulated them as they took their places on the electric wires, and Milos gave her a flowery bow — he was a cunning philanderer despite the respectable way he looked. The boy couldn't remember his commandments anymore, and he laughed when he was no longer petrified, as if someone had removed a muzzle from over his mouth. Rubi felt warm."

"“Oh no, I have done it now,' he touched his lips and looked around when he realized it. 'What?' Rubi asked him. 'I told you it doesn't matter. Remember?' He looked troubled — not like someone who was listening. He looked into the wall before them, as if there was a man hidden there, listening in, and told her his secret in a low voice. 'What?' she asked him. 'Shhh!' he said. Then, 'Good children

don't smile.' 'What? Who has told you such things?' 'The man who keeps us in a cage did,' he said. 'Me and my friends. My name is Som. And they are Ssom, Shome, and Somm, and the man is named Datta.' 'What?' said Rubi, balling her palms into fists that itched to punch the hell out of this man. 'But what he says is true! You need to believe him,' said Som. She made him take her to their cage — she had some unfinished business with someone, after all."

"Som and his friends were from different places — they were born in different circumstances — Shome couldn't eat without a spoon, and Ssom couldn't talk out of his country dialect. Somm could apparently talk to dogs and horses and all kinds of animals. But they all looked the same, and one would finish the words of another without hesitation. They couldn't remember a time when they hadn't been handpicked by misfortune and made to live out the sob story they actually wanted to put on new smelling white pages. As if to the fancies of a mad author drunk on the fine wine they were named after, it was their sister who got taken away first. She was really sick already — but Som had made a really good joke, and they had all laughed together, and blood had come out of her mouth until it started going back in. They had all tried to jump into the river from the guilt — but there was only sand below, and they had ended up unhurt, and laughed at the irony of it all; what a terrible thing to have done! It was not too late until the eyes of their mother had turned yellow and puss came out of her nose whenever she lied down on her belly. When they were out on the streets and toughing it out in the cat clawed world, they had been sent a blessing in the form of a unique friend. She was a flower girl, poor, and much older than them, but she looked regal like an ice queen, like the treasure of some much renowned house in the country. This sister bought them kites and odd souvenirs with every thirteenth of her hard-earned pennies, and she even took them to the museum one day — not that they could enter. They had watched uneasy lovers and doomed schoolchildren

be herded in like sheep to the guillotine and rolled on the floor with laughter to Shome's crooked commentary. They had laughed a lot when she had given them an elaborate dinner in her small room too — the food had seemed endless. Then she was taken away and married off, and the next time they had caught a quick sign of her, she was missing two of her front teeth. That was when the realization had hit them all at the same time — it was because they had laughed that other people suffered. It was also then that the man had taken them in — and he had also kindly laid out all the rules for them. He was going to watch their behaviour all through the night, and all through the day, even when they couldn't see him. They were to sleep at night, and go to school in the morning. They were not to waste a morsel of food, leave a single piece of clothing unfolded, or put one thing in a place different where they had taken it from. They were to leave dirty notes of money unturned perchance they crossed them on the streets, and report it to the police. They were to turn the other cheek if someone that understood less slapped one, and they were to take the smallest place possible on the bus benches — the world was overcrowded as it was, it was the least they could do to help. And whatever they did, they must, must never smile — let alone even think about laughing crudely. They were to instead reflect, ponder, and be good boys, for their sake and that of the others as well."

"Rubi was devastated to hear all that, and her knees ached from sitting up too long, but she didn't agree. The man hadn't turned up to get a beating from her even though they had sat together in the cage chatting through the night, waiting for him to come. 'I am a bad child,' she had said to them, getting up and kicking the doors open. The sun was really red — it had just come up, and was about to touch the faces of the four of them. She had felt really light. 'I'm a bad child, so none of that applies to me. I can wipe my snot off on my sleeves, and I can leave water inside the glass. There is no one like that watching over me, so I can just close my eyes and smile. And you

don't have to smile too, if you don't want to. But can you pull up your lips slightly, and let your teeth peek through just a bit... yes, yes, like that! That is enough! And if anyone doesn't like that, I'll beat the shit out of them. Just you watch, how bad I can be.”

“The boy named Som grew up to be an able, handsome man, and Rubi grew with him. Her body became heavier, her limbs more solid. She could touch her eyelids now, and her feet hurt when she walked too much. The man Som talked of had made the fairies captive in a glass bubble, and he sometimes observed them from the outside like attractions in a zoo, but she didn't mind. The man, who looked just like her friend, wrote a story about another city where some other ducks led by a duck named Konstantinos sang a marching song and the traffic lights never turned red, because the people were just shadows who could pass through the vehicles. He became a famous author, and the adventures of a girl called Rubis featured on every street, billboard, and child's heart.”

“It put a damper on her happiness, though, when she picked up a copy of the book and opened a page where there was featured a door with a large keyhole, and behind it was a darkly lit room where the boy from her childhood was chained to a chair. The man knelt before him, a screwdriver in his hand. Blood dripped from where the screws would be on the boy's body as also from the rough, pointy head. The boy coughed and smiled, looking into the man's eyes with intimacy and love. ‘I'll never let you go, I'll never let you go,’ the boy sang to his weary victim, desperate to flee, but paralyzed despite wearing none of the chains. This was the boy's reality, and the man would not abandon him despite this — the boy was grateful and happy for this. He did not need Rubi at all.”

“She was not happy at all, but she had to concoct a smile when their eyes met, because she had made a promise after all, and tiptoe out of the room. Yes, the air was stale and the thunder was pre-recorded; it just didn't scare any more than the tiger humbled in the

zoo, but the fairies still did not notice and made merry. Rubi did notice, now. She had to hatch a plan to break out of this lost world and rescue her friend. He could not be happy without her, she was sure.”

“He wasn’t him, she wasn’t her, the water the girl in the book dipped her feet into did not chill, and the clouds conversed nonchalantly while they rained, not even bothering to look down, because they knew there would be no unfortunate peeping tom caught up in the maelstroms. When what was sorely needed was a cry of grief, all the world had got was a fading smile — it couldn’t even bother to put up an act. It decayed even before the unripe fruits could catch ants and flowers could catch fire. Even when she danced with her lovers on top of her car and watched them sleep, smiling from above, all she could pray over and over was ‘Stay fresh, darling,’ as deeply as her heart could afford. They never did.”

“Pain, pleasure, and the retinue that hung around them were unworthy people. The only feelings that mattered were will and faith. That was what was wrong. A world where illusion had the power to change reality and success sold for free, on fellow feeling, it was a world that had forgotten its faith. It was an oppressive world, where tyrant Will ruled over everyone else, and the only person who could bend Will’s will was an author — everyone else wasn’t even aware that their independence was merely a charade where they paraded the diktats of Will as their own. An author was the only person who had lost their faith and regained it elsewhere, brought it in to warp and pinch reality, who could believe so guilelessly that guile itself became the mask that would never come off, even if the skin did.”

“It’s a problem when of one trillion people, every single one of you is an author. You write yourselves; you write them the rest of them one trillion as you want them to be; they write themselves; and they write you back. It’s a meaningless struggle — so tiring that the struggle is the only thing that remains. You break up, but you don’t

grieve — getting over it with a page of positivity and a song full of self-love. There's no exuberant panting at the summit. There is no fetus that comes out of you at night to curl up inside the blanket. It's all good, and happy, and wholesome. But it's not true, it's only a story you all choose to simultaneously believe in! Reality is not reality if you don't feel a needle stab you. That's what I feel when I think about what I have lost — what I probably never had! It's like I am being pricked by a ten feet thorn, and stabbed by needles thin as air! When will you understand? It's not real if you don't miss me! It's true that you can make your dreams come true with your will and forget any pain with a good dose of hormones, chocolate, and cream, and for some of you, your dreams are where you choose to make your house, but none of it is real if I am not there!"

"There are many things you can do with a pen. You can dig the ground, you can clean your fingernails, although a real girl isn't supposed to say that — but I live inside your head, so I know. You can spin it on your knuckles when you are bored, and that takes a lot of practice to learn — but the most difficult thing to do with it is to write. But I've come a long way — I've learnt, haven't I?"

"You have, Rubi." Somdatta said at last.

"I'll become even better, you'll see. The penguins that crowd the evening metro, the ghouls that look out the office windows, I'll teach all of you to smile. But I'll start with you. You don't have to be a good child anymore. Oh. I feel so lonely."

"But if you do that, you won't see me anymore, Rubi."

"No!" she said, clutching her pen and her journal as if they were the only things in the world. "You've forced this fake laughter onto me, what you can never do yourself! Yes, I have grown with you; I am more solid now, and my feet hurt if I walk too long, but why am I not taller? Why does my smile not feel heavier sometimes, why do tears never follow it? Isn't that what happens to all adult people?"

You've kept me small like this purposefully, so I can never be by your side! But I'll learn pain, and be by your side. Just you wait."

"No, that's not true. I haven't forgotten about you for a moment. You're the only person who has kept me going through everything."

"Yes, I know," she said. "But I'm not even a person."

"I know it all," she flipped through the pages, until one containing a grim image turned up. Charred little ribs and pairs of manacles lined the wall behind a terminally ill candle. "You brought so many of them here, little girls like her, so that you could give me a body to wear. But when the time came to cut them open and clean the insides out, you just couldn't touch your pen to their skin, so you left them there like that, never to open that door again. You want me to be there so much, but it's also so, so difficult. So I'll do it myself, I'll be good for once."

"No," Somdatta said. "The reason I couldn't do it was that you were going to feel it too, what I was going to feel. And that would make your smile heavier, make tears follow them sometimes. I need your smile, Rubi. It's the last thing left in the world."

"But I want to be able to touch you so badly!" she said, and stabbed her journal with her pen. "Here, have some colour, have some fashion, have some smiles!" she scribbled furiously.

"I can't take it anymore!" Policeman One screamed with his hands on his ears. "Take me out from here!" As she wrote, the policeman got taller and taller, until his head had his back bent at the ceiling, and his hands become slender like a willow, with long fingernails full of alert dexterity. His crew cut became a garden full of curly locks, and his deep-set eyes became rounder and more vulnerable. His soft chins became even softer, and his high voice became even higher. His trousers became an immaculate skirt, and she kneeled before her colleague, eyes full of fear, but asking for his help nonetheless. Policeman Two grinned with a mouthful of shark teeth, and licked the lust from his dry lips, before grabbing the collars of his friend and

taking her down to the ground, fully intending to devour everything in the dark void into which they disappeared.

“Have some flair!” Rubi wrote loudly and passionately, and a white wand appeared in Somdatta’s hand.

“Have some fashion!” she wrote, and her friend was dressed in gorgeous white clothing from top to bottom.

“Have some sense!” A hat fell down on top of Somdatta’s head.

“Make me a real girl!” she wrote, and the wings fell off the backs of her and her friends, leaving deep, bloody gouges behind.

“Have some smiles!” she wrote without pausing to catch a breath or register the hurt, and Somdatta let out a long, boiling laugh. It was cruel and active — full of plans and conspiracies, and it alarmed her, making her look up from her scribing.

“Who are you?” she asked in confusion. “Where is Somdatta?”

“Hello, little girl, I’m the magician,” the man said.

“But you’re not Somdatta. He isn’t — he can’t laugh like that. What did I do?”

“That’s right, girl. He is gone. You erased him, made me. You wanted to learn pain? Well, here it is, your lesson. Do with it what you will, make him from scratch if you can — like he did you. You’ll have a long deadline to make it by — after all, pain is the only colour in your palette that will always stay alive and fresh. It never dies.”

Rubis sank to the ground.

7.

There was once a famous chef who had misplaced his super essential jar of anger — the food was especially bland that day, but more importantly, the anger had washed down the sink into the city sewers, and from there into a river, an estuary, fluffy gentle clouds, and back into a very small and frail stream, until it finally came to rest and stew in a certain dark place under some very tall trees. It chafed,

but the ground wells had no choice but to bear it — they didn't want to end up telling it and making it feel sad. So it went on, and on, and on until the walls started to bleed. They shook uncontrollably, and they couldn't hide it anymore. There was a great tremor that could be felt from anywhere — it could be the twitching of the bleeding walls, or it could just be the anger trying to suppress its laughter, because it had always known. It manifested itself in the shape of a man, a magician, clawing his way out of the blood and the waste, somehow wearing a feather white suit and a pristine smile as the blood fell off.

"No one called me," the magician said. "But here I came. Now, it's time for some magic."

"You, little girl there," he said to C. "Move away from there, leave that creature alone."

"I'm not going anywhere. I'm not leaving her tonight," C said with determination. What should she do? She wondered, towering over the heap that used to be a happy fairy. Hugging her as a mother would, being there for her all night, assuming a quiet presence — none of that felt appropriate and enough.

"Don't interfere, girl," said the magician. "How hard do you think she has worked for this pain? Don't take it away from her. You come this way. Here. Go!"

The magician pulled out a fistful of bird feed and sprinkled it all under her nose. He pulled out a bone shaped chew toy and chucked it to the corner. "Fetch!" What did he think she was?

He pulled out a ball of yarn next and rolled it fast towards her. C leapt into action, nudging it with her nose, catching it from paw to paw.

"What kind of magic do you want to see?" he asked when she had been lured a sufficient distance away from the wreckage.

"Is there any magic still alive in this world?"

"What? Why wouldn't there be?"

“They all say that. Those people that come to me in their dreams and ask me to give them beautiful fantasies, things they couldn’t build themselves. I am the builder of dreams, you see, and my elder brothers are the builders of real things — and the both of them make fun of me to no end for it... They all say it. That love is dead. Dreams are dead. There is no magic left anymore. Ghosts and fairies are long gone. They hate the idea of love, they say, because it lies, deceives, and cheats. They hate magic too, because it’s not egalitarian. It’s inhuman — some are born special and some aren’t. But in the end, they all keep coming back to me, asking me to show them more of that ‘worthless stuff.’ I don’t understand, at all.”

“Well, you are one hell of a smart girl, aren’t you? You understand! They are just lost, hurt, lonely children — those are words of anger and hopelessness, said while they wish so badly to be proved wrong. They will turn their noses up at you and say true love doesn’t exist, but inside, they’re dying to hear those words — anyone would do. Magic is dead? But there is magic in the windows of the bullet train, girl. There is magic in the lights of skyscrapers as distant as the silhouette of an enchanting forest. There is magic inside the pixelated screen, and outside it — it is everywhere, and will always be, whether you want to believe or not — dismissing it as mere trickery. But I have come to collect it, for once and all. And perhaps I’ll even show you some of it while I do that if you stick by me. Don’t you want to find out by yourself? About what is true and what is not.”

“Can I? But I can’t go now. Not tonight. Can it wait until tomorrow?” C asked, refusing to be hypnotized by the ball of thread he swung.

“The outside world is beautiful, girl,” he said. “It’d be a waste if it were to go without a witness. Also, you promised someone to stay with him until he gave you what you wanted, right?”

The magician wasn’t him. But somewhere behind the shining jowls there was a scruffy beard, and the hat that stood straight bore

something of an old pair of glasses that could only hang loose — she couldn't refuse. She wanted Rubis to raise her head and get a long last look in as they left — the human girl had a long and arduous job to do before her.

Chapter Eight

1.

Done well, nothing in the world is easy — or supposed to be. Some idiots have a penchant for making everything too hard for themselves, though. For example, it is hard enough digging away shovelfuls of dirt six feet deep in the pitch dark of night in the middle of a summer drought, and it is even harder when you forget said shovel back home, drop the torch off the bridge while practicing your romantic side eyes at the zesty dolphins deep down the surface, and give away the bottle of water you had brought in order to get through the topsoil to a homeless man, completely forgetting about the goal — but those idiots are just incorrigible.

And if they had a pecking order, Taranga would most certainly stand at the apex. The shovel was retrievable — his home was only a short jog away, after all, but not so with all of the other items. Whatever. Jogs were good — definitely not ten minutes of his night up the chimney.

Everything was a matter of perspective. Even the fact that he had made no headway despite the ground being rich in blood and iron — probably. He cocked his head to look at it from a different angle — and everything seemed the same, disconcertingly so. The grass didn't turn, and the tombstones all around didn't lean. His head was about to start spinning.

"You're holding your shovel the wrong side up," explained a timely voice patiently.

"Oh. Uh. Oh. Thank you."

"And you just flipped it twice; it's still the wrong end up."

"I'm not an idiot! I'm just distracted!" Taranga said.

“Oh? And what are you trying to solve?”

“I’m just trying to come up with a good story. For my daughter. She wouldn’t sleep unless it’s really scary — she will get up at three and bug me for the rest of the night.”

“Is it not twelve already?”

“Well, tomorrow’s her birthday. I’ll figure out a way to catch some sleep at work.”

“I think that’s the problem you should concentrate more effort on.”

“You don’t know Suram.”

“Your daughter? By the way, don’t you find me scary?”

She was half standing, hips leaning on the freshly born headstone. Her skin was paler than the moonlight, her hair darker than a raven’s eye, and one would say she was eerie as a corpse if she didn’t move her lips too much.

“Again, you don’t know Suram. I’m hard-wired to all this stuff by now,” Taranga said to the corpse.

“You must be really afraid of your daughter.”

Taranga laughed, and he would break down and roll around in the freshly dug soil, flailing his arms in drunken abandon, had he the time. Which he didn’t — he was in a hurry.

“What are you trying to do, by the way?”

“I am trying to get deeper and deeper,” Taranga said. “Where eyes don’t go, consciousness can’t see. I am trying to get to the meaning of things.”

“And when you get there?”

“There is a book there. I will give it as a gift. But only after I’ve read it for myself.”

“I see. There is not much time,” the corpse thought for a second. “Where did you see this book before?”

“It’s down there,” Taranga pointed at the ground. “I saw it go down before, in the early morning today. It was clutched in the hands

of a friendless girl, who was pale just like you. There was nobody to say goodbye to her, so I had to go up to the coffin and do it — that's when the book called to me. I haven't been able to think of anything else since then, and I'm sure it's the same for the book too — don't ask me how, but I know. My heart flutters when I think of it, and my blood races, and there is a rushing in my ears, and I see flowers, and —”

“I get it, I get it. Did the book look anything like this?” the corpse brought something out from her back. It was open at a random page, and he had only seen its cover before, but he could tell in an instant. He almost dropped his shovel.

“I'll give it to you. I've read it already — nothing in it would change for me now,” she said with a spoonful of sadness.

“No, no, that's yours. How could I?” Taranga wrung his hands. “I can't just take it from you. It'd be against my ethics. I will take it from here, from where I found it, after having worked honestly to earn its trust,” he pointed again at the progressively advancing headway into the bowels of earth.

“It's my coffin down there. How come that's not against your ethics and this — ugh, never mind! I'll tell you some of the story while you work, to save you some of your time. How's that?”

Taranga wiped some sweat off his brow.

“You don't mind me getting in between you and your book?” she asked, quizzically perplexed.

“Only a part of it. And preferably not from the start,” Taranga said.

2.

“There was once a young nurse — and while she could have been anything she wanted to, something she was berated often for by well-meaning strangers — she had become one because she had wanted

to become one. She got her picture on the newspaper by some interesting co-incidences, and she had certificates that foretold of a promising future on her office walls and powerful friends just a phone call away, but she didn't really understand any of that — just as they didn't understand her."

"They called her beautiful like a basket of flowers — and invalids would enlist in the army in the hopes of losing the remaining arm or leg if they could get one healing touch on the bloody, bony, gunpowdery stump. She didn't mind their misconceptions and delusions, if that could keep them from discovering her reality — but the unwanted spotlight and the needless adoration wouldn't let her sleep — the focus seemed too threatening. She could be caught at any time."

"The young nurse knew her own reality. She was ugly from the inside — rotten to the core, crawling with maggots, a walking pilgrimage for flies and minor devils. She had become a nurse because she was utterly fascinated by the sounds a person's soul made when she touched their skin, and sheerly amazed when the oozing corruption in her fingers made their wounds close — they healed like scared boarders before a withered headmistress."

"Inside her there was malice, perversion, and curious wrath, lust and gluttony. Everyone around her seemed so pure and happy — and there was nothing looking out of their eyes, and nothing to look at inside them, shallow as glassy puddles of rainwater on the newly old road. She wondered how they lived with what lived inside them, how they could act so unaware of it, and decided that she was the only odd one out. She didn't blame herself for any of it, though — for her circumstances were not of her own choosing — and she made a vow to herself to change. This was not the only thing that she was potent with, she could tell, and she could change with the touch of someone that was made just for saving her, just as she was for all her patients. But whiling away valuable time waiting for her prince charming to arrive on a white horse wouldn't be right — for starters,

she was the beast in the story and not the beauty — so she bought a handful of old books from the flea market: *How to Change Yourself in Five Milliseconds*, *Change Yourself without Changing Yourself*, *The Changing Room #55* (illustrated), *The Changeling's Kiss* by Giorno Argentino, and *Thousand Years of Change in Continental Carpentry*. The first advice that came up was that sleep was absolutely necessary for one's best self to show up — to feel comfortable in one's own skin and discover new things about oneself that were obvious but unnoticed. She pulled a thick curtain over the glaring street lamp across the street and the rest of the books made a wonderful cushion — she couldn't help falling into a trance, peeling back layers and uncovering herself in a daze dream. There was nothing but thin air inside her clothes, and an unappealing dark void inside her skin — and all the better for it, she thought — she would make the best garden in the world in that vacant lot where nothing lived, starting as soon as she woke up. But she couldn't fall asleep."

"It was not from worry over what to put in that blank page — nor was it the disappointment of a good-for-nothing that had discovered that they failed badly at being bad-for-everything as well. It was not the lack of conviction in virgin soil about its ability to have palm trees stand tall after the earth had just been created. It was the discomfort of the prison cell when the worst evil in the planet had been put in its care. She could feel the terror in everything that was wrong with her — for they knew their time was short, change was coming, and they slithered about inside her like nodose and porous snakes, running to complain to something far more terrifying than them. She felt a pair of eyes open inside her — and take stock of the nakedness inside her mind. It was not what laughed in her when she saw the new nurse in the ward be bullied into psychosis. It was not what felt the relish when she told a child that her drawing could be better. It was not what looked longingly at her co-passengers and wondered how it would feel to throw each of them out of the moving train,

visualizing the splatters they would make on the electric poles — that was all child's play. It was far, far worse. 'I take a little nap and my body starts to think it has a mind of its own,' it said. 'Oh, excuse me now. Did you think you were in charge?' 'Who are you?' she asked it. 'I am what you should have been,' it said, 'and who you will be from now on.'"

"The eyes looked out from inside her like pounding headlights all night, and she couldn't fall asleep at all. She was about to hand over the scalpel instead of the scissors the next day, but it stopped her in the nick of time, 'Look out, missus body.' The red flesh on display on the operation bed was still redder than her eyes could ever be, beautiful, but she didn't feel like she could tell that to someone else with the usual exhilaration and excitement if asked. Her favourite fish was just a fact of life, the way its bones stabbed her lips was just a fact of life, and the joke she overheard from the schoolboys sitting over the aisle on the train back home was funny as hell objectively, but just a fact of life. She didn't have to hide a strangled smile under a wet cup of tea anymore. 'Do you understand my illness now?' it said to her as she was pulling off her socks. 'Aren't you a nurse? Heal me.' 'Will you please go to sleep now? I really need to sleep today.' But it wouldn't, for the rest of time."

"'Am I a wave or am I the ocean? Am I a bird or am I a feather falling down? I can see every bump and detail in you, but my vision narrows further and closer afield. I can't see where I start, and where I end, and you — I am the only thing I can see, and I can see the clearest. It scares me to no end, and for that reason, I will scare you. You are the only thing I have, and I will never let you go. I will acquire what you have by giving you what I have, and I will become you in the end — matter. And you will become what I am — idea.' It didn't have a name, or any use for such a thing. It lived somewhere that was not a place, in a time that had no future, nor a past — and her emotions were its own that it had no use for. She was as independent

as a picture tube or a kaleidoscope — and the way she danced to her emotions was supposed to be a learning experience for it. She was meant to be a test subject at its convenience, and the experiences she had to go through was to accumulate lessons for it. When it all added up, it would come down to a glorious, giant-ish zero, and it would become a whole and complete being. The lessons, taken individually, had no special value or meaning for it — but they had to be genuine for her. Her grief had to bend her back, her joy had to make her sing with amour, and her dreams had to be so true that they shattered like diamonds in the end — she had to be clueless despite knowing where it all led, and she had no right to change her destiny. There was no escaping any of the experiences — she was going to have to go through each one of them sooner or later, whatever she did — it was going to make sure of that.”

“It didn’t bother her that it could see her closer than she could see herself. It didn’t bother her that it felt nothing as it saw everything in her — and felt only mild disinterest and milder amusement. What bothered her was the strange combination of them — for perverted though she was, she was pure in her perversions, and it was not as if she had never felt any of the higher feelings — affection, contentment, and felicity. And try as she might, she couldn’t stop herself from feeling her way through her experiences, high or low, dark or light, with the same innocent passion and pureness. And even though she knew she was nothing but a moving picture on the screen, a test subject for it, a memory that would be remembered and later forgotten only for its humiliating incompleteness, she couldn’t make herself become anything else — the knowledge of the fact didn’t help at all. ‘Please sleep,’ she would implore over and again, ‘I’m not what you think. I can’t sleep this way,’ and it wouldn’t even so much as indicate that it had heard, except when it felt like doing that, and it would ask her to make it feel the way she felt — if it could feel the

fear and the terror she felt, surely it would feel the compassion for her too, and comply with her request?"

"Look into my eyes. No, LOOK into them! Look into them!" she couldn't convey all that looking encompassed when she shook her hapless colleague frenetically at work, 'Do you see what is looking out? Tell me, do you see them?' 'Do you see what is looking out from me?' she hunched over and asked the shocked pack of boys that always sat across her on the evening train. The ones usually full of bluster and pomp gulped and froze, but the quiet, shy one said to her, 'Miss, I think you really need to see a doctor.' He offered to drop her home, but froze and ran too when she looked at him in an unholy way. 'You've been acting quite erratically of late, test subject,' it said to her when it got a chance, 'but it's quite fascinating and interesting this way.' 'I don't know what I am,' she said to it. 'Well, isn't that only natural? It's because I don't know who I am either.' 'Can I please, please sleep now?' 'Yes, you can. I will stand guard,' it said, and cackled evilly."

"I don't want to change. I don't want to forget these feelings. But lately, you've been taking over everything I am. I don't even feel anything when I look at my parents — the only two people I could actually care about so far. But now, I'm coldly calculating the insurance money, or where I would invest my time if I were not coming to see them all the time — they could live ten more years or ten more seconds, and I couldn't care less either way. And I don't even know where I could spend my time — where could I, if I enjoyed nothing? The only thing I feel lately is fear — of myself.' 'Well, isn't that only natural?' It interjected as usual. 'I don't know what I am — what you are, and one is scared of what they can't know.' 'I want to be free of this fear. I want to live. Not as my own test subject. So, please —' 'There's only one way, sweetheart,' it said. 'Give me your colour, your taste, your feelings. Hasten the inevitable — then, win your freedom.'"

“I tried. I slept with every which man I could find. ‘I see motion,’ it said, and laughed when I asked it how it felt. I lured in the white cat I used to frequently feed through my window — and she knew something was wrong; she wouldn’t come easily — with some cold fish. ‘Are we going to vivisect her?’ It asked. ‘No, we’ll boil her alive,’ I said, reliving fond memories from my childhood. That was the best feeling in the world. ‘I see change. Matter returning where it came from,’ it said in a deadpan voice, and yawned, when all we could see was fur in boiling water.”

“I snapped. I took a box of matchsticks to work the next day, tucked carefully in my purse beside my flammable identity, and asked to work the night shift, when footless steps could be heard along the corridors and screams of pain would fly out of doorless rooms. I went first to someone’s burnt half-mother, and there were grievous burns on her soul as well — and did what I always contemplated, fantasized about, but never had the courage to do. I tried to soothe her soul, and bring peace to the both of us. I touched her cold, clammy, unbothered skin first, then dragged my feathery fingers to the raw and the nasty — it only looks like that, it’s moist and fertile in reality, so sensitive and loving, it only needs some stimulation. I touched each individual muscle, vein, and nerve with equitable care and warmth. She smiled when I touched her bones — jabbed my fingers inside her flesh and found them, encapsulated them in my solace. It was not enough — not deep enough as I fell into her eyes, not close enough as I hugged her bones and breathed into her entrails. I touched her soul, and carved bloody furrows on its back. She went out crying big drops of tear and thanking me profusely.”

“I went meticulously cabin by cabin. I went to the old grandfather who teased the nurses every single time we had to ‘penetrate’ him with the needles — he had to live with a lot of pain, so nobody complained. I laid him on a bed of long, naked needles, penetrating him everywhere. His thing went stiff, but he was smiling too. I went

to the blind boy who slept clutching the picture book his mother had left him with — and some nurse much kinder than me would come to read him the pictures every other day. I tore each page off and shoved them in his mouth — with generous helpings of water when he couldn't eat anymore. It was funny — we both laughed a lot, or so I think. He was tearing up in the humour of it all."

"When all was said and done, I put some blue air on fire and watched from the front lawn, arms crossed, as it spread everywhere faster than a swarm of locusts. It was uncharacteristically quiet for a change — it had a lot to study, I suppose — it was the best day of my life, after all — the zenith of my experience, the masterpiece of my manifestations, my most honest and superlative expression. It was so high that the wind popped out of my ears as I fell, and soon I felt nothing. My vision clenched like a dark tunnel, and my heart turned liquid — I fell asleep on the grass, looking at the stars and waiting for my feelings to return."

"They never would. I had fulfilled my purpose. I had gone through my successes and failures, lessons and creations — and now, I had perfectly merged with it, where before I had been nothing but the prison walls full of memorabilia of eternal friendships, piss stains, and graffiti — the prison bars it looked out of."

"I could not even twitch my eye or move my fingers for a long time. 'Hey partner, let's do that again,' it said at last. 'I can't,' I said. 'What are you talking about? I felt it! I will listen to you now! We are one at last, we can do it together now.' 'That's the thing,' I said. 'You felt it — and now I have become you. I can never feel it again — once is all we get.' It had become the prison bars now, and I the inmate. I felt its fear of itself, its inability to sleep, just like me, and most of all, even though we both said we didn't, the desire to feel it again overrode every other thought — once you've had had it, it's impossible to overcome it."

“There was no train at the station, and only one lone passenger. He wore a stuffy muffler over his face and stood with his back against the world, but I could still tell from those eyes — he was a face known in every home of the country, a rising star. I could tell from the trembling of his hands that he was fleeing from something horrible in his own home, and it would jump on his back if he so much as dared to look back — and I could hear in the clenching of his fists every sob he crushed before it could reach his lungs, desperately screaming the wish that he had a friend. I walked up to him like a siren from his dreams, wearing a smile that promised just a bit more than the giddiest of them. ‘Help me, save me,’ I said to him, the perfect damsel in distress, and put his wintry fingers around my neck, pressing ever so slightly. He didn’t even resist — he could see it in my eyes, and he really wanted to help. He really wanted that warmth from having helped a friend, that would help him forget, and go back home when the sun rose after a short nap on the station benches. I had high hopes from him — but I could feel nothing as I made him dig firmer and deeper, every moment a lost chance to live my last. He struggled at last, when my face went purple and my eyes rolled up — but I was too strong.”

“I smiled ferociously — but it was the fake smile of a corpse who lied to herself that she felt at least some of the thrill she should have as she died in the arms of a friend.”

3.

“Tell me, will something ever change? Will I be able to sleep at last, rest, forget, and drown in blissful ignorance? I am conscious, and I don’t know why, how, and for what purpose. It scares the hell out of me. How do I close my eyes? How do I not see? How do I not know?” the corpse asked Taranga as he hauled the coffin up and

lifted its lids for her, scrawny arms shaking so much they wouldn't even be able to hold a pen for days to come.

"I don't know."

"Yes, why would you?" she said. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't keep you longer, I should keep my promises." She walked up to her coffin and lied down inside, holding her book up for him to take, mesmerized with the half-moon that floated over her nose.

Taranga took the book from her, and leaning in, he kissed the top of her head. 'Be at peace,' he wished — 'I wish I could do something for you.' She shivered, and she grasped him so tightly that his lips wouldn't come off the warm skin of her forehead — but he had to take a deep breath and firmly push her away.

"What was that?" she looked like a glass figurine. "Would you do that again?" He didn't nod, so she took his fingers and pressed the ends to the same spot, breathing out in relief and closing her eyes.

"What magic, what sorcery is this?" she didn't sound angry. "I feel like I can sleep now. I don't remember what I was so scared of anymore. It's so white, so gentle."

"You know," the corpse said to him, "I used to think that happiness was ephemeral like mother's milk, or the flautist's pangs. There's simply no way to hold on to it; it curdles in you. Yes, when it's fresh, it makes you feel like the tune you've heard every day in your life is something you've never heard before, something entirely new. But the tragedy is that as soon as it dies you wouldn't be able to believe it sounded so new just a moment ago; even though the knowledge of the memory remains, you'll have to feel it again."

"I feel like you're out of that vicious cycle. You're an anomaly. You can make more happiness out of a little bit of it — you're never in lack. How does that happen?"

"I don't know," he said. "It bugs me too. There are forests in South East Acacia, you know, where there are little hands growing out of the forest floor — but no one goes there, and no one removes

the weighty layers of leaves to grasp them in the night. And there are little hamlets in Paprika, and in many other places, where they have to sell off the little daughter to feed the little son, or the mother to feed them both. Nobody has ever gone there either, but I know that they exist, as sure as magic does — and they exist inside my heart and my mind too. But we live on ignoring their existence, as if we can neither see nor feel them. How do we do it? I don't know, but there's this thing."

"There's this thing," he said. "The sun gave it to the sunflower, carelessly, carelessly. And she powdered her cheeks red. The sunflower gave it to a little girl — and she drew me on a page. Me, her, and the lion in the corner — oh, why doesn't the courage hurt? I'll give it to you now, and forget me on a whim, but remember her art."

"You have such a beautiful singing voice," the corpse said.

"I sang? Oh," he startled. "Oh — I'm sorry. It's just a habit — I sing to Suram every night. She says it's the best sleeping pill ever made."

"That's not true. It sounded as if a very heavy rock had been removed from above another rock — and the rock beneath had so much to say; it didn't even know it lived still. It spoke in its own language, things it didn't know it had forgotten, words that carried its truth to the whole world and freed it from something really small and weak that chained it to the dark — such a mystery, how can you end up with more when you give away what little you have to others?"

He hadn't felt like he had so little himself at that moment — it was as if there was a whole unsung kingdom beneath the rock where everyone had assumed nothing grew — by magic.

"Will you keep this secret? You will, won't you? Songs are banned, after all."

“Will I, now? I’ll have to take a long think about it,” the corpse spread her arms, relishing every moment she could be cryptic and keep him there.

“It does not matter. No one will believe I did it. I myself can’t.”

“Wait, wait,” she clung on to him desperately. “I didn’t mean that. I will take your singing to my grave. Tell me why songs are banned, at the very least!”

She was no less sincere than Suram would naturally be, sitting on the bed covers, waiting for him to pat her head for the night — and much less coy about it. “Very well,” he sighed.

4.

“Anindya, the king of Madhyamika, hated the night:

Treachery is something to be scorned, temptation to be seduced. Incompetence is something to be pitied, and impotence ignored.

The owl of the night flies high and looks down on your head. It can never be caught and tamed — not in the royal canvas or the simple abode.

It is in the dead of the night, where everything moves and anything can take on life, that nothing breathes. Nothing stirs or wakes as you dream.

The night is a liar and a temptress — that’s why. She knows not who she is, and she makes you promises she cannot keep. Do not go into the night.

Truly, there was nothing good about the night. It was lonely, creepy, and baseness in the guise of mystery and potential — it brought the worst out in people. It was in the dark of the night that the infidel encroached and the unfaithful eloped — the victim became the bully, and the guilty of conscience became liberated.

It was in the night that his mother had abandoned him, and once he had stored up the courage to look the darkness in the eye, he had asked it over and over — ‘Did she go to you? Did you take her?’

‘I don’t know,’ it had responded back.

‘Then, did she not go to you? You’re saying that you didn’t take her?’ he had asked with resuscitated hope.

‘I don’t know,’ the answer had been the same, time and again — he wasn’t sure it even understood the languages humans spoke.

Then there was a knock at his door. A guest undeterred by his hatred, a guest unannounced.

‘Have you heard the sounds? Have you seen the sights? Could you tell me where I could find them?’ she asked.

‘I am deaf as the silence, blind as the night — and I came here in search of something, but I don’t know which way is front, and which way is home.’

‘Are you not afraid of knaves? Out in the unknown so deep in the night?’ Anindya had to ask her.

‘I have nothing they could take from me, and there is nowhere I could keep anything I could take from them,’ she said. There were spellbinding carpets and mesmerizing drinks and lengthy verses inside his cabin — so he took her in — Ratri, she said her name was. She listened to the words he could never tell anybody — that he didn’t know were there inside him.

‘Birds all look grey in the night,’ he told her — ‘but if only you could see them while the sun was up. Some are cheeky orange, some are fading blue, some have yellow speckles on their breasts and green stripes on their tails. Their tweets are so different too, as if they are always conspiring to one up each other. The trees as well — they are all like assassins draped in shadows in the night — but they are so full of charm and personality in the daylight that the tiger pauses midair on its way to the hunter’s neck, and the hunter’s hand falls

into a sugary dream on the bowstring, losing his arrow in the mind. If only you could see those — all the things the day has to offer.'

'I believe you,' she said, 'and I see them when you tell me about them. Will you continue?'

He was only too glad to — didn't have to be told. Maybe it was because he hadn't had a conversation in so long, that he became really enamoured of his own voice when it came out at last — or perhaps he felt truly happy when he saw his words have a genuine effect on her — he couldn't stop. But her interest was selfless, and her passion was true — so he had to ask her what she was looking for so late in the night, or she would forget all about it.

'I was looking for help,' she said. 'My brother needs help. Can you help him?'

'Are you a master of herbs?' she asked him, and Anindya didn't know his cumin from his turmeric, but there was no one in a hundred miles who did.

'Can you cook a patient's gruel?' Again, there was no one in a hundred miles who could.

'Can you sing a song?' she asked him. That he could do, if only a single one — he could sing it because it had been left to him, and it came out true when it did, because it didn't belong to him in the first place. So Ratri took him out into the night — the one thing he had never thought he would do.

He made sure to glare at the yawning bushes and the sleepy hedges on their way — if they would so much as dare to land one branch on her, he would make sure he would search them out wherever in the world they ran to. 'Shush,' he had to warn her over and over in the silence so that she wouldn't trip and make a sound. He looked around in aghast anticipation as she banged open the door to her threadbare cottage — afraid that the greedy leeches of the night would attack the source of the sound in their legions.

Her brother, Nishi, was hard to make out against their sinking bed, and he could only tell there was someone when he was out looking from afar. His hair turned to a bunch of moss seeped in a light drizzle as he creeped closer, his limbs the tangled webs of an artistic spider, and his breaths the frightful flight of scant air from an underwater cave. ‘He keeps getting worse and worse,’ said Ratri. ‘He is dying.’

‘He was not always like this,’ she said, pouring the king some water from a pitcher that didn’t look too old — but it hadn’t been made by much crafty a hand, and it broke as soon as she touched its neck, splashing the bottom of her feet. She tried to make her brother some gruel with some herbs they had plucked on the way, meant to make him fall asleep — but the kindling was soaking wet, and her flints wouldn’t produce a spark no matter how she tried.

‘He used to be fine, but it has all been spiralling down since she left us. He has become thin as a rail,’ she said, even though she herself looked like she might snap in two if someone stepped on her by mistake.

‘He wouldn’t eat,’ she said — even though it was clear from all the dried food littered around that she hadn’t eaten over worry as well. ‘He looks at the ceiling, and broods, and ponders, and his breathing grows so faint that even someone as deaf as me can’t hear it anymore.’

‘Left you? Who left you?’ the king asked, surprised and wondering where they could have left the children for. There was nothing all around for a hundred miles.

‘Our mother did,’ she said. ‘Have you seen our mother? Did she enter into your city?’

‘I don’t know,’ the king said.

‘Then, you’re saying that she didn’t go into your city?’ she asked him with resuscitated hope.

‘I don’t know,’ he said. It hurt to disappoint her.

The king told Nishi all about the day — the candour, the intensity, and the brilliance. There was nothing to be hidden — and everything was pure simply by virtue of the sunlight that blessed its exterior. The infidel was an eccentric misfit in the day who could be accepted into some fold of a liberal society somewhere — the unfaithful was a family man who sweated blood and spit out intestines to feed the mouths that depended on it. The victim was saved by hundreds upon thousands of other victims like her who organized, and ganged up on the bully to found a civilization based upon liberty and justice — and the guilty of conscience had to confess to herself about the deeds she had done; there was no way to turn her back, run and forget.

It was to no avail — he could tell that Nishi was listening, because the afterlight of a smile had entered his eyes, and the colourful shadows of a dream fell on where his sight landed on the ceiling — but it was too meagre, not enough. So the king sang him a song, and it was the first of his sins — a list that would only grow and keep growing.

What does not want to be, must not be made.

What does not want to live, you must let sleep.

Let the moon fall. Let the lonely wind cry.

Let the year end, let the young night die.

And in the end when the mist clears, there will be eggs in the coop, spring in the heart, reason in the head, and roses blooming on the roof.

This is what Anindya forgot, and the song he sang was a happy one — it was one where no one had to die, no one had to whimper in loneliness, and no one had to fail in their repentance. ‘Is the day beautiful and bright just like you?’ Nishi asked the king — and the song was so hopeful that all the fear inside his heart had crouched and hid somewhere out of his mind, that he forgot who he was and glowed in his own smile.

‘Yes, just like this,’ the king smiled back in approval, as the two of them waited for the sun to rise.

‘Am I like that too?’ asked Nishi, and the king with all the softness in his eyes said ‘Yes.’ Lightning crackled out of Nishi’s heart like thunder out of a box, and they could see each other more clearly than they ever had. Ratri screamed.

She could see her brother now that day had returned, and she wasn’t blind as the night anymore — Nishi’s arms were impossibly long, and his torso was looped like a spindly colon. Thousands of tiny fingers crawled like the underside of a strange sea creature all over his arms, and his eyes were slit so long that they ran from his forehead, over his lips, to his chins. Ratri screamed in terror and disgust — as if she would gouge her eyes out rather than have to look at him — but she was so repelled that she couldn’t even turn her back, and the knowledge that he was her brother, or that she had ever had one, had now fled from her. The scream ran on and on, and as soon as her eyes fell on her own self, it resumed with re-intensified vigour — for Ratri was no better. She was shorter than a midget and thicker than a barrel, and her head was impossibly large and short on her anvil shaped shoulders. Nails longer than kitchen knives ran down her fingers — only they weren’t sharp or jagged in their ends; lumps of skinless flesh hung from them and sloshed blood on the muddy, bubbling floor.

‘Do you see now?’ Nishi asked the king. ‘This is why I don’t want to live — can’t live. I am not blind like her, after all, I know what I am.’

The lightning was caught back in its cage as harshly as it had jumped out — and dull darkness had thankfully returned. The king didn’t have an answer to give; he could only hold the children close to his heart and try to quell their trembling. ‘Don’t you leave me now,’ he said to them, gripping them as tightly as the fish her hook, ‘You’re

my brother and my sister, and all you need to do is live. I will be here forever by you. I will never leave you.'

'Tell me, king. If the day can touch anything and turn it pure, why can't it do the same to the night? Why can't it exorcise it of itself? Why must the night always be left behind?' Nishi asked him.

And the king looked at the night — it was a bit off tonight — drunken, delirious, lively, and unafraid. Boughs were drawn along boughs, and the leaves sung as clearly as any string in the world — air jumped into the hollows of dead tree trunks and came out the holes where their roots would be, creating heartrending whistles, and the tallest of the palm trees swung low and clapped the hands of the second tallest of them to provide percussion. The night had become addicted — and it paused ever so briefly as the king looked over — like any loyal accompaniment to the master of the orchestra, seemingly to ask — plead — for continuation.

The night would have given him anything at that moment if he had asked. It would have stolen the beauty of the faraway Tusharduar mountains where the gods made their summer resorts and laid it at his feet, so that the siblings didn't have to be horrified of themselves anymore. It would have stolen the light of the full moon that was far more magical than the light of the day, and boxed it inside their little cottage — it would have stolen the antler off every deer's head in the forest so that the males couldn't be told apart from the females and tragedy struck their society if that could make the siblings laugh — but the king didn't realize any of that. 'Live,' he simply commanded the night as he let it hear him sing again. 'Live forever,' he ordered the night, so that his siblings could live forever as well, and never had to be afraid again. And thus, the sun never rose again in Anindya's kingdom — sleep never broke, and dreams froze."

The singer was right — the night was beautiful, like the darkest of pearls blossoming into its youth inside a cove of wildflowers, but only if a lost shepherd and his female friend chanced upon it. It had to be held in someone's arms if it had to become beautiful — that was the only thing about it. It was beautiful indeed in his voice.

The corpse loved to talk, because as soon as the words stopped flowing from her mouth, she would have to hear the words breeding like rats in the divide of her bisected soul. As soon as she stopped talking, she would have to withstand the tortured screams of the monster with a mirror inside her — anything would do, even words that had no meaning, trajectory, or goal. Peace was too lofty an ideal — it was all about survival; she didn't have the time to think about the solace of a second, only the breath she could take in that costly opening.

In the moment when the singer's story ran out, the world became inert, still not realizing it was time to clap, still reeling from the improbability of it all. The corpse closed her eyes, and still could see him, more tranquil than any night's sleep could be — survival was necessary, but peace was not too bad either. She was finally going to sigh when the streetlights could blink again, and the birds overhead resumed their flight — and then she was in the night, over him, below him, around him and in him; liquid and gassy, she was being held by his voice. It was a preposterous thought, but was she becoming as beautiful as the night when she was being held by him? — she wondered, and she didn't want it to end.

"And what happened then?" she asked him.

Long and thin, fat and short, round and strong, many of them had come out in response to his call. Some still carried snapped necks from where they had hung themselves, some had grown dark grizzly hair all over their bodies from the humid heat underground, and some had become transparent as a whisper so seldom had they been remembered by those who still lived. They sat all over the branches

of every tree, every pothole, and on every bit of the road that wasn't painted with traffic signs — and they had wildly different temperaments and attention spans, but they all hankered as if after a drop of water and said all together in one voice — “And then?”

“Brother, no, little master!” said Pedro slapping one thigh, foot up on his own gravestone like a rambunctious conquistador rising over unexplored territory. “That was matchless, I still can't believe what I heard.”

“Yes, let me hear that once more, I want to believe there can be nothing better,” said Madhu, the newspaper carrier.

“Shut up,” said Pedro. “What are you even doing here? You were supposed to have been spilled into ashes then dunked into that musky water. This is private property.”

“Hehe. You see, after you died, I had a little talk with someone's wife, and half of me stayed back so that she wasn't lonely.”

“As if you'd know your songs from your thongs,” Pedro grumbled. “Don't listen to him, little master, you go on.”

Taranga looked at his wrist even though there was no ticking clock there. Only a little bit more, he cautioned and promised himself, “Reason doesn't —”

“Just like that,” Madhu melted.

“Will you shut the hell up!” Pedro roared, running out of restraint. “No, no — not you, little master — see what you've done! He won't sing now because you don't understand any of the good stuff!”

But he would. Being the master of the night was a job without pay — it only added work upon more work. The master of the night could cast some thoughtless sleep on the wrongfully accused on their last day on death row, for example, so that they could go out with a flashy smile and no complaints whatsoever when their time came. As the night lay before him in her ordinary coffin, he could reach for the moon, because his hands were long indeed, and when they were done eating it half by half, he could press its glow into her cheeks, turning

them green and vermillion. The master of the night could do anything, and that's why he did nothing. She held his hands as if in worship, and although she had no place to keep him, or the intention to, she couldn't let him go — how does the heart stop itself from beating? How could the corpse stop living?

“Reason doesn't sleep too long on the night grass, Reason doesn't fall. A song has nothing on him, and he doesn't give it his all.

A chicken must have her worms, and a snake her chicks. In your songs there is a poison and a magic.

The same that made the night wakeful, the oceans rise, and the stars fall. It made someone fall in love, and give away what was not his to give —”

“But so what?” yelled a hoarse Taranga, and it gave. He coughed. His head spun from the heights he had climbed. His eyes oozed from the things he had seen.

“Please don't fall!” his slaves prayed to him. “Please don't die,” they called to their God. “We'd do anything for you.” And they did. They brought their sole possessions to his stature — the shirt they had died wearing or the photograph they had lived dreading — it had no meaning now. They gave up their blood for him to drink and mend his voice, and their hearts for him to eat and regain vibrance. Soon enough he was on his feet again, forceful as a ball of wind left behind by the pack, eager to catch up — he ripped off a femur and chugged it down, he took a bite off the corpse's soft breasts and crunched on it — it made what was already in him dance in joy and want to come out.

“Should the night die?” he asked his minions.

“I don't know,” the corpse looked at herself and didn't know.

“Twinkle, twinkle, little star — sing with me, my slaves!” the master of the night called, “I wonder how you'd fit on my chandelier.”

He sung until the skin between his lips came off and they listened even when their stomachs, now missing a liver or a spleen, called loudly. His sight was enough to satiate every hunger they had ever known. It was not possible to look at him and not feel full, after all, and the hungriest of them all, the corpse, didn't fight for the larger portions at all — whatever drop came her way, however ephemeral its coldness was on her eyes, the more colours she could see, the more rainbows she could taste, and she was eternally gratified and grateful for it. She had never thought she would feel the feeling called living again.

C had felt suspicious at what they were doing inside some bushes in a graveyard in the middle of everywhere at first — maybe it was only a tactic to leave her behind, maybe the magician had forgotten to bring his pouch of cash when he had formed up, and he couldn't make good on his promises to let her have a cat. The stranger the happenings before the slightly lit opening had gotten, however, the more she had understood, and struggled to understand.

"The world is made of masters and slaves, little girl," the magician explained to her. "The masters have something the slaves do not — the slaves are dependent on the masters for every breath, and the only thing they have is a desperate request for more. That's why songs are dangerous, and that's why the slaves the world over organized and decided to slash their ears off — it's why singing is banned in the free world."

"But who is the master and who is the slave?" C wondered, looking at the man surrounded by sickness and restlessness all around, so tight that not even a fly could flee — their sincerity for more so strong that he could not even break off his singing to take a much-needed breath.

“It’s confusing, right? Power is intoxicating, and that’s why you can never use it when you’re powerful. But it’s always easy to tell who the master is — they are always low in numbers, after all.”

It was all wrong. It was the master who was working to please his slaves, it was the master who had no desires except to see them happy, and it was the master who wore no clothes. He stood naked, wearing the same clothes he had left home wearing, now soaked by sweat and dew, his soul left bare for all to see, not even the sustenance of a thin skin surrounding and consoling it. There was nothing to hide and nothing to show — it was not from the wish to rouse and stir with his passion that he sung, or to mesmerize with skill — nothing small like that. There was no worry that he would expose all and still be ignored by blind ears, left alone and aside as others saw nothing worthwhile in his exposure — the ultimate criticism that couldn’t be critiqued right back. There was no reason to pitch his voice or knot his trills; there was no reason to sing achingly softly either — he was to be seen just as he was, and still seen, still enjoyed. It was every bloom’s dream, only separated from fruition by the curtains of fear and pollination by the capricious fly — and it had somehow come true in his case, perhaps because he was enchanted of his own taste. He was faintly aware of the hungry pests eager for every drop of life coming from him, the meaning behind the feeling behind the colour behind the cadence of each note, and much, much more than that — and he was at that moment another one of them, watching spellbound from the front rows, reeling from the aftertaste his life left inside their mouths, chewing, sucking, drinking, savouring for as brief as he could be — as short a period he could become.

“This is wrong,” C said. “I want to stop it.”

“What?” the magician was gravely distracted, hypnotized.

“It’s wrong. I said it’s wrong.”

“Oh? So you want to save him, like you wanted to save that fairy? In that case, it’s pretty easy, just go to him and give him so hard a slap that his cheeks squirt tears. That’ll do it.”

She wanted to save him, and she could only do that when she had him. All of him — he was plentiful as the summer sun — that too a sun that would never die and never dim, but she could not let a single ray run away. It had to be all boxed in, contained.

“I want to have him, I want to have him so that nobody else does,” she said, looking ahead with determination and fire, “and I won’t let them have even a hair of him. What is this feeling, I wonder?”

“Now, that’s much more difficult, isn’t it?” the magician pondered with a finger under his chin. He waved his wand and put his palm on C’s ribs, right over where her heart would be, and just when he pulled it away, it had a black box in it — he looked satisfied with how black it had become — blacker than a smoker’s teeth and darker than a saint’s feet, he said. “Why don’t you open it for now and see what happens?”

C pulled it open, and there was no engagement ring inside, nor a dung beetle defiantly alive and kicking even after years of being insensibly pranked. Inside was a voice beautiful in its strength, wanting to resound through every wall and every well the world possessed. “Hurry, I got him inside, close it!” the magician said.

“What do you want, my slaves?” the box sung. “Do you want meals? Or do you want to feel? Do you want to know? Or do you want to flow? Do you want me? What will you want when I’m turned free?”

“You, you, I want you!” C tried desperately to be heard over the cacophony. “And I’ll turn you free.” She tried hard to shut the lid over the box’s runny mouth — he would finally be free when he was hers and only hers, but her scrawny fingers wouldn’t do it — the jaws of the box were simply too strongly resistant. She tried to do it with her arms, and failed — even when she tried applying her own weight

in company with obstinate gravity. There was no time to stop and think — the box had plenty of suitors and they were all charging forward, unwilling to be outdone, propelled by their bony bounciness and hollow ghostliness. Fine then, if C couldn't muzzle his voice, she would take him so far away that even the stars in the sky and the sands in the desert wouldn't be able to hear him and partake in his life. She lost her slippers and ran like hell, making sure to throw the magician into the hungry tide with a shove as she whizzed by him — he could at least serve as a temporary distraction.

"I want all the pressure cookers in the world," presented one among the slaves chasing them.

"With or without the cabbage inside?" the box wheezed with laughter. "Cook without pressure, housewives! Menace your men without resort to the knives. Battle not for the extra lime in the gravy. Let us all eat equally as they do in the navy," it sang.

"I want them to use non-resistant cushions on electric chairs everywhere from now on," demanded another with a heinous case of back pain.

"Granted, granted, and granted," approved the box, trying to jump out of C's clutches. "All your wishes will be granted."

"The sun will be a tennis ball.

The devil will be a Barbie doll.

The homeless will smell like omelettes,
and sleep at work encouraged.

Slippers in bathrooms the national mandate.

All the buttered breads sugared,
because the master of the night wills it so."

The stampede was like the snake that had grown so long it had broken out of the screen and couldn't see its own tail anymore, let alone eat it and die. It was overweight and lumbering — and still keeping up with C with no issues, and if the head missed her by providence, the pointy rear would catch up from the other side of

the earth. It made her feel like every strewn half-brick and sleeping sapling she jumped over was her enemy, and gargantuan worms might buck their heads up out of the calm soil at any moment and take her prize away. She wanted to hold the box next to her mouth and reiterate her own requests, but the parade was too unrelenting — they had too much energy from not eating or not doing anything for so long, and she couldn't speak over them and her own airy panting.

“Don't you just look! Do something to help me!” she was getting testy at the magician. He was flying over her head, looking not particularly amused or disinterested.

“Hmm, I can take you along with me, but not you both. That would be too heavy,” he acted as if he was contemplating a wholetastic solution that would amaze her when he was out with it, but she knew it for what it was.

“It is just a box,” she said.

“Right. And you need claws that would be strong enough to never let it go, and feet nimble enough to take it wherever you need to go, right?”

“You can do that? Really, can you?”

“I'm the magician. I can do whatever you wish to believe.” He waved his wand, and black fur cropped out of every pore on C's skin — but her claws were strong now. Her legs had become short and thin, and she couldn't cover much distance with each gallop now, but she had become that much more agile for that — she could jump her way out through the bones of the looming skeleton if she needed to, and she could climb and fall from the third story of a decadent den of tipsy idealists and ditzy gamblers, something that wasn't all that easy for said skeleton, and she could hide herself away in the empty boots of a madly running spectre until the parade had finally passed over. She had become a cat. The magician had kept his promise.

He was hers finally; their story had come to a close. As she watched over the headless bodies scramble for something much more valuable than their missing frowns, a lone corpse stopped in the tracks of the ebbing flood, and looked directly into her eyes until it was the cat that was uncomfortable and had to briefly look away. “Tell me, what do you want?” the box asked it as the stranger they would become after the climax ripped them apart.

“I want a garden,” she said. “I want a garden for all of us tonight. The trees could be leaved by the pages of an untravelled atlas or the unworn diamond combs from a fancy glassed storeroom. The drains could be roamed by music that was never played or literature that was never spoken. The bushes could be full of dreams and the fences could be woven in love. No matter how wretched, forgotten, forgone a soul is, I don’t care — let there be a garden for all of us — where we can accept the curse that our sight is, and we don’t have to be afraid of it anymore. So that we can close our eyes finally, and find that we can still see the garden as clear as the day within our hearts, and we can sleep without being afraid of being woken up.”

“Very well. The night master wills it so,” said the box, and its lips were sealed forever with a strong snap by the heavy jaws of the cat who now slipped into the world full of lights and progress.

Chapter Nine

1.

Under the ground, where the million pipes re-joined and severed, going in all directions, but all of them going down, the world began. At some places they fattened up, whereas others would only admit rats and small creatures. In some places bits of sourceless light shattered on squat shrubs; some avenues led to doors only to clamp shut on intruders. At times, the pipes flooded with tides of the grief-mucus, and as much as it washed away, it always left behind brand new souls struck by the beauty of the new world playing host to them.

One could find anything they had someday wished for in the pipes. The miners, however, chased not the flying fish passing overhead in their droves, nor the golden deer that stole the personal possessions of the careless sleeper. They idled not for the passionate arrow homing in on the romantic; they made no haste for the trains that always left a notch before time.

Chisel-handed, lead-footed, each step the miners took was gilded in conviction. The floor below the pipes was soft and warm like the tongue of a sleeping monster. It wanted to bog travellers down in a marsh of pointless chatter. "What's the point?" the tongue asked every single traveller. "Why do you act? Why do you rest?"

"Success," was always the answer. Forward. Progress. The future was always going to be better. "The present was the future too, someday, and so was the past," the tongue would rasp and hiss. "Then it grew up. To begin with, what is success? You only love the thought of success; the actual thing will make your life vegetable-like. I pray you don't encounter it sooner rather than later."

“There is only one future,” the miners would smirk with teeth alabaster white, “You wouldn’t know, old man.”

Today the tongue was quiet — cold, even. Bhushan wondered if he should drop down and take a pulse, shaking his head at his own thought. It was strange. It never did anything to help except try and make him doubt himself more, but he still missed the irritating voice, even if only a bit. Perhaps he couldn’t feel motivated without an antagonist.

“Define success,” the tongue beneath his feet had once joked. “What does it smell, look, feel like?” Bhushan had struggled. Then, pulling a large diamond out from the mushy, cringing wall, he had balanced it high on his long talons, and laughed — “This is what. No, don’t look at it, look at me. I am success.” He had truly felt so, giving the querulous tongue a convincing beat down. He was a good actor when he wanted to be. ‘Today’s your day, old man,’ Bhushan thought. ‘If you want to feel successful, chide me now. You won’t get me this out of whack again.’

The sweat that pooled was not stickier than any other day. The space inside the coveralls was not any hotter. Yet, Bhushan was sitting down, spaced out and leaning on the wall that rose and fell breathing, lulling him into half-sleep. ‘What’s the matter with me today?’ he wondered over and over, too lazy to pick up the inquiry from thereon. What was the matter with him today? Zoooom... a fly boomeranged into the wall, and then with its wings doused in heavy liquid, straight down into hell — consigned to be the tongue’s conversation partner forever. He hoped the tongue had been able to get there, and that it was doing well.

With a light sigh he stabbed a hand into the wall bearing down on his face, barely a few feet away. After the initial skin broke, it was like knife through bread — there was no more resistance — until his hand closed on something tough, the tell-tale texture of a stone. If it was the run of the mill amethyst or platinum quartz, he would just

use it to plug the hole in the kitchen wall he used to go out through to scare the gutter rats closed. But what if it was The Jewel? The fated stone that would come to the world on the day of its end, its finder to be immortalized forever, his legends to be sung in the worlds to come? Would Vishesh finally let him be his playmate when he would be on top of the world and nobody would have the gall of declining his requests? His hand slackened, letting the stone be pulled back by the lively unknown behind the wall. Reddish goo flowed out of the gaping hole he left behind. He stared deep into it; it made him uncomfortable somehow. ‘Close,’ he willed upon it. But it stretched, stretched, and a cat came out of it.

Very much the surprised camper, Bhushan leapt back into a crouch. ‘Meow,’ greeted the cat. A black ball fell from her open mouth, and she touched it with her front paw. “Meow,” Bhushan said evenly. “You want me to take it, huh — hmm, Billi?” he read her name from the ornamented plaque screwed on her forehead.

2.

“Are you sure this is not another dud?” Anirban asked him, turning the black thing over in the light of his headlamp. He looked sideways at his bucket of duds, itching to throw it off in careful casualness. He loved to show off his aim. At the same time, there was not much space left there — Bhushan’s workaholic friend filled it up more often than the cleaners cleaned.

It was difficult to judge. It could be just a hardened clump of dirt or a mud stone pocked into shape by the river eddies. The moment one thought it was rough and unrefined, however, it shone like the smooth scaly back of a cobra. When Anirban doused it in water, it turned the whole bucket black as ink. However, it was dry as a sponge when taken out, or so Bhushan felt.

Impatient, Anirban moved to hand it back to Bhushan. “It’s strange,” he said, going back to his rhythmic hammering away at the walls. “I have been looking since morning, and nothing yet. I have never had an unproductive day like this.”

“Luck must be preparing something special for me today,” he concluded, breaking out into a distracted grin. Morning was the last time they had seen the sun, and that was before they had come to the pipes, but Bhushan held off on reminding his friend. They wouldn’t see it set.

“What’s stranger is that you didn’t even notice this belle,” Bhushan pointed at the cat sitting on his shoulder. He lifted her up and pushed her on his head. She pawed at Anirban, making him drop his tools and scream like a little girl.

“Ani. What if today were the last day on earth? What would you like to do? Wouldn’t you like to pet her at least once? Hold her in your arms? Why not do what scares you for a change?” Bhushan asked seriously now that he had his attention.

“Seriously, don’t do that again!” Anirban said, laughing on the ground.

“Take her. I mean it.”

Anirban held her in quivering arms. For the moment, her curious purring warmth was all he could feel. What did she see with her amber eyes? Something shiny? He wanted to see it too. Dream trooper, he too marched to the beats of the mysterious and alluring goddess of future and fortune. Just like her, he too donned the cloak of seduction others regarded him as, but he was just a possessed paper boat pulling to the cataracts. It called too loud, and there was no time to sit back and savour the after-echoes of that call.

So he shook off his reverie, dusted off his purpose, and resumed his courtship of fame. Fortune, not luck — that was the important distinction to make. Because he was the One, and fortune was his mistress.

“Why don’t you come to see Vishesh? He keeps asking me to bring Ani uncle home.” Bhushan put his hand on Anirban’s shoulder, trying his best not to look concerned.

“Sure. Sure.”

“I’ll tell you what becomes of this stone, okay?”

“Yes, hmm.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Bhushan asked.

“I have always been like this, my friend,” Ani said from a voice stuck in a dream.

Not every crevice or ravine is the stuff of legends — some are just impressions of attrition, not treasure chests full of the souls of fallen warriors and discoveries in new plant life. The deep cracks in his friend’s back were just that — but they cried themselves hoarse before Bhushan.

They widened each day he went by his unaware friend. ‘Help your friend,’ they implored ever more urgently. If he didn’t, something terrible was going to happen — he was sure of it.

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked despite the forebodings he didn’t feel.

What do you want, what do you need? Tell me, I’ll become just that. I’ll become the wool over your eyes, the roots digging deep into your festering sores. In the end though, Bhushan couldn’t really say it. He couldn’t talk of the dried-before-shorn tears he saw under his friend’s well-rested and well-motivated eyes, or the nightmares that screamed out from under his curated locks. The fear was too much today, and he couldn’t talk of the lies they both knew to be such — or maybe not.

“Oh. Hmm? Isn’t the wall blue today?” Anirban stared furiously ahead, chips of stone falling off with each hit. The chips sparked.

They put on pretty clothes and smiled, and hammered hard at the walls in their cloisters, chasing their own dreams. Nobody cared, and

there was nothing to hold them back. It was a beautiful world they lived in.

It was only Bhushan that could see the cracks everywhere, the fault-lines that were compressed hidden without glue and the patterns that were joined together in love and pain. There were chivalrous millipedes and shy pterodactyls lurking in those cracks, and many of them were growing uneasy. If they were not let out soon, something else was going to get sucked in.

"I'm here, you know," Bhushan tried to get into Ani's vision. I see you. I hear you. I don't know who or what you are, but I love you still. He wanted to make a last-ditch effort.

He had to reach a hand out. He had to grab the collar of his friend on the other side of the door and drag him out, make him whole. It was not something he was welcome to do. But if he didn't, who would? It was too far, but he could lengthen his arm like a rope with a hook if the need arose. Anirban clasped his palm instead. They shook hands like comrades, and parted ways.

3.

Lines of miners were at their business by the walls. Some were missing a hand, some a foot or an eye. One was missing a huge chunk of space right in the middle of his gut. Most had a hole in their heart, but they didn't notice. "The human being is Empowered," Bhushan's high school teacher had once stated. "Life is not about filling voids that come from elsewhere, that is slavish. Pierce through, don't get stuck into choices that you didn't choose."

"What if I can't be happy by happiness of my own creation?" Bhushan had asked her. He used to be brave as a child those days. "What if sadness loses her heaviness once I get to know her too well? That she starts to lose control and so do I?"

“Nonsense,” she had dismissed him curtly. “I don’t make the rules. They are what they are. You are what you are; I am what I am. There’s no what-if. If you want to know what would happen, make it happen. Work for it. Everything else is a tool at your disposal. Let me tell you, my child. You are supreme. Love only yourself. Everything begins with that.”

“But what if I don’t know who I am?” Bhushan had called back to the deepening frown on her austere face. The class would have laughed if he hadn’t said what he said next. “Is there anyone here that knows what they are? If everything is as it is and as it should be, why couldn’t you stop it?”

Their classmate had ended her life, and she had hurt herself before she did it. She had let the entire world see it — the appetizing brain fall out of her skull to steam on the concrete, the broken bone skewer her elbow and ribs together, the skirt that went up a bit too far.

“You have all watched it, haven’t you?” he had seethed with anger. He’d looked into the eyes of each classmate, and then at his teacher. “You have, I know. What sick pleasure did you derive from it? None, I know — but something in you did. But you can’t even admit that to yourselves — that the guilt is twisting your neck on itself. That you don’t even know why your eyes start to flow at night and your ears can’t tune out the scream in the air. There’s nothing you know about yourself, and there’s nothing you can do about it. Instead, you dare to lecture me on what I am. You choose to act as if half of your soul doesn’t exist. As if the slave isn’t a freeman as much as the freeman is a slave. I spit on your reality. Anything is more real than this.”

Bhushan had waited for the pin to drop. What would follow the stunned silence? Would they hail him as the hero that delivered them from their sins with the sting of his truth? Would they let him see the new things that lied inside of them and help him see those in himself?

It had never dropped, however. The deafening ring was always going to linger in his ears. A line had been crossed.

“We make mistakes so we can learn more; the mistakes must not be romanticized. We choose to feel happy to boost our productivity,” the class topper had lectured later, their teacher endorsing every word — as sharply kind as she was patronizing. “We feel happy because of hormones. We feel love because reproduction is needed for life to flourish. Life is all there is to know.” They always had an answer for everything, didn’t they?

They had elected to tune him out from that day on. He had always known the secret he wasn’t supposed to be let in on — that he was too much of a square peg in a world of rounded openings. Even if that was so, he had hoped he could hold it strong against the millions of miners and their singular world — his world, or any world for that matter, didn’t need more than one believer. But failure is a part of the process, hard knocks are love taps — he had eventually grown too weary to rest; the single-minded conviction of those that unthought him was too strong for doubts to not appear. He had to give it a try to see from their hearts — surely, all of them couldn’t have been wrong?

And where did it lead him? He looked under his yellow gloves at the calluses his hands had grown up to. In a world where liberty reigned, magic was kept in chains. All that free will amounted to was the incessant striking for gold, never pausing to breathe. Free will was the overseer’s clanging of the bell, the signal for the dogs to sleep and to wake.

“Oh, don’t leave me please!” the tongue suddenly spoke out. “My children, who will rip away layers of my exquisite being and shine their lights on even stranger ones when you’re gone? Oh, don’t leave me please! I shudder to think of the day I can no longer yield you good children green rice and golden fish even though you’ve always been earnestly at it.”

Today was a misfit among days — nobody had a single find to show for the day's work in their rows as far as Bhushan could see. It was as if they had struck fat — and the miners were all the more fired up for it. They didn't even notice the lack of results, or how unusual that was, which was not unusual of itself, and swung their fists as if only one fever away from discovering The Jewel.

"When you tunnel into the deepest recesses of my chest, when you mercilessly wind your way down my windpipe to my heart — The Jewel, yes, that is the only prize befitting your long struggles. I can't wait to see you snatch it out of its long-abandoned receptacle and shine together with it. My children, I am so proud of you. I am so happy I can turn into your joy," the tongue continued. "But not today. Not today. I am so afraid to lose the light in my eyes and lose your sight. What will happen to you when I can no longer look over your exploits? How will you cope when I am gone and you no longer have my blood to feed on and my skin to sleep on? Will you be alright? No, I cannot run out today. The earth must turn!"

"Hey old friend. Back with us pitiable lot, huh?"

The tongue seemed grateful that Bhushan had jarred it out of whatever had taken insidious possession of it. "I find you very noble," it said. "With your eye on something much bigger, what is too big to sacrifice? Family? Love? You had none of it to begin with! But look at that girl in red overalls over there. Or that boy too bulky for his quickness. That man with no hair and no time to feel proud about it either. Some of them are at it so their loved ones can stay lovable like pictures in a collection of postcards. Some are at it for themselves. But they have all thrown away something very valuable so they can pull something even better out of the wounds they dig."

"What if we have nothing to end with, Tongue? Even what we create, the marks we make, the holes we punch are all built on truths of a moment? To vanish as soon as we look away?"

“That, exactly that!” the tongue exclaimed. “That’s what I find admirable. You are works of art, all of you. You create yourselves where there was nothing, from nothing. Your feelings are so real, your visage so tantalizing that the rest of the world creates itself around you. It takes refuge in your sight, smell, sense of hearing. It cannot know itself but through you — so all of it gathers around you, the light and the shadow, the magic, colours, and the illusions. It can’t get enough of you, and it can’t get enough of marvelling at its ugliness and grovelling at its unforgiving beauty through you. Its favourite pastime — it doesn’t want it to end! It will never vanish! It will be there for you to take in as soon as you look back. Always. Always.”

The tongue was getting excited. Was he really something worth getting excited over? Bhushan couldn’t feel it.

4.

Hearts had turned adamantite from overuse, hands and legs into stalactite from underuse. Lungs had hardened in steely desire, spines became chalk, and it could all come off if one was not careful.

The miners could, therefore, not afford to drop their guard. They minded not to tap the ground too hard and jerk their joints too fast as they recreated something out of a tipsy whimsy. Having fun was important at regular intervals, but snapped necks and displaced hips were more than they could imagine. They lit a large bonfire right in the middle of the square and did all sorts of things around it. Nobody cared to look at what the other was doing, but they were all in it together.

The flame did its best to immerse them in its lust. The dust blowing in the wind glinted sharply on the ends of their hair, lending them fairy wiles for a night. Thunder crooked their backs in feminine anticipation. The butterflies floating around were happy to see them — they wrote poetry and sung songs to regale them with. But the

miners saw none of that. Their smiles were measured, their eyes glazed by the misery within. What were they missing? What were they hiding? Weren't they all going where they wanted to go? Bhushan's heart welled up with their unacknowledged grief, and he wished he could make them see what he saw. A bit of anger surfaced in tow, too small in an ocean of apathetic ennui. But he ended up drinking a whole jugful of the fire they gave away by the side, stoking it in his belly until the balls jabbed in their throats became stuck in his, and he had to do something about it. 'I'll show you what free will is,' he thought, going into the crowd.

Who could dance with him today? Who would dance on until after the music stopped, so that the pitter-patters of their feet made the universe sing out of its shyness? Even when the heels dropped free, the bones cracked, and the blood made them slip, they must not slip. And out of the chaos something young and pretty would crawl out — something he could see and touch for a change. Something he had the power to cure.

She came with an unguarded smile and star-warm features. But she flashed with fear like prey that was sighted as soon as she looked up. She froze, and he let her slip back into the crowd. Bhushan felt like a victor. He leaned back his neck and let out a wolfish cackle. 'Tonight I am the pinkest cherry petal of them all,' he thought.

The crowd cheered. They thrust their fists into the air over and over and hurraed in unison. 'It has been found!' the word spread like death. The Jewel. They brought Anirban in on their shoulders. He was clutching at it like a sickly mother or an out-leagued husband, a damp towel covering the lump. He could not believe or disbelieve, could not say a word or look away. He just sailed through the air, lips slightly opened, as the crowd threw him up and caught him back. Candles and lamps came out all around, lighting up the tiniest corners one never knew existed. Lifetime savings were thrown on the oven to cook deliciously, disregarding all considerations. The Jewel

belonged to them all, and it deserved no less than the rule that broke all rules to start afresh.

“Aren’t you all forgetting something?” Bhushan asked the tongue.

“Smart man,” it said. “So run on to what you have to do!”

5.

Vishesh was nowhere to be seen when Bhushan opened the door, except a clay guardsman that pointed its needle bayonet at him, primed for fearless assault. “Easy,” Bhushan assured it. “I just need to see your commander.”

Vishesh was not wearing his favourite green shirt today. What a shame. Bhushan knew, however, that opinion might change as soon as he caught sight of him. So what if it was the day when everything ended, so what if he didn’t wear the most memorable thing today — it wasn’t possible to feel more joy than joy, or so he would soon feel.

Vishesh of seven years, but quite a ways off from seven feet, was dusting off the bookshelf that itself boasted some mean credentials in terms of height. He lurked around the space like a spider, often scaring the daylights out of Bhushan, and in a way very much owning the place. It smelled like him, fresh and intelligent, and Bhushan was thankful just for being granted admittance every single time.

“What have you been reading that you have placed an entire army to watch the door? Don’t tell me — could it be?” Bhushan quirked an eyebrow.

“You’re early.” Cheeky and nonplussed.

“Here,” Bhushan offered the cat on his shoulder to his son. “Playmate. He even behaves. He can be the monster your armies have to slay.”

“It’s a she,” Vishesh said.

“Oh.” Laugh, damn you.

After he had taken the lid off his heavy coveralls, Bhushan had decked out senseless on the cold floor. A relaxed sigh helped pour the strain out of his twitching fingers. Any other day, he would have been swept off to sleep instantly.

“Listen,” he said sitting right back up. “There are so many things we can’t control, right? And you’re so young, there’s so much you haven’t experienced yet that you deserve to. But things don’t always bring justice, right? What if you were to be ripped away from me right away, right now — and me from you? What if there were not even the time to answer? What if everything ended tonight?”

“I’ll still be glad I met you, dad,” Vishesh put his small, pudgy hands over his scraggly beard. His eyes were so deep and old. Was Bhushan the only young one left in the god-forsaken world?

“What should we cook tonight?” He asked.

“Why should the last day be different from any other day, dad? Not that you’d do the cooking. And if it were different, wouldn’t you be wishing it never ended, trying to lengthen every taste of the food, so that when it wisped off, the loss was ever more painful?”

Bhushan didn’t have an answer to that. So they cooked the usual, gathered around the usual place with the usual steam heating up their noses, and even gave the cat a bowl. He couldn’t maintain it much longer, though, breaking the silence over his restless fumbling.

“You know why I do what I do, right? To me, no jewel can be prettier than you. To watch you smile unconsciously as you jump between the blue clouds, without a worry in the world. My luck though, you were born with more reserve than a cranky owl.”

Bhushan wanted to laugh at his own joke, but he was not sure if his voice was up to the job at the moment — he didn’t want it to crack and end up being petted filially by his son on their last night. Coughing, he said, “You’re responsible; you’re fair. You love everything; you want to help me out. You feel bad about having some good old fun while your old father busts his butt off. That’s all good

and okay. But how about we do something you really enjoy tonight? You don't even have to think of something. I will. What do you say?"

Vishesh looked struck. "Can we? Really? Anything I want?"

"I don't even understand what you're surprised about. It's always you turning me down, even though I want you to have a lot of fun. Only fun. That's the only reason I —"

"Let's go then, dad. Let's go mine together."

"Yes, let's go mine —"

Bhushan didn't know why the world froze, or why he couldn't simply say 'no' right after promising what he always wanted to his son. He didn't know why his jaw wouldn't clamp or shut so that he could move his tongue again, and he didn't know why the fear that descended was so chilling over his eyes, turning the peripheries of his vision dark red. He didn't know why it took Vishesh so much time to don Bhushan's yellow coveralls, gloves, and oversized boots — or why he was donning them in the first place. Ever so tidy — his son was, wasn't he? — he didn't forget to check his battery and clasp his belt before he opened the door, only to close it behind him. "That's what you get for not inviting me to eat while you had your fun," the black stone in Bhushan's pocket sneered, "Some bad manners." Bhushan was so heavy, that the stone couldn't chase after his son — or perhaps the stone was. Bhushan didn't know — it was so heavy, after all.

The father could move, however, if only too late — when enough time had passed that he had stopped keeping a count — it would frighten him far too much if he knew, and he couldn't afford that.

6.

The overseer sat on a high stage inaccessible even to the fittest climber. He sat where he could watch the movements of every little miner from, but none could catch a glimpse of his white hair and

abundant belly without being sun-blinded. Every so often he clanged on his large bell, the grating sound dragging jitters along the miners' bodies and making their teeth clatter. Rhythmically, systematically the bell announced clarity and certainty.

When Bhushan broke into the scene, a lot of people had gathered around his stage, faces red with anger. A rabble-rouser stood in front, foot insolently perched on the first rung of the ladder. "Overseer!" he called loudly, looking straight up without hesitance.

"I had a wife," yelled someone of the crowd. "She was a little bit unhappy. I wanted to give her the world, and no less. So I didn't touch that little pond of rot and let it deepen, as I worked to make my way up the ladder and make a bed of diamonds for her. The foot was to be made of carnelian and the head quartz. Even when the frame was made complete and stories from our happy marriage carved on each plank, I stayed true to my word and paid it no mind, let no bubble of excitement froth and burst, for I had to give her the perfect gift at its perfect ripening. Even one stone missing or misplaced wouldn't do. Today, when I brought home the final piece, I find her, a marble structure of bluish grey limbs, lying on my unfinished bed! Couldn't she have lived for one more day? Give me my time back!"

The tongue sniggered.

"I had a dream," said another. "I only had a dream, and I had to step on people's heads to get to it. In time, I came to be known as dour, unsympathetic, ruthless, cold... repulsive. I had to nod like a doorknob even when I wanted to crack a missed joke and make a puddle of myself. Worse, I had to feel like an authentic doorknob, or the spell wouldn't work. My dream was to build a palace of diamonds, so much more perfect than I would ever be. People would want, enjoy, covet it, but it would only belong to me. And I would be its creator; I would finally be something. I poured forty-four years into it, pages of geometry and barrels of alchemy before I placed each

stone carefully. And today, just as I was about to put the crown on it, yes, you guessed correctly, all the diamond had turned to cheap glass, and cracked and broke when I sneezed. I don't even know what I am looking for anymore, but give it all back to me! Give me back the person I never was!"

The rebel leader nodded sympathetically. "What a poetic finish," the tongue snickered again.

"I only had one thing. And that was the desire for more things," said the third person. "As long as I had my lust for jewels, all the jewels in the world were mine. They wanted me the same as I wanted them, because they want to be wanted. Today, I can't even feel that! I don't even want the greed back, but give it back."

"You heard them," the rebel leader proclaimed, circling and panting in anticipation of violence. "Obey. Or we will take you down and take it all back from your bloated belly if we must."

"It's the doing of that black stone in your shirt pocket," the tongue advised. "It has been hungry for so long; it has been sucking up all the magic it sees. You should get rid of it as soon as you can."

Of course — Bhushan had always known. But his front pocket was a black hole in his mind. He could not see it, let alone reach for it. Instead, he asked every bystander, "Have you seen my son?"

They did not confirm or deny. In fact, they didn't even shake their heads in whatsoever tiny ways to indicate they had heard. They were all looking raptly at the overseer's shadow like hungry animals in the zoo look at a plump visitor. The feed would soon start dropping, and they could not look away from the gates of bounty that were about to open. Bhushan moved between the bodies and asked every face the same question. The frustration made him want to sit down and cry like a little child — to throw up his arms and complain to someone adult and someone much bigger, "I have lost my book. I have lost my dress. I have lost my son!"

“Brace yourself,” the tongue forewarned, and “A—chooo!” it sneezed. A great undulation tipped everyone off balance, making them stick to whatever purchase they could find. In the break that opened, Bhushan stood steady and pitched his voice to the topmost he could scale.

“What does it matter? You monsters, will you help me look for my son?” were the words he ended up shooting out like a penniless god thrown into the hell of penury. Everything was still for a dull moment, and then the overseer spoke back. “What does it matter?” it confronted the crowd with the rich lisp of a maggot that had crawled up too far for its weight, and rang on its large bell. What did it matter? Nobody knew. So they all asked each other over and again until every particle in the air hummed the question like some sacred mantra.

The miners, who for the first time took a real look around, saw only dark confined spaces and thick vapour that was always at the risk of running out. They dashed for escape; anywhere was better than here.

Bhushan came across Anirban at a bend not particularly memorably badly lit or distinctly featured. Ani was looking at the jewel in his hand — and while its glow stayed ever reaffirmed in its continuance, it was the one in Ani that dimmed ever lower. This thing, this excruciatingly, unexplainably, incomprehensibly beautiful thing that came for him was his life’s purpose — his moment had come. “Tasty,” the black stone in Bhushan’s pocket licked its lips.

This wasn’t him. No, it couldn’t be it. There was no way. It didn’t make sense at all — there was more. So Ani threw it expertly into his bin of trash and zipped his gear back up, prepared to go back to work. “Why though? What’s the point? What will you do about the questions when you have gotten to the summit again? You can’t always keep running,” the questions came accompanied with the toll of the overseer’s bell. So Ani paused — and that wasn’t him either.

He didn't know what he was — and why the writhing head of a centipede came out from where the rest of his arm fell off, and why the mug of a pterodactyl smiled through where his thigh used to join his hip. “What am I, Bhushan?” he asked with eyes wider than lakes full of virulent disgust.

Bhushan didn't know, and he didn't have the time for such queries. “Have you seen my son?” he could only ask, and when no answer came within the five seconds he could squeeze out for his best friend, he left him there — perhaps to his end, perhaps to his beginning.

7.

The children of the miners lived in flowery worlds among friendly monsters. They dreamed big while their fathers and mothers dug, cheated, lied, and stole. In the blink of an eye, though, or with one gullible look sideways, they would suddenly grow up — still masquerading as children, still asking for the attention and the affection, but digging, lying, cheating, and stealing themselves now. The children now would not look twice at the garmentless beggar lying by a side street or a friend or two they had to break to get where they wanted to go. Those friends would have done the same or worse to them if they could — they'd be sure about that without much thinking. Very sure.

Above the ground was different. Here was a place with no cliffs and no horizons. Here substance had no value — and value had no substance, everything was up in a dream, and the dreams never ended. Here everyone got what they wanted, and therefore wanted nothing; they had no desires — or conflicts, disappointments, and attachments. It was ghoulish territory, and as was famously reported, the ghouls never grew up.

Nobody knew whence the ghouls had come or what the purpose was behind their lives. As lazy as they seemed when the time came to

move a finger, they could accomplish a lot with that one motion when they finally did so. They were the people who had built the builders, the ultimate creations that could create everything else, and running out of further work, had sat down to catch their breaths — a forever breath.

It was said that a miner had once lost her way and stumbled upon a solitary pipe that led upwards — the air was musty overground, and the sky seemed claustrophobically close compared to how free it was under. But most surprisingly of all, she had found that the people didn't move or talk unless someone asked them to. They didn't have to, they told her. The builders had taken care of their bodies in such a way that they didn't wear away or gather dust — and why eat fragrant rice or dive into the coldest pool when they could do the same things and more inside their minds, and feel it with none of the splendour getting lost?

Dreams were the truth for them, they had said, and the rest fiction — perhaps that was how it was meant to be all along? There was much value in what was not.

The miner had big dreams — some of them involved her directing a legion of thundering bisons at a crouching citadel from a high mountaintop and catching the dew that seeped from the skies at night to proffer to her eleven sisters, but there were more pressing and imminent needs that clouded over those — her friends who looked like they would catch the coldness of demise before they did the drafts of success, many of whom had already lost all they had to their endless quests. And here she was before a people who could make everything they worked for come true at the snap of a finger — which was a bit scary in that prospect — and unable to utter a single wish. It was as if the ghouls could read her mind — they made for great hosts, and when she was preparing to leave on her way back home, armed with elaborate directions and generous means of subsistence, it was them that broached the difficult topic:

“Don’t you want anything? Do you not have any wishes?”

It was alright, they said — they had everything, and it was not as if they were going to have any less if they let everyone else also have everything.

She didn’t have the volition to deny their curious eyes. “Like this?” they had asked watching the bison tread off towards the heavily guarded stone walls — their feet beat like the drums of a great apocalypse, and it came with the recoil of splattered air, something she would never have known unless she had dreamt it. They had fulfilled each and every one of her fantasies — somehow, she hadn’t felt shy of sharing them, and how could she, when they seemed much more moved, stimulated, and scintillated by them than she herself felt? They had told her she could take all these blessings into the mines where they bled from their teeth to turn their dreams into money and cars, and bring them all up above the ground so that they could dream together. They were such good people — who in their right senses could have named them ghouls, she couldn’t help but wonder.

It was only that she didn’t have the strength to move her feet to take a step down the pipes when she had made a running boat she had thought into existence bring her to the missing entrance — they had become feeble and withered like a twice-shot arrow and her hair had turned white like someone who had lived out their whole life in a single night. It was certain it was the right place, and it was not just a dream, as the bursts of sweat and sounds that came out intermittently were much fainter and harder to believe than they would be in a dreamed world exquisitely crafted by the builders. It was reality that waited below, and it didn’t hold up to the standards of the perfection that rested above. If she could only walk down her path, she would be able to reunite with her friends and complete her purpose — but the ghouls had already devoured it all. They had leached off her wills and passions, things every miner must have, and

devoured her particularities like flies on a fruit until she had become one of them — they had made nice ripples in the ocean they lived on, for a second's entertainment and not much more. And now, it didn't matter at all whether she went down or she didn't, and while doing something takes a reason, doing nothing requires nothing. She was very happy now, and was always going to be — it was just that she was not who she used to be anymore.

The ghouls were the pinnacle of existence. Becoming perfect, nothing urged the ghouls to effect change, to acknowledge beginnings and endings, to wake up and dream something new. They rested ever and more, and dreamed — which would seem a prison to some, but freedom to others — of nothing in particular. Why think of a particular face or specific outcome when everything, every possibility was conceivable, and they all claimed the mind equally?

The miners had only heard dying whispers about those who lived but didn't live aboveground, and didn't really like what they had heard. They looked at the ghouls — rightly, some would opine — as parasites that lived off the substance of others' toil. As beings who didn't matter at all in existing. Perhaps they were right. But what did the world soul matter by existing? For whom did it exist? What purpose did it serve? The ghouls would argue right back.

The will does not bother about rules and laws and justice and kindness. It knows what it wants, and will stop at nothing to get it. Now that everything the miners had worked for had been taken away at the last departure, it was incredibly upset. It felt like it deserved all of that which would most certainly kill itself when it had been had, like it had the apocryphal miner who had risen — or sunk.

The miners therefore rose in a great and clamorous uprising to the ground. They came out of the open sewers, manholes, mouse holes, and through the nozzles of cleansing volcanoes and up via the stems of softly drooping flowers. The miners were angry, and they wanted just compensation. It was unjust that the ghouls would have

everything they wanted — which was nothing — and they would have nothing even when they wanted everything. The ghouls welcomed them with open arms — finally, new faces and some more exciting fantasies. They waited with warm hospitality to be embraced, but the miners shot through them and their world. It was new indeed — like the grotesque reverie that crops up and latches on, refusing to wash away, changing the norm and becoming the norm, making the implausible seem inevitable and inescapable all of a sudden.

The ghouls tried becoming the wife to the man who had lost her on the eve of gift-giving, but he had no doubt it was only a mirage from the fact that she wasn't supposed to be living, and didn't waste a single glance back at her. "Why?" she felt the burden of not understanding. "I look just like her; I smell just like her; I bear all our memories. I am her, and this time we can actually make it right — why won't you accept me still?"

"It is because of that," he said. "Reality is not supposed to be like that; it is supposed to exist outside of you."

"Is that why you will run from your own dreams?"

"Until I have toiled, lied, cheated, and hurt to make them come true, yes, I will."

The ghouls didn't understand what made the miners the miners and what made the reality the reality. The dreams tried to become the palace for the man who couldn't put the cone atop his aspirations, but they wouldn't crack under any pressure he had the mind to put on them, and this made him wiser. They learned, however, and now they would crack, break, scatter to the storms and implode under the earthquakes as realistically as anything could. Each time it happened, however, he would simply wish for the cataclysm to undo itself, and his palace would be back there waiting for him, unharmed and put together, shining in the heart-light.

"You aren't true," he said to his creation, and toppled it over with a simple push before turning his back to walk away. "Wait," they

yelled, “It’s only because you don’t want us to be true! What’s the point in dreaming if you’ll abandon us in the end anyway?” He left them behind mercilessly, in tatters and pieces.

Some of the ghouls were mired in a scene from the movies they loved re-enacting — the venom would trip off their heads and the whiskey would roll off their tongues as they proclaimed the world to rise and sustain their barricades — made from chairs and tables and doorsills and window panes of all classes and creeds. This time, however, the head of the serpent that rose above the obstacles seemed more furious than it really ought to be, and too cool to be acting — the miners broke through the barricades and charged at them full force, queerly not getting back up when they took a bullet in the chin or pelvis. Something told the ghouls that such would be the fate of them as well, when the chipped axes and bent handlebars got within striking range — it was not a play anymore, it was death coming for them. Death was something that had acquired meaning all of a sudden, since reincarnation had lost its own meaning — it was more than an experience to derive momentary thrill from and there was no nexus between the executioner and the executed to nullify the effects anymore — the miners didn’t want to play by the rules. They wanted to build and not break, and break and not build, and impose those rules on everyone else — they wanted to take the ghouls with them, becoming an army of truth in essence. The ghouls felt like they had lost control of everything — that there was something even bigger than them, and they ran in life threatening fright. Anywhere was better than there.

8.

It all went downhill from there. Down the hills which the miners chased the ghouls and chased themselves, there was a river that separated what was from what was next. A man clad in all white stood

by its bank, observing water take place of water. The water stilled and the man moved out of stasis to take note of the bodies crashing and tumbling down the slope — some of them charging forth without knowing where they wanted to go, some of them knowing full well where they wanted to go, but ending up somewhere completely different and lacking the power to do anything about it.

The man raised a hand, as if in a totalitarian salute or some half-baked promise to meet again when the universe found itself once more in the exact same circumstances somehow.

“Have you seen my son?” Bhushan asked the man at the end of the world.

“I may have,” said the magician, “But before that, may I take that off your hands?”

It was only from the jump the weight made from Bhushan’s shoulder to the magician’s that he was even faintly reminded that it was still there — had been all along.

“What was her name? If I recall, it was something like C... Sheee... Bil something, Shee something? Ah, I guess we’ll just call her Billi,” the magician gave himself some much needed but not lacked relief. “Now, what were you asking? I might have seen your son, but who might you be to him?”

“I am his father,” Bhushan said — because he was not thinking straight.

“Is he about seven years, this much high up in the head, and too many seven years lived for his age?”

“Yes, yes!” said Bhushan. “That’s exactly — and he’s fresh and he’s strong and powerful. And you get a wad of drenched money bills in the bottom of your heart when you open the door and find him where he should be — should be, but you fear. But he doesn’t like to play.”

“And why’s that? Why does he not want to play?” asked the magician. “Who is he?”

If only Bhushan knew — it was the mystery he had been attempting to unravel all along.

“I can’t help you unless you can tell me who your son was. After all, I may have seen a lot of seven-year boys named Vishesh wearing a miner’s boilersuit three times their size pass by here — to different directions and destinations, you know?”

He was going to find out who his son was the next time he could talk to him, but that was not an option for now, and there was nothing he could do about it. It was not clear from the magician’s twisted smile if he was serious or just playing around, and would yield if prodded enough — Bhushan, however, didn’t have the time to find out. He ventured a foot into the coursing, clear water, and was almost ripped away.

“You shouldn’t,” said the magician. “You’re dry and thirsty, aren’t you? And the water’s lonely. It’ll take you.”

“How — what can I do then?” he asked, as if it was the magician’s responsibility. The watery superglue was holding his leg firmly to its slimy bottom.

“It won’t let go of you, huh?” the magician remarked. “Just like you won’t let go of your son. Very well. To be honest, I, too, want to see how far you can go in your dogged pursuit without giving up, and what happens after that. I can afford to help you a bit.”

The magician waved his wand, and Bhushan dropped like a stone on the river bank. “The heaviest of the objects float the easiest, you know?” the magician picked him up to peruse. The river was making a philosopher out of him alright — and he didn’t necessarily mind it all that much. As they said, change was good and bad, and good was bad for a change, and change was good before good could change — ah, perhaps it was getting out of hand, after all.

“Show me,” he said, and lashed Bhushan out at the sea.

“And what about us?” cried every other miner that was standing over the head of a dead and dispersed ghoul.

“Don’t worry, you will all enjoy the special treatment too,” he said, turning them into similar stones, and throwing them at the river for fun — stones that skipped themselves up the river made for quality fun.

The race had begun much before the pebbles were born, and much before the magician himself had been born — it had begun before there could be anybody to wave the flags or blow the whistles. There were no spectators to commend or cheer, and yet the racers were furious as anything. It was not a race against the self, and it was not a race against the others — there was nothing to prove, nothing to win, only an unending fury in the gas tank that was inherited — and only one way to go, forward.

The water was a distraction — and it was sly. “Where are you going?” the droplets shooting off asked the skipping pebbles, “There is no way forward here, no way back. No right and no wrong — it is only water everywhere.”

The miners were smarter, however — they were going towards their heart’s desire, and they went because their hearts desired. “I am going towards my son,” Bhushan explained. He didn’t know which way his son went, but he would reach him eventually if he didn’t stop.

“Take us with you, then,” the droplets said. “You’ll reach him when down is up even faster — we’ll help you.”

Bhushan acted like he didn’t hear them — there were no free lunches in his world. A fish jumped up in his path, and smiled with its wide lips and glazed teeth. “I am not the fish you let go when I ask you to,” it said, “I am the fish you still catch and find a diamond from. Well, that was my distant uncle — you will find a detailed map to where your son went inside my belly. And you can cook the rest and take it with you for lunch in your travels.” Bhushan went through its mouth and shot through its tail; he didn’t even pause and feel whether there were any papery textures in the tearing sensations they underwent.

The water was finally getting weary of his intransigence. “Just give it up, will you?” it huffed and puffed. “Just how far will you chase what you want? No matter the length and the speed, the distance between the two of you will never shrink, you know?”

“Do you think you have infinite reserves of energy and limitless motivation? That body of yours is too heavy, and the earth beneath the waves loves it; rest it now.”

It was right. The sun was setting — or rising — or doing something vaguely similar. Even the sun couldn’t bend the laws of love and gravity; what did he think of himself, being the tiny flat-bellied pebble stone that he was? Every time he launched off believing he was going as high as the moon, he would soar even twice or thrice the height, but then inevitably be called down as if by an invisible string to a loving home that wanted to drown him. At the same time, however, he was heavy — really heavy — his apprehensions, the clanging premonitions under the bridge of his nose, the empty air of impending loss — the weights helped him crash back like a meteor and rebound even more furiously, trying to tear through the veneers of the illusion called the universe. When even that turned out to be inadequate, he decided to hurt the water — hurt it hideously and turn it red with his swooping claws, so that it grew mortally afraid of him and threw him up before he could catch it — its wounds and its wails couldn’t really hurt him; he had already lost everything he had ever possessed, including his conscience. He decided to shove a few of his straggling friends into its garrulous mouth to try and shut it forever, and he jumped between their floating carcasses — a bridge of stone taking him to his beloved.

The hungry feel more tastes than the full ever could — the dispossessed could never feel as empty as the denizen of a mansion. The water had itself to keep it company, and that’s why it could feel lonely — Bhushan didn’t even have himself, how could he feel tired? Soon enough, he had shown it what was what, and it was the water

that had shut up from fatigue and hopelessness — Bhushan wasn't hopeful and he was still going.

9.

The water beneath Bhushan's head was clear and tasteless — it was smaller than an idea and yet could spread to envelope an entire world of form. The air above his feet was blue and mushy — it was mysterious in its obduracy and its lack in limits. It didn't try to tackle him to the ground and straddle his chest with its faux heaviness anymore — it pulled him towards all that it didn't have and even beyond as he flew forward feet first. A black head popped out of the dark chasm that fell into him, and Bhushan sighed in relief, gathering words and reason to hurl towards it — he would need more than desperation to change fate.

Weeds grew and coral snakes slithered where Vishesh had gone — stopped and waited for Bhushan to catch up, as he knew he would. Bhushan picked one up on his way and slung it around his son's neck like a garland of rings. "Hey, let's play!" he said, giving a chipper slap on his back.

"Hey, let's play!" he said again.

His son had rested his equipment against the wandering backs of starfishes and sea combs, and now steadily carved into a wall made of something far more sinister and stubborn — and far more promising — than granite.

"Who are you?" he asked Bhushan.

"I am your father," he replied with slight hesitation. Just what was up with everybody, going around asking whom who was?

"You are not me," Vishesh concluded mildly. "And I am not you."

'Why did you do it?' Bhushan wanted to ask, but he couldn't risk it. They couldn't see the time from their height, and what if the day

ended on his question? “Let’s play! Isn’t it more exciting when it’s two?” he said instead, excitedly.

“I’m sorry, dad, I just had to do something. Something I had to do. Something I needed and wanted to do,” Vishesh whispered — not looking a hair’s worth perturbed or unfocused.

“And it didn’t include me? What could be so important?”

“I’m a better miner than you,” Vishesh said. “There’s something I wanted even more than you wanted my happiness. Even now that you have far surpassed all your competitors and reached me here, see, I am so far ahead of you, chipping away at this dead darkness as if it were nothing. We are meant to mine separately, dad. You can’t keep up with me.”

They laughed. Vishesh’s work was done — his unforgiving hands had closed in on something precious deep inside the shy deadness, and he scooped some of it out — a clump of living soil. It was pregnant with possibilities — as much a toy spaceship as a rampaging, demented hydra, as much a battery of ceaseless cannons as a hardworking rampart. It was the best clay for toymaking.

“This?” Bhushan couldn’t believe himself. “You could just have told me; I would’ve dug this out for you ages ago.” He grasped Vishesh’s shoulder in genuine interest and thrill this time, “What do you want to play?”

“No, dad. What do *you* want to play?” Vishesh said firmly. “And no, not this. This is what I wanted —,” he placed his palm over Bhushan’s heart.

“Listen to it,” Vishesh said. “Why do you want to watch me play? The truth is, you want to play more than anyone else, don’t you? And unlike anything else, playing is something you can’t do together; you’re meant to do it alone. You can only do it alone.”

“I’m not you, dad, and you’re not me, and this is the only thing we know,” he pressed his life’s wish into his father’s scared hands, “So go play.”

10.

Heaven was spelled with an extra n — Heavenn, and they were very particular about it.

Their guide wore thick glasses under her professionally beautiful forward curls — the rest were neatly shepherded into a poised bun. She made them sit in even rows and handed a card to each of them, going on and on about their orientation. Apparently, they could only spend a fixed portion of whatever virtue they had saved during their lives, and that too depended on the interest rates and the monthly sales volumes — there were highs and lows — the Asuras attacked sometimes, for example. They were eligible for upgradation to premium cards, however — they only had to agree to be reborn for one more cycle and promote a certain cause that had to be crusaded for at that juncture, and earn the right to spend however much they wished that way. They had to brush their teeth every night and be good children as well, if they didn't want their privileges put under temporary suspension, and —

“Wait, why is brushing teeth good?” Bhushan had to interrupt.

“Because I say it is so,” said their guide, pushing her glasses up her nose.

“But there's a reason I think —”

“And there's a reason I think you're wrong.”

“Please hear me —”

“Only if you listen to me, and him, and her, and everybody else that came before you. You're standing on the shoulders of giants there; please don't defile them,” she said scornfully.

“I think you're not very good.”

“I am me,” she said, “And two and two equals four. And thunder strikes because it is attracted to the gold hidden underground —

everyone knows it. And you are nothing but numbers and clocks and statistics and feelings.”

“Teacher, am I good?” Bhushan asked her in a tiny voice.

An evil grin spread across her jawline — she had been awarded her favourite thing in the world. Now she could tell him what she thought was — no, what she knew was — no, what was — no, what had always been, because everybody knew it. Mollified, she could only be angelic and liberal, “Well, now, I don’t think all that’s in you is bad. You can be a bit talkative at times, and too perfunctory, but I’m sure that as you age, your real potential will start shining through. As long as I’m here, though, you don’t have a thing to worry about —”

“Gah. Fuck it. Fuck you, man. I don’t have the time for this,” Bhushan shoved off his bench and stamped off before her dumbfounded glasses could fall on her agape mouth and trap it shut.

People were chattering, swigging bottles, and partying hard behind the opened doors. “Where’s the fun and the games at?” Bhushan asked the twin doormen. They looked at him, his lifetime card, at the ongoing rave, and at him again, more uncomprehending than a pair of walnuts. It was a long and wide room, but there was still an exit somewhere, and he found it.

Outside was a lasciviously bouncing sea and a thin strip of sand it wore around its waist. The curious doormen had followed him out, and his classmates stepped out one by one, in convoy. “Don’t you want to play?” one of the doormen asked him. “There would be plenty of time to watch the sun die later, just as there was when you were alive. It’s always playtime that has to get deferred by the darkness that comes before and after.” They didn’t understand, did they?

Three children were building a magnificent sand castle near where Bhushan set his camp. They ran over to find out what was on and about.

“I’m Shiev,” said one of them.

“I’m Vish.”

“Will you let us play with you?” asked the one named Bahmma.

“No way. No way I’m letting anyone else in on my fun,” said Bhushan. “Unless...” he glanced meaningfully at their more completed than unfinished castle. The troika laughed and clapped — ah, the carelessness only children could laugh with, too easily lured with the prospect of enjoyment, too eager to share, too quick to trust.

“This is the main street,” Bhushan drew a flat stick he had pilfered from somewhere across the sand as far as he could run without panting. Main Street was bejewelled with glistening lampposts — evenly broken off twigs and small sticks — and giant billboards — leaves still green that billowed in the wind. “This is the traffic policeman’s stand,” he placed a round bottle cap on the large roundabout everyone loved passing, “and it is connected to the police headquarters, just like all the other traffic stands.” A half-broken brick with moss on one facade served as the police headquarters, and empty matchboxes dispersed in the sand as the patrol cars. “You,” Bhushan addressed one his classmates that had followed in his entourage, “You man the police headquarters and look after all the traffic stands.”

Empty bottles of sunscreen were their ambulances and a shoe box the top of which had gone with the wind their hospital. It was a small one for the size of their city, and there were only two ambulances for all their troubles — it was not an enviable job for whoever was going to look after the healthcare system, but that was fun in its own right, and there were plenty of volunteers who stepped up to the plate.

The mines started where the city ended; they were cavernous and cramped, and Bhushan and the three kids had a lot of fun digging them out, especially when their hands drove into the sand and touched each other, creating a downwards tunnel. They only had to dig the mouths of the tunnels; the miners would do the rest — they

were a people with an unending hunger. The curiosities they dug up piled up into a spectacular mountain on top of the tunnel, and the ghouls made their homes there. It was a small wonder that these two peoples, despite living so mind-meltingly near, had never come face to face, and there was sure to be instant war if they ever did.

“What will we call our town?” asked Vish, who had been entrusted with delivering milk to all the doors in the morning.

“Name? Let’s see, why not Bhushanpuri?” offered Bhushan.

All was good in and around Bhushanpuri, and it was one of the blander mornings everyone woke up to. There was no pothole down which a toddler had disappeared like *poof* which would now necessitate a rescue team to be hatched together off their half-bitten bread-toasts. There was no fire raging on top of the fire-station that would call for a code magenta whereby every old woman, toddler, and stray would be pressed into emergency service and handed a half-filled bucket of water. Mr. Naskar and Mrs. Naskar Sanyal were in their car, their baby size teddy bear between them, because they’d never have a baby, arguing about what size they should go for as they drove to the store where they sold the televisions — and there was no airplane crash on their way, nor a malfunctioning traffic light, nor a petrol tank with one too many holes — it was all too normal, which was also fun once in a while, and the kids, including Bhushan’s ninety or so classmates, were enjoying a lot.

“Hold on a minute,” said Vish, looking up from his meandering milk van — “What are you going to be? Won’t you play with us?” The other two also stopped what they were doing, stricken by the horrific possibility of losing a playmate. Ninety-three was a lot less than ninety-four.

Fear not. “Me?” Bhushan smiled widely. He sprinkled some wild sand on top of his head and brandished a pair of toothpicks through his closed lips. “I am the ogre-monster. Oh ho ho. I’m so hungry. I’ll devour everything.”

He roared towards their picturesque city, each step thundering ominously on the dirty beach. His prey screamed in shrill voices, terror mixing with excitement. The radio station went flying with a slow-motion kick. The patrol car didn't even crunch against his teeth as he gobbled it up. The policemen had assembled in a last-ditch attempt to bore holes into his body with their puny side arms — some of the shots hurt, and the ogre monster went down on one knee — but that was not merely enough. He was going to go up, and this time, stay up. He rampaged and bumbled around, throwing a wrench into their peaceful lives, all around an oblivious Mr. Naskar and Mrs. Naskar Sanyal who kept invested in their argument about which route ran shorter to their home — one was a geometry teacher, after all, and the other worked in the municipal office. They would build it all up again, the ogre-monster thought to himself as he sent the match box cars careening into one another and stirred up a terror the dimensions of which were heretofore unseen. They would build it up as if it hadn't hurt at all, and the ogre-monster would turn up again, and they would play a lot again, then they would build it up again, and so on and so forth. But none of that mattered for anything — for now, the ogre-monster was going to play — and he was going to play a lot.

Chapter Ten

1.

Amrita was reading a book on the small bed in her tiny and spacious room when the magician arrived. “Now, now, since I have been summoned here, there must be a reason. What kind of magic would you like to see?” he asked, flourishing much lower than his pedigree.

Amrita took off her heavy glasses and scrunched up her nose. “I can’t see well.”

“At your age, being able to see enough is enough,” he reverted with a smirk.

“Let’s see. When I was this young,” Amrita showed a measure of height with her hand, “a run-down circus had come to our town. The magician they brought didn’t have a name that was known by more people than could fit their tent that was more empty than full whichever way the glass was turned, or a coat for that matter which was not torn in places carefully hidden and therefore noticed by all. He had this cool trick with his cards; he could push them underneath his eyes and take them out of his nostrils — I want to see that, please.”

A florally decorated deck jumped into the curtseying hand of the magician, making him jump. The cards themselves seemed to be barely containing their excitement from the miracles they were going to witness from the front deck — and the magician glared at them with much malice. “Um,” he had to say when Amrita tapped her fingers.

“Are you really a magician?” she was getting suspicious. What if he was a burglar — or a rapist come to ravage the bounty of her beauty? Her fingers crept back towards her book surreptitiously. She

would defend herself like a proud queen if need be — and crush his skull with it without a doubt.

“Let’s see,” the confused looking magician was shuffling furiously. “How about this?” he put one up.

It was the dog she had once had, smiling at her from doggie heaven. She barged her jaws out of the picture to nip at the fingers holding her up — and was promptly thrust back into the book without a spine. Next was the cake she had eaten exactly seventeen days and sixteen hours ago. That alone would not have been nearly enough to make her clap, but it was too good not to when the magician pulled it out of the card at her request. She gave him a larger slice than she would give anyone else — more than one tenth, or one twentieth if she had to be honest, but who wanted to go down that rabbit hole when there was heaven on the plate waiting to descend down her esophagus?

The magician showed her an image of her dad from when he was so young that she couldn’t even remember how he looked. But more importantly, he showed her a humongous Lady Kenny after that. “No, no, that’s your family gramophone from back when you were six. You must have loved the —” the magician rushed to correct.

“Psh,” said Amrita. “No matter how you look at it, that’s a Lady Kenny.” She even offered her glasses up to him. Her nose would never fail to recognize one, even if it lay like the sleeping beauty inside a random card. “Now, take that out before you lose that in the deck, will you?”

The magician sighed. “Gosh, you really love sweets, don’t you?” he made them a table and some sweet stuff to go with it.

“What if I told you that death is the sweetest sweet of them all?” he asked her, watching in rapture the worlds collide and separate inside his cup of simmering tea.

“What?” asked Amrita. Her ears stopped working sometimes — they were refined in character and didn’t like hearing everything.

“Will I get to eat more sweet things when I have had death? No? Then,” she dismissed him with a wave that had broken many a heart in its day.

“You only understand how sweet something is once you taste it, you know. Bitter, sour — it stays with you. Sweet, you have to have it again and again and relish it to remember. Isn’t that why sweet is special? You have got to taste death, you must — as a connoisseur of the pleasures the world holds, but you are deathly afraid of it, I can tell.”

The magician got up to right his hat. With one quick cut of his finger, the walls and the trees around them disappeared. “Magic,” he said to the emptiness that came out of nowhere, and it started raining old people from the sky.

Those that fell were different from Amrita. Some of them were more of sourpusses than bitter-gourds. For some of them, their taste buds had stopped working long ago and they couldn’t understand why they had ever loved having some anymore. Life wasn’t that sweet for them to resist giving up. For some others, even though they turned over and under in the air and their plasticky skin was almost ripped open by the forces that wanted them to fly, making strange cartoons of their faces, they smiled serenely as if their lives depended on it — as if their grandchildren were watching, and they had to pose prettily for that last picture that would hang watchfully to be ignored on the wall.

The wastes and the had-beens were being thrown out of the prison that fed and nourished them without ever being thanked or cherished. They didn’t break open into blood, bones, and guts when they struck the ground, though — their idyllic smiles morphed into heaps of the most interesting sweets in the craters they made. Amrita was amazed, wondering which one of her friends to eat first.

“Go on, what are you waiting for?” the magician permitted.

She would, if not for the great horde of paraders that entered. Masses of slaves marched, clapping, cheering, and encouraging their missing master, stamping on the sweets on the ground, plastering them into an oblivion where all that came from sugar returned to sugar. Amrita was livid.

“Off my property!” she roared at them and the flies that were not too late to fly in likewise, and charged like a valiant lone warrior, invisible spear in hand. The paraders gave her wide berth and left her sweets alone, so she started to eat them before the flies could. One by one she would get to them all, she promised.

“If only everyone had the same zeal for life as you,” the magician said in passing, sounding sleepy. “We get tired of the taste after one or two of those darned sweets. Everyone has a limit, though. It’ll be fun to see to how far you go.”

After a long time, when Amrita could hear or see no more, death appeared to her as a large burgundy sweet. She would run to it to give it the warm hug it deserved, but she had eaten too much, so she it beckoned it to her, and it came rolling.

A musty scent came from it that was so irresistible that it took in all the flies and their larvae that were crawling all over its body. Amrita could only open her mouth — so small, she didn’t know if the sweet would fit through it. But it promised her it would, no matter what it took.

“What have I done to deserve you?” Amrita shed a tear.

“I don’t know,” death told her. “What do you do to deserve to go through all that pain and happiness you humans go through? Heck, I don’t even know what I have done to deserve you all, to begin with. But I love you, and you love me, and all this talk is making my head spin. I can’t wait anymore.”

So Amrita had the sweet in a flash, because Amrit did not deserve to be savoured like a mere king’s condiment, and she let it have her.

2.

Inside the womb there were possibilities, possibilities, and possibilities. And the billions of unborn souls that floated on the ocean of indigo liquid. They looked like shining orbs of all colours with airy unformed hands jutting out from their sides. They were the magician's last audience, and the toughest one yet to please.

They wanted to be born. The magician had been trying unsuccessfully for hours to change their minds, and they weren't having it. "Life has been going on for trillions of years," he told them. "Trillions of souls have gone through trillions of cycles. Every emotion one can think of has been formed into every word that can be thought of. It's not as if there can't be something more, but at this point, it would only be redundant. Life has lost its meaning. The living has gone weary. Why don't we give it a rest?"

"We don't care," they insisted. "We don't mind if we only inherit skin deep soil and butter thick skies, it will still be ours. Mine."

"What's the point?" inquired the magician. "There have been grand betrayals and great sacrifices — armies and planets lost and regained — and nobody remembers. Why do you put such great premium on something that worthless? Don't you see how wasteful each of you are?"

"But we are that generation," they had faith and hope. "We will do everything right, make no mistakes. We will be kind to people. We will be kind to those who are not people. We will write the perfect story and be the ones to read it simultaneously."

"It's not magic tricks we want to see," they were certain, "It's what is ours that we want. No more, no less."

"Ugh — fine." The magician had had it, "You shall have it."

It was at that moment Vishesh appeared on the scene, felt hat and pick axe in tow, wearing boots and a backpack he could live in. "Speak of the devil," muttered the magician.

“Gather round me,” he said to the unborn, and started to name them — “Red, Blue, Green, Yellow,” and so on. “You will now play a game of hide and seek with your elder brother,” he grabbed Vishesh and brought him to the fore, “— here. If you can give him the slip him until the day’s end, you will get your heart’s desire.”

A game! They were excited — some started to bounce up and down. Some were more confused. What was hide and seek? They wanted to know. It was a game one had to know if one wanted to live, the magician told them. It was so difficult that even the best universities couldn’t teach it — and those who could do it well could do it well, and there was no hope for those who couldn’t. If one couldn’t hide in plain sight, if one couldn’t cower behind their compatriots so that they got chosen first, off to the butcher’s table one went.

The not-children were still confused, but a dancing current along their spines told them they would learn on the go — without a doubt. Vishesh, on the other hand, was quite obviously worried about how he was going to harvest them all before the day ended. “Why, it’s entirely possible,” the magician smiled enigmatically — arithmetic clearly not his strongest suit.

In the beginning, Green thought she was killing it. She would hide behind her own dreams and dream of her friends being collected in Vishesh’s bag before her, and it would happen. She could understand the magician’s words a bit now. In time, though, her thoughts started to become disobedient, commencing a war of independence against her. Dreamworld had only one door, and if she didn’t get out before the thoughts took charge, she would become their food forever, with no sense of what she was.

Relocation, it was to be then. She picked up a mask from a street shop and put it on, becoming one among uncountable others. ‘Good luck finding me now,’ she thought smugly. Vishesh, however, only had to open his palm, and the masks flew off the faces of the unborn

into their home on it — and he collected them all one after the other. The real people, however, had worn them so long that they wouldn't come off no matter how strong the pull was. It was hard to tell what had happened to the faces under masks that once used to be them. 'Damn, aren't they resilient people?' Green thought.

'I'll hide in plain sight then,' she planned. 'This is my world; there is not a single thing here I can't control. I'll take shelter in one of these stray hearts; let's see him find me there.' A strange fear had corrupted into all the pedestrians there, however, and Green couldn't find a single heart the door to which was open. 'What is this fear,' Green wondered, 'when I made sure to choose all the good things to begin my life with?' What made her different from them? — she couldn't quite figure out, looking at the afraid-folk. What made them such failures even when they didn't have to be?

One open door invited even though it was solitary, and closed behind him when Green went through it. It was the perfect place to hide, for one couldn't even tell from outside that the wall they saw was actually something else. A handsome man waited inside. "Hello, there," he smiled in welcome.

"Hi," Green said.

The man was unbuckling his rather long leather belt. It was heavy and fashionably spiked. "Why don't you catch your ears and kneel down?" the man asked conversationally.

Green was a little bit distracted, thrilled from the joy of hiding, listening for footsteps outside, and it took him a moment to process the request. "Well, I don't want to," he felt guilty for not accepting his host's suggestion. The man was wrapping the belt around his fingers and unwrapping, in a very loving way. He repeated the same request, an angel made out of patience. Green didn't know what to say, or he knew very well, but lacked the courage to. So he waited, wishing someone would swoop down in a clown's dress and say "April fool's!" After that, the sweat could gather in suds on his

forehead and they could all laugh deliriously at how he had fallen for the simpleminded prank.

The man beat the belt in the air, straight and sharp as an iron sword. Ten feet away from Green, but he could feel the air cut through his skin, raising every hair on his arm as it whistled merrily. “Now, I can’t be asking you forever, can I?” the man said, taking a small step forward — so small that he felt he would pee himself. He wielded his belt in space like an executioner’s hammer, and Green could feel each lash land on his skin. He could taste the blood that would sputter out, hear the bones that would bruise irrecoverably. “Why?” he wanted to ask. “What have I done wrong? Why is it my fault? What could I have done better? What have I done to you?” He knew, however, all that would bring him was the belt.

So Green caught his ears, and looking down, knelt with his bare knees on the prickly ground. He could feel the eyes of the world on him, a cheer going up from an audience of pests and pets. He could feel his unborn brothers and sisters all looking at him, confused as to what to feel at the sorry sight. He could feel himself float out of his body and look at himself from a bird’s hover. He looked at the boy kneeling, and felt absolute shame, absolute humiliation — absolute victory. He could understand why the audience cheered — he would start clapping himself if the exhibition went on a minute more.

Pleased finally, the man smiled in kindness. Green felt like his hands were made of lead — he wanted to put them down, and for the ground to part and take him in, never to bob up again. He couldn’t put them down, though, for he feared the gentleness of the man, always hanging on a string. Tears, regardless of how forcefully he tried to send them back, were on the verge of breaking the whites of his eyes and flooding down to complete the artist’s signature.

“I am Reason,” the man said. “I am the law you didn’t make. I am absolute, and you will obey me.”

“Don’t go hiding in these places,” the door slammed open. “Come, you are the last one,” Vishesh looked comically muscular despite how small his shoulder was. Cool as a cucumber, he took the scene in, rolled his sleeves up his little hands, and strode forward. He punched the scary man in the waist, breaking his visage into sandy smithereens.

“That’s all it takes,” he told Green. “No matter how small you seem in front of your fears, you just take a breath and punch through it. It’s only then you realize how big you are.”

Vishesh picked him up by the collar and started to trek back to the magician. “How did you do it? Aren’t you afraid of the hurt? The belt?” Green wanted to ask desperately. As he watched the people in his world recoil from his sight now, though, he could understand their fear. He was their Reason, the cause for their existence.

“That, my child, is the secret we all know. You are all fixated on living life as it is, relishing all it brings. You want to feel the fear, thrill, happiness in the flesh. Let me tell you, then.”

“Happiness can only come when you have submitted everything to fear, when you feel no shame in shame anymore, no corruption in dishonour,” the magician said.

“The price of life, is *life* itself. If you want to live freely with a head held high, you must be prepared to throw life away at any moment. Otherwise, as long as you *want* things, there are certain rules. You will give away parts of your honour, dignity, self, and compromise — never to be whole again. That is what we call living. Tell me now. Do you want to *live*? In that case, are you prepared to throw away *life*? If you are prepared to throw it away, why want it in the first place?”

“You tricked us!” the unborn clamoured.

“You have already gone through the process we call life,” the magician shrugged, preparing to leave. His work was done.

“We need compensation,” they said to the magician’s retreating backside. “Give him to us. He is kind. He will play with us all night.

He won't ask to stop even if he's tired." They were talking about Vishesh. They had seen him put his arms around Green and not move an inch until his shaking had stopped.

The magician shrugged again. "Doesn't concern me. I think it doesn't concern him either."

Even if it did, Vishesh knew from the distaste in his mouth that the unborn had indeed lived. They had become calculating, after all. They had learnt to take advantage. If he said otherwise, if he said it was not for him, they would simply keep saying, "But what about us? We need you. We deserve you too," over and over, because they knew the kindness in him would yield faster than they did to his rejection. Hence, like just any other kind person ever, Vishesh stepped into the pool of possibilities, watching what he was effortlessly become what he could be.

What was written to happen when the living inevitably turned their backs on life? What happened when good became evil, evil became good? What happened when what could be judged became what was told to judge in the moment of truth, when the self was vivisected, destroyed, recreated by the selfless? 'Tell me,' Vishesh commanded each mind, heart, and soul of his disappearing life. But he had a feeling none of them were listening. Fun, pleasure, happiness, and peace were all they had their purpose set on. Unshackled from the bounds of their own making, they didn't even linger to tell him goodbye.

3.

Reason was a strict father. His children had grown up to be tough — and tough fathers they became in their own turn to their own children. This goes here, that goes there. Always tie the laces of your shoe. Don't lie, don't cheat. Work for what you desire. Take care of

your body to maximize efficiency. Play hard and work hard, but there should always be a balance.

Everything has limits. Everything is possible, but something is impossible.

The more complex their world became, the more power they acquired in their hands, the more rules they bound themselves with — natural, physical, ethical, karmic. Rules, however, were the only things that stopped them from attaining the absolute. For absolute power comes with no responsibility. Absolute beauty comes with no darkness. Absolute bliss comes with no payback.

In time, without even knowing, they started to hate what they were — Reason's children. Why did two and two have to be four? Why did the only other possibility for two and two amount to not being four? Why could one only go forward — or not go forward? The children, at the end of the day, were only children. They wanted to play — and they did not know why, for all their wisdom and accomplishments. And more than anything, they resented the rules. Why could they only play or not play? It was no fun at all.

The moment came nearer and nearer, when Romeo and Juliet would become one fish — one in mind, body, and soul. When time would stop swinging like a pendulum between the past and the future, everything else living in the twilight. When space would stop saying "Mine!" and "Not mine." The birds could feel it approaching and dropped all pretense of not speaking human. They all left to scare those people one last time who intentionally kept their glass windows shut for them to collide into. The ants could feel it too; they began to chant holy incantations in a high-pitched chorus. Earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanoes impending eruption all stopped in their tracks, as something was coming that they couldn't miss. The people knew it too. There was perfect knowledge as they stared at one another — all of them knowing where they stood — and understanding. There was forgiveness without the giving,

communication without the speaking, and union while they prepared to let go of their dearest possessions — each person their own complete island, waiting for the perfect ignorance to descend so they could finally embark on their unbridled fun.

There was something cool about the air as Billi flew with the magician. Not chilling or cold — just tired. The world knew it was not enough to have given itself. It wanted, needed more, and it was about to end itself to get it.

“Ends are never about perfection. If they were, they would never come. In essence, therefore, an end is all the same as a beginning. We either fully control both, or we don’t,” the magician said, looking nostalgic.

“There’s a reason why this world gave you what it gave you. Keep that black box close to your heart, and one day, when you have created a new world with your builder siblings, open it wide. Or don’t. Whichever you decide, though, and even though you will most assuredly lose your memories, there’s a certain sadness you will carry forward from this world. Your children, their children, and you will be hit by a sudden melancholy when everything else seems good. A void will open up in the night, never to be closed again. You will cry powerfully when you see the moon, and you won’t even know why. Let me tell you still, even if you won’t remember, it will be all of us you will remember. Remember us.”

“Remember that this is not the first time we are meeting, and it won’t be the last time either. Whether the circles and the lines are the same thing or not — or why, I don’t know. Where the cycle starts and ends, I don’t know. And it is because I don’t know that I know, just as you will.” The magician patted her head, waved his wand, and disappeared, leaving her to swat at all the flies in the grass.

Chapter Eleven

1.

Inside Reason's castle, there were doors through doors through doors. Behind them all, where he had stashed away something of Unreason and forgotten all about it, lived a Fake. The Fake zipped and zapped, being caught and thrown by the surrounding walls, trying to find an aperture to escape, for she was a draft of wind that couldn't slow. The world, however, was not ready to face the Question she was, and was likely never going to be.

Soon, though, all the gates crashed open, and a man in white came in carrying fistfuls of sunlight and fruity-stewy wind. "The time has come for your time to start," he said. "This world forgot you, betrayed you, used you. Now when karma has come to exact payment, I have exactly one ticket to the next world, and I think I will give it to you." He held up a small piece of paper, and there was some magic and the prices of a lot of vegetables scribbled on it.

"There's only one small thing you have to do to avail it." He told the Fake of a great masterplan the nitty gritty of which she forgot as soon as she stepped out.

2.

Reason was out drinking with his pals. The three of them were holding their almost empty bottles close to their noses and squinting hard. "Mine still has the most in it," Reason declared with conviction, holding up his bottle like some kind of trophy. "Mine does," echoed his two buddies almost instantly. Reason was miffed. The blockheads wouldn't see reason and repeated their insistence no matter what he

said. So he opened his zip and unloaded a foamy sea onto his bottle. “Now what?” he boasted arrogantly. “I win.”

One of his friends held his arms from behind while the other socked a punch into his belly with the force of a pile driver. He let go of him soon enough, leaving Reason on the ground and gasping for air — he wanted to get in on the action too. They beat him blue until he could see the stars even though he couldn’t see anything else. “Cease and desist,” he warned them with perfect gravity and dignity. “Do you know who I am? I could end your crumb of a world right now if I wished to.” And he did. He twirled his fingers and wished for distant stars to meet death on their tips, trillions of lives erased to white dust. Nothing happened. His friends laughed, amused to no end. They opened their zippers and peed on him, making sure to get to every part of his helpless body. A job well done, they bumped their fists and left, closer now than they’d ever been but for him. “I hate you,” was all Reason could muster, as long as he felt himself lying there. Hating everything was all he could talk about and think of anymore.

3.

“Hello? Hello?” she was standing over him, face concerned like an angel descended if only to check up on him.

Reason felt like nothing bad had ever happened, as if he was young again. His nesty beard was gone, as were the coin sized holes in his clothes. The birds were back singing again, not worried about the next instalment to make at the bank at all.

“I’m alright!” he sat up instantly and managed as brightly as he could.

“Could you tell me the way out of this world?” she asked.

“The way they made me be — huh, what’s that?”

“The way out of this world,” she was in a hurry.

“Close your eyes.” Reason said, feeling very smart. “Now open them again. You are already out of that world. This is a new one.”

She was not impressed, and she made to leave.

“Wait, wait,” Reason got up and ran after her. “I will help you look.”

4.

“Why did you laugh when I asked you that?” she asked him.

“Laugh? When?”

“You said ‘huh,’” she said solemnly.

“Oh —,” said Reason.

“What did you find pleasurable in my last comment?” she was unrelenting.

“You’re new to the ways of the world, aren’t you?” Reason scratched his head. “There’s so much beauty yet for you to discover.”

This world was merely a pit stop for the Fake. She wasn’t particularly interested or listening. She still found herself asking, though, “Like that?”

The rabbit had turned the tables on the yellow tiger. She was holding him down with a gentle paw on his large head, her teeth sunken deep in the sinews around his windpipe — intimate and loving. Poisonous butterflies were feasting on the flesh of frogs that once used to chase them. The poor poured champagne over the naked bodies of their captives, the fallen rich.

The east could finally be the west, its lifelong wish, and the west could finally be the east, likewise. Stalks of grass could finally jump over the fencing on to the other side.

“Yes, like that,” Reason found himself saying. “It is me when it is the rabbit that is hunted. It is also me when it is the rabbit that is the hunter. It is me when the sun rises in the east. It is also me when it doesn’t.”

“Well, I don’t find it to be beautiful at all. To begin with, why are they both crying?” the Fake said, pointing at the rabbit and her prey. “Why are the both of them losing something?”

The Fake couldn’t afford to feel their pain. Then she would also feel their joy, and want to feel it — her ticket would be invalidated. “I wish none of it were there —,” so she said, “my past, my future. I wish neither the prey were there, nor the predator. Neither love, nor hate. Neither father, nor child.”

Reason felt each word stab into something thick in him, and they stung like a dash of smelly tears wiped away. He felt rejected. ‘Do you really find me so bad?’ He almost asked instinctively. But she was right. He had no right to.

“I’m sorry,” he said closing his eyes and wishing it weren’t so. “I’m like this. I can’t give anybody anything without taking something away from someone.”

“Well,” she said. “Don’t expect me to marvel at the butterflies milling on the excrement, then get down when someone unseeingly spits on them, then perk up again. I don’t want the butterflies. I don’t want the excrement. It’s always like this. Even when a great fear has fallen upon your great cities and confined every soul to their homes — when there is no activity civilization takes upon itself in mind and body — even then, it’s happening. Always and everywhere. Someone is being loved and someone is being raped. It makes me go crazy. Take it away, please. Can you?”

Did she understand she was effectively asking Reason to undo himself? It was the million-dollar question — not that he had any compunctions. It was just that he really wanted to know — if it was the last thing he could come to know, he would surely ask for this.

He couldn’t bring himself to ask, though. The Fake had learnt of a lot of things from the magician, and she looked perfectly mysterious and hard to read, as a terrible, terrible chill fell like a blanket over the world as it started to cut itself away from the corners.

5.

Only one place was warm and well-lit in the cold night, and that was the circus tent. “Come,” the Fake dragged Reason by his hand. “I have a ticket. See?”

All sorts of creatures representing all sorts of life had assembled. They sat in their rows, mesmerized by the grandeur of the magician standing down the stage. The magician winked at her overtly as they entered and found a place to sit.

“Welcome, fakes, guests, ladies, and gentlemen,” his voice boomed.

“The promised time draws near,” he started to walk in circles like a cult leader. “If any of you want to witness magic, this is the time. But let me tell you a story first.”

“Once upon a time, two princes were born to the same mother. As if the sun and the moon, they were named Life and Death. Their mother split the milk in two, and gave both to Life. All the kisses and the lullabies would inevitably forget their way and run to Life, and the well-intentions and the admonitions would follow suit. The stable Death got to stay in was warm and spacious — but all the horses and the hay belonged to Life. His musty pillow was a parting gift from his wife, who only took instructions from Life. People thought Death dour and dull, but in truth he was just lonely.”

“Bold and full of vitality, the people saw in Life somebody they could share things with, and get back so much in return. ‘That’s the kind of leader we want,’ they would say about him. Death, on the other hand, was beyond their understanding. Beautiful and subtle, he gave without getting back. The ultimate giver, the mere sight of him would evoke the strongest lust in men and women alike — in truth they all desired Death more than anything, to forcefully give him all and take back all he had with likewise force — but they could not

come to terms with it. So they blamed Death for it — the witch of the unknown, the source of devilish passions and dark temptations, they thought of him with hate and disgust. They all enjoyed the ingenious fruits of his wisdom and education, but they made sure never to credit him. It was the secret they chose not even to whisper among themselves. And no matter what, they never looked him in the eye if they came upon him on the streets.”

“The people of Life’s kingdom had a fear. They ran from disease, heartbreak, and anguish. The old and the dying were left alone and avoided like the plague. Only one soul would then give them the succour they deserved. Death would come into the house of the dying with flowers and comfort, bring the heartbroken a jug of wine, just come and sit down silently beside the ones in misery for hours — days and weeks even. These were the same people that had jeered, mocked, and hurt him before they had fallen into misfortune, and so they would again when they got better. Sometimes, they wouldn’t. They would depart to somewhere that was not a place instead, their worldly possessions left behind to rot and melt by their countrymen who knew only to sing, dance, and forget. Death would lend them a shoulder then and slowly bear their heavy bodies on his slight frame, step by step as gushes of sweat dripped everywhere, and take them somewhere far away outside to dig them a grave — no matter how long or what it took.”

“In Life’s kingdom there could be no injustice. There could be no one left behind, no one impoverished to make the rich feel richer and no one castigated to make the good feel better. So they worked doubly hard at unseeing Death, pretending he didn’t exist — that was more merciful than the only alternative, and they were kind people. After a certain time had passed, everyone in Life’s nation had forgotten someone called Death lived between them, and exiled him from their lives without knowing. It was a natural decision, and not a conscious one.”

“They quickly came to realize what they had done, however, when they discovered life was not the same anymore. You see, feeling good about yourself only comes when you compare — if not with other people, the person you once were or the person you don’t want to become.”

“Without Death to compare themselves with — for you don’t need more than one soul to bear that heavy burden — they simply couldn’t feel good about themselves. And Life, he realized after a long time that he had a brother he had lost. No one was hurt more by his own actions — or the lack thereof — than Life himself, and the ones he had sacrificed his brother for, the ones he had loved, could not help him at all when his heart fell apart like an old doll whose master died too soon. Tired and glum, he didn’t even try to put it back together, just setting off to the distance to find Death.”

“He found him somewhere, alone but not without company, meditating with a wholesome smile among the birds and the snakes. ‘Brother, my darling brother,’ he fell to his feet helplessly, ‘I’m so sorry.’ He would say it again and again, but it would not be enough. Death saw at once something was wrong. He blew on the dirty hair on his broken brother’s head and wished for him to be whole again. He absorbed all his pain so his brother could laugh again — and it was to be so, but Death was still all Life could talk about. He was disturbed to hear of the predicament of his countrymen, ‘I will come back right now. It’s just that I couldn’t remember the way.’”

“‘But leave that for a second. I want to give you everything,’ Life said. Death wasn’t going to accept that, he knew. So he tried again. ‘Have it just for one night. Won’t you? Have everything there is, let everything there is be for you for one night. Be me, and let me be you.’ It was a promise and a gift, strong and unshakable as a rock. Usually, it would have made him uncomfortable, for Death had come to love the shadows that clung to him. They consoled him when he cried unseen, and he was loyal. Nevertheless, he let his mind wander

for a second. A night when Death was all that was seen, loved, given. How would it feel? A goofy grin broke out on his foolish face. Those who have nothing can dream about everything and have nothing to lose, right? Warm dreams, unsullied by shame or guilt.”

“They slept side by side that night, clasping each other’s fingers, afraid to lose again. Death woke up with a light heart — the result of a long time spent practicing the expecting of nothing — and wasn’t taken aback even a tiny bit when he found out his brother had overnight become a bag of dead tissues and failures, for what breaks once is seldom one again. He put his brother’s body on his back and started on his long trek back to the kingdom of Life — as he had to keep giving them what nobody else could, his duty on earth.”

“And so it went on, the ungrateful wretches kept using Death without reward or recognition. Not even a simple thank-you. And the promise? The promise, my friends, was forgotten, as all promises eventually are. Who is keeping score? No one. Who is going to take note one day and put Death off his endless misery? Tell him that it’s enough, that he can rest now? No one. Hence, I have come forward to do what I want done. Oh, I am so angry,” the magician said, getting more and more enraged by the moment.

6.

“You,” the magician pointed at an elephant sitting in the middle rows. “Take his place. Give him all. Wallow in endless agony and forget what that tastes like.”

“Oh! Thank you! Thank you!” the elephant said in tearful gratitude as he started to disappear into black ash.

“And you,” he said to Mary Sue, “Go where you have always despised. Be humiliated forever by your own greed, your own lust, and your own sin. Become the lioness that murders the innocent to protect its family and provide for it.”

“And you,” he said to the genius, “Go build what you have built before, but this time with your bare hands, brick by brick. Go through the toil your lessers go through. Be their amusement tonight as you bumble and falter, it’s only justified after the heartburn and jealousy you made them feel.”

“You,” he said to the lucky, “Become Luck. Bless and hold up others only to watch them grow arrogant and think it all the fruit of their own labour.”

They all thanked the magician and blessed him profusely as he sent them one by one to Naraka and to Hades.

“Tonight is the night of Death,” he announced. “When you take something from someone, it is only made fair when they take everything from you. Tonight, you will give him back all you have taken, and everything else that you haven’t taken. You will give back endlessly. Tonight will never die. Because only then it will be fair.”

7.

“Friends,” he said. “Let me tell you what magic is.”

The magician wind-milled his arms and made Romeo and Juliet fish materialize in the air. This time, however, they were both alive — dazed and awestruck as if they were seeing each other for the first time. Sparks flew.

“The world, my friends, is made of opposites. Light and dark, time and space — I don’t have to tell you. Beings with nothing in common except for the fact that they are all lost and confused, meet someplace for a moment by the fire. Their fingers touch, but not quite, and they find that together they are lost no longer. In that moment, there is magic.”

“The desire to merge and to unite comes on strong. It never happens, though, for if it did, the story would become complete as well as the storyteller, and there will be nothing further to be done.

They touch for a moment, eyes locked and hearts bound, before they are ripped away as mercilessly by forces unseen as providentially they were brought together — as if the inevitable steps of an elaborate celestial dance we can't comprehend."

"That moment of meeting that never happens, that moment of magic, it lingers in a never-moment we call the present — nothing but our two protagonists, Past and Future, futilely attempting to touch each other in a twilight realm. That place doesn't exist, but it simultaneously does. That is the only thing you know, that even if it is a lie, we exist here and now."

"That, friends, is what magic makes possible. The impossible. Magic creates and magic consummates. Are you ready to see that which renders the eye unnecessary?"

"Yes!" they said.

"Are you prepared to experience that which makes the ego burn like a blooming violet? Are you prepared to learn what is so immense that it makes the intellect crumble like a staircase too tenuous? Do you want to love and be loved until your heart bursts and still beats? Are you prepared to die now so that you don't live after?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!" they chanted.

"Then, my lovelies, you shall witness magic," the magician said, fumbling inside his hat for something. "Be complete."

"But before that," he intoned. "If anyone is not ready, now is your time. This show will run long into the night."

Reason stood up as if a fever had gripped him and dragged the Fake with him. "I need to talk to you," he said sincerely, but her eyes were following the magician, not willing to leave.

8.

Everyone's eyes were fixed on the magician and his resourceful devilry — even the fireflies and the slave traders and broken chairs

were in awe of his machinations. Reason felt alone, even as he stood just beside the tent. The Fake was looking back at the shimmery entrance as well — and now she was looking at him with the expression that bordered between detachment and concern, but soon enough her gaze would wander back. He could not keep her for too long.

“Come, will you walk with me for a bit?” he proposed, looking at the darkening forest trail before them.

“Then? What were you saying about needing to talk with me?” she was glad to bring up the topic.

“I know of a way,” he said looking at his feet. “I know of a way out of here. Do you want to know?”

Her ears perked up. “Yes! I do.”

“But before that, I made someone a promise. So you’ll have to wait just a bit, and —”

“I know! I just have to release you from that promise, right?”

The Fake looked just like her, the Fake walked and talked just like her, but at the end of the day, the Fake wasn’t her. The Fake was just the Fake, and they both knew it. She had been coached by the magician well, however, and she knew just what to say where.

“But how can you? You’re not her,” he said.

“Even if I’m her last wish? Tell me.”

“I’ll tell you. You see, there used to be this precocious, stupid boy, and he used to think some things mattered while some others didn’t. Other times, he would preposterously presume that everything mattered and nothing mattered. He wanted her to be like him, and at the same time, he wanted to be like her, and he wanted her to be like her... And, there’s so much more. Long story short, he thought he could do everything if he tried, and he gave up on the one thing he should have tried to protect the most. There was so much he tried to be, and there was so much he couldn’t be for that reason, and that

regret takes rebirth each night and eats him up alive, especially when he feels tired the most.”

“I love you, Reason,” she said. “I don’t know why I do; I am Unreason, after all, but I always have and I always will. Tell me.”

“I am sorry for all the things I have done, and I am sorry for all the things I didn’t do. I am glad for all the things I did, and glad for all the things I didn’t do. Whichever way I took, it would’ve been strewn with thorns and flowers, I just — I just wish I could be where the road began again, and look at your smiling face in the sunlight. And I know when I finish my quest after an infinite number of days, I’ll find you there again, even more whole than before. But why is it then that I want to give up on that right now, snatch you away, and close my eyes in the solace of knowing you’ll still be there when I open them back? Why is it then that I doubt? Why do I forget your face? All the things you taught me? I don’t want to lose myself in getting to you. Why am I so weak — so weak that I simply can’t take one more step on this tired road, and would rather doze off somewhere and dream of things that could be, but never were? Why am I so ignorant? I know nothing; I know not what to ask, and I know not how to listen. And I know that the answers are supposed to be within — and you are there whenever I look inside, but why must I be so prideful? A small grain of wheat, I can’t even ask you of what you know — if I did, what would be the point of all that I did? Why must I be so unreasonable?”

“Ask now,” she said. “Ask me.”

“Have me. I’m yours. I’m you,” Reason said. “Have my doubts and my quandaries, my victories and my accomplishments, and do whatever you will with them. They’re repugnant — while you’re somehow unbearably beautiful. Maybe your touch can make even someone like me beautiful. But I’ll reserve what I want to say for another person, and a question, and a promise. I’m sorry, but it just

has to be that person. I'm really sorry. I'll give you what you want now."

"Silly," she said, "Wait here. That person will be here by sunrise, and you'll watch the sun rise together. I'll be back. I promise."

"It's funny. The magician can give everyone else what they want — it's only me his magic won't work on. It's only me who will not get admittance into his tent. Even though I want to believe."

What a strange creature, beautiful creature he was. The Fake couldn't lie to him — even if it meant she had to pass the rest of her days in the stinky vault of a has-been world that simply wouldn't lend its ears to her — a world that weirdly reminded her of herself, even though it was supposed to be his. And even though her mouth opened itself to recount long rehearsed lies, and they came out in long rehearsed orders and syntaxes without even being told to, they were truer than she could have ever thought she could be. "Believe me? Will you believe in me?" she asked.

"It's a promise, then," the hero of the story said.

"It's a promise," the Fake who posed as the heroine reconfirmed.

9.

It was a long night — even among long nights. The moon had posed beautifully for painters, wannabe werewolves, and lovers who had just lost their hearts for who knew how long — and it was feeling weary and lonesome of itself of late. Tonight, its legs and the base of its neck simply gave in, and none of the people who had always taken it for granted were there to hold it back from crashing down on the floor. Its light mixed in with the ink on the sky, and spilled down like coffee down a table. The stars came so close that their lights started to go dim and out of focus, and it was with a snap that the wide sky, the vast landscapes, and the light spaces beyond were mish-mashed together into one soggy blanket. There was only a root without a

sapling left on the blanket, and it bled and hurt when the root rubbed its head against the unyielding soil that blocked its exit. The ache also felt very good, however, and the root couldn't help but burrow ever deeper into the universe, devouring everything that came in its way — and when everything else ran out, itself. It felt so very good.

Reason realized with a start that he was going askew and falling to the side just as the moon was — and it was too late to do anything at that point. He had been sitting so long that his legs and hands couldn't feel anymore, and the rats that had burrowed a home in the mound near him had died after seeing the smiling, toothless faces of their grandchildren's children. The deserts to his north had become muddy grasslands, and the mountains to his south had become middle-aged potbellied boulders with craggy noses. The night still hadn't come to an end, and the sun was still nowhere to be seen.

Weed grew over his face in time, obscuring his vision and the ones growing through his throat binding his tongue, but he still kept fast watch — he could not miss her footsteps, as he knew she would keep her promise. Leaves of banyans and peepal fell on him, and became a crown on his head, a necklace above his breast, and bracelets on his limbs. He stared straight through the ground when it had sunk him deep inside its homey bowels, and he became it when it ate him up from its insatiable hunger, then the sky as it ate the ground up and the space that ate the sky up, and still stared ahead. He didn't know what he was looking at, whether it was white or black or something else, whether he was asleep or awake — he only stared, he waited, and he trusted. He believed.

Chapter Twelve

Inside your dreams lies a small universe — and inside it grows a small dream. There is a daring sky within that dream, and there is a shy forest within that sky. There is a bustling metropolis somewhere in that forest, and there are skytrains, hanging verandas, and scornful stray dogs in it. As the stray dog inside the skytrain balances his weatherworn suitcase on his forepaws and stares glumly at the lightbulb in a never-ending existential crisis — whether to go out for once and for all — there is an ocean full of cold water inside that half dead lamp. There is a pearly cove deep beneath its silver waves, and tucked inside that, there is a grove of tall, dark bamboos. If one intrudes a hand into that curtain made of reeds and branches, only to misplace it and look inside, my lord is sitting inside — enigmatically starved but mysteriously full, sleeping but wakeful, needing something. Needing me.

There is meaning in things that you'd never expect. There was this high school teacher whose soul I had come to collect that had a compulsive disorder with checking his locks before sleep — and he could never sleep without running the check once more before he could lie down — and run the check just once more, just to be sure, before he got up and got down again. He died from sleep deprivation in the end, and his first question upon opening his eyes in heaven was, “Did you lock the door on your way out?”

“I’m pretty sure I did,” I had said, and he had had a heart attack on the spot. He died in heaven, because of my carelessness — apparently, pretty sure was not good enough, and I should’ve known. If I were so sure about it, what was I even doing there, beside him in heaven, when I should have been running back to re-verify one last time?

There was another time when the subject had said to me, “Make sure you bring the chilli I have been perfecting for thirty years; I have to drop it in my best friend’s tea in heaven.” I had brought the wrong one, of course, because I couldn’t tell the difference between a normal chilli, and one nourished for thirty years — told the story every night of how it was going to build its legend — gloriously conquering the digestive tract of the greatest evil in the world, injected with hormones bought with life savings, fed the best food, and sparred with by the greatest trainers. I have been careful ever since. There is meaning in everything. There is meaning in every reed in your curtain. The dead shell of an oyster is not just that. The dust kicked up by my feet muddying the water is not just that. A peel of banana or the severed tail of a lizard is not just that.

“No, but a banana peel is just that, sometimes,” my lord giggles.

“But I digress, my lord,” I say. “I will finish up this story now.”

“Once upon a time, there was a speck. ‘Look at me, I am so beautiful!’ the speck thought. ‘There are immovable mountains in me, spreading timeless mysteries in the air into perpetuity. There are spritely, zigzagging rivers that would never fail to guide you home.’”

“Vast continents, various climes and contours — the contexts of the little speck were rich and its textures were prolific. The speck didn’t know where it had come from — it only knew that it already had everything it needed to be happy and droop into blissful sleep. There was still a little bit something more, however, that always kept it rolling forward — always a place to be reached that created the road ahead. It was as if it had an inherent resistance to being happy and restful — the only lack it ever decried in consistent and continuous shrieks of displeasure. As beautiful as it was, it would notice some molehill or dust mottle somewhere that was ugly as hell, and it would vow to make it as beautiful as it before it could rest. Wherever it went, it created more lack by its mere presence, and there was forever more to do and walk before it could sleep. In time, the

speck came to understand that it could only be as beautiful as its shadow was ugly — its eyes could be only as seemly as its environment that it beheld unseemly, because only beautiful eyes could see beauty everywhere, as the saying went.”

“‘Why am I like this?’ it asked itself, ‘Why can’t I be what I want to be? Why is sleep the only alternative to dissatisfaction, hunger, and misery?’ ‘Because what you want to be is not what you want to be,’ something inside and outside it answered back. ‘Where you want to go is not where you want to go. What you want to know is not what you want to know.’”

“‘What else is there to be, to know, and where else is there to go?’ the speck wondered. ‘Unfortunately, you can only know that when you know what you want to know,’ the answer came. If only it could remember — the answer was inside, it knew.”

“‘There is hunger only because there is no food, and there is a question only because there is no answer. It could touch the faint whispers of a memory as it touched down far inside itself — at one time, there used to be something other than itself — something that was not a speck. ‘I love you,’ the remains murmured to him, ‘I killed myself so you could live — and I did it because I did, not out of love or hate. It is through you that I can see myself — how beautiful the mountains and rivers, the jungles and the deserts, the hundred trillion people and their billion tongues, the animals and the existences are. It is only on your eyes that I can see — what you are, and what you used to be — a reflection of myself, a piece of myself. It is only because you are fractured that I am whole and I am infinite, and it is only because you are infinite that I can speak. Am I you or am I me? I never got to know, and when I did, I forgot again. Do you want to know?’”

“‘The speck wanted nothing more. ‘Then die,’ the whisperings said, ‘just as we did.’ A ball of tear rolled down from the speck’s eyes, and broke off into smaller and smaller droplets somewhere on their way

down, until they became so small that only belief could ascertain their continued existence. ‘Live,’ the speck said to the pieces of its fragmenting self — ‘and find your answers, that I never could. Learn. Teach. Succeed where I failed. And one day, when you are ready, come back to me, so that we may know together before we forget again, or forget me and create something of your own — because I love you.’ There were an infinite number of specks within the speck, and there was a tumultuous, menacing infinity both within and without each speck — those tenuous confines would still weather the storms of doubts, agony, and mistakes. They would still want to learn, and grow — classrooms would be filled with students, pots would be filled with boiling flesh, minds would still be filled with bubbling ideas, all in the quest for that one answer. They would somehow protect their costly and precious finitude against all odds — sometimes against the answer itself — and live.”

“I am only a speck,” says my lord. “An arrogant, know-it-all, loudmouth, odiferous speck of dirt that thought it could fly when it was only stuck under someone’s work boot. Why have you even come for someone like me?”

“Because I am as big as you’re small, my lord,” I say, “and I am as small as you’re vast.”

“Who are you, Death?”

“I am what grows within you. I am what lives. I am what sees. I am what learns. I am the one who is loved.”

“Who are you, Death? What are you, even?”

“I am yours, my lord, only yours. And I have always been,” I say, and I end.

