

Novel

RELATIONSHIPS

JOGAJOG

Rabindranath Tagore



CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1	3
CHAPTER 2	6
CHAPTER 3	10
CHAPTER 4	13
CHAPTER 5	15
CHAPTER 6	17
CHAPTER 7	19
CHAPTER 8	22
CHAPTER 9	25
CHAPTER 10	30
CHAPTER 11	33
CHAPTER 12	36
CHAPTER 13	39
CHAPTER 14	42
CHAPTER 15	43
CHAPTER 16	46
CHAPTER 17	50
CHAPTER 18	56
CHAPTER 19	59
CHAPTER 20	63
CHAPTER 21	67
CHAPTER 22	69
CHAPTER 23	74
CHAPTER 24	77
CHAPTER 25	79
CHAPTER 26	82
CHAPTER 27	86
CHAPTER 28	90
CHAPTER 29	96
CHAPTER 30	100
CHAPTER 31	103

RELATIONSHIPS

CHAPTER 32	107
CHAPTER 33	110
CHAPTER 34	114
CHAPTER 35	117
CHAPTER 36	122
CHAPTER 37	126
CHAPTER 38	135
CHAPTER 39	140
CHAPTER 40	146
CHAPTER 42	157
CHAPTER 43	164
CHAPTER 44	171
CHAPTER 45	179
CHAPTER 46	191
CHAPTER 47	197
CHAPTER 48	202
CHAPTER 49	206
CHAPTER 50	209
CHAPTER 51	215
CHAPTER 52	221
CHAPTER 53	226
CHAPTER 54	230
CHAPTER 55	233
CHAPTER 56	240
CHAPTER 57	244
CHAPTER 58	247

CHAPTER 1

Today is the 7th of Ashadh. It is Abinash Ghoshal's birthday; he has just turned thirty-two. Since the break of dawn, congratulatory telegrams and floral bouquets have been pouring in.

This is where our story begins. But even beginnings have their precedents. It is like rolling the cotton wick in the morning to light the oil lamp at dusk.

If one were to trace the mythological era of this tale, they would find that the Ghoshals were once settled near the Sundarbans, and later in Nurnagar of the Hooghly district. Whether they were driven out by the Portuguese from the outside or pushed out by societal pressures from within remains uncertain. But those desperate enough to abandon an old home possess the fierce vitality to build a new one. Thus, at the dawn of the Ghoshals' historical era, we find them endowed with vast lands, cattle, laborers, grand festivals, and an abundance of wealth. Even today, in their ancestral village of Sheyakuli, the Ghoshal-dighi—a pond spanning at least ten bighas—bears witness to their past glory in a voice choked with mud from beneath a veil of waterweeds. Today, only the name of the pond belongs to them; the water belongs to the Chatterjee landlords. It is necessary to understand how the Ghoshals were once forced to sacrifice their ancestral pride.

In the middle chapter of their history, a bitter feud erupted with the Chatterjee landlords. This time, the dispute was not over property, but over the worship of the Goddess. The Ghoshals had the audacity to sculpt an idol two cubits taller than that of the Chatterjees. The Chatterjees retaliated. Overnight, they erected archways along the immersion procession route, measured perfectly so that the head of the Ghoshals' idol would strike against them. The faction of the tall-idol marched out to tear down the archways; the faction of the short-idol rushed out to break their heads. As a result, the Goddess claimed far more blood than her customary ritual allocation.

The bloodshed and injuries led to a lawsuit, which only came to a halt at the very edge of the Ghoshals' utter ruin. The fire was extinguished, but no wood remained; everything had turned to ash. The goddess of wealth in the Chatterjee household also grew pale. Necessity may force a truce, but it does not bring peace. Both the

man standing tall and the man brought to his knees continued to seethe with inner rage.

The Chatterjees delivered their final blow against the Ghoshals using the guillotine of society. They spread a rumor that the Ghoshals were historically "degraded" Brahmins who had hidden their true lineage upon moving here, pretending to be venomous cobras when they were mere earthworms. In society, those with the loudest money have the loudest voices. Thus, the Chatterjees easily found willing drummers in the scholarly Brahmin neighborhood to broadcast this slander. The Ghoshals lacked both the evidence and the financial clout to wash away this stigma, so, plagued by the tyranny of the village elders, they abandoned their homestead for a second time. They settled in Rajabpur in a very modest state.

Those who strike the blow forget; those who suffer it cannot forget so easily. Just because the staff falls from their hands does not mean they stop wielding it in their minds. Because their physical hands were paralyzed for so long, the phantom staff has been passed down through their lineage. Over time, many tales—a blend of truth and myth—about how they once outsmarted the Chatterjees have accumulated in their households. On rainy summer evenings beneath thatched roofs, the children listen to them with wide-eyed awe.

For a hundred years, the Ghoshals have passed down the story of how twenty-five thugs abducted the Chatterjees' famous enforcer, Dashu Sardar, in his sleep, brought him to the Ghoshal estate, and made him vanish without a trace. When the police came to investigate, the estate manager, Bhuban Biswas, smoothly lied, "Yes, he came to the estate on his own business. Having the scoundrel in my grasp, I insulted him a little. I heard he left town, wandering like an ascetic out of sheer humiliation." The magistrate remained suspicious. Bhuban declared, "Your Honor, if I cannot find his whereabouts within a year, my name is not Bhuban Biswas." He somehow found a thug matching Dashu's formidable build and shipped him off to Dacca. He had the man steal a brass pot and give his name to the police as Dasharathi Mandal. He got a month in jail. On the exact day he was released, Bhuban tipped off the magistrate that Dashu Sardar was in the Dacca prison. An inquiry revealed that Dashu had indeed been in the jail, but had left his shawl in the field outside upon release. It was proven that the shawl belonged to the

enforcer. As for where he went next—that was no longer Bhuban's responsibility to answer.

These stories are the expired cheques of a bankrupt present drawn on the past. The days of glory are gone; hence, the mythology of that glory makes such a loud noise precisely because it is utterly hollow.

However, just as oil runs out and the lamp extinguishes, so too does the night eventually turn to dawn. For the Ghoshal family, the sunrise appeared through the sheer luck of Abinash's father, Madhusudan.

CHAPTER 2

Madhusudan's father, Ananda Ghoshal, was a clerk for the wholesale merchants of Rajabpur. The family made ends meet on coarse rice and plain clothes. The women wore heavy conch-shell and metal bangles, while the men wore brass amulets of protective mantras around their necks and thick sacred threads scrubbed clean with wood-apple paste. Because their status as Brahmins had grown tenuous, their sacred threads were made emphatically prominent.

Madhusudan's earliest education took place in a rural school. Alongside this, he received a free, informal education sitting atop bales of jute in the courtyards of the riverbank warehouses. He spent his free time weaving through the crowds of appraisers, buyers, and bullock-cart drivers—wandering among rows of molasses pots, tied bundles of tobacco leaves, bales of imported wrappers, kerosene tins, mounds of mustard, and sacks of pulses arranged under tin-roofed market stalls. Navigating past the massive weighing scales and heavy cast-iron weights brought him the kind of joy another child might find strolling through a garden.

His father decided the boy had potential. If he could be pushed through a couple of exams, Madhu could anchor himself in one of the respectable professions—anything from a schoolmaster to a pleader or a lawyer. His three other brothers had reached the ceiling of their destinies as mere clerks, content to pull the slow, heavy carts of life. They were sitting as apprentices with pens tucked behind their ears in the offices of merchants or landlords. Banking entirely on Ananda Ghoshal's meager life savings, Madhusudan took up residence in a boarding house in Calcutta.

His professors expected him to bring glory to the college in his exams. But then, his father passed away. Selling off his textbooks and even his hand-written notes, Madhusudan made a solemn vow: he would now earn a living. He started a business selling second-hand books to the student community. His mother wept bitterly; she had held high hopes that her son would pass his exams and enter the esteemed ranks of the "gentleman" class, raising the flag of clerical triumph at the top of the Ghoshal family mast.

Just as Madhusudan had an expert eye for selecting goods since childhood, he had an equal talent for choosing friends. He was never deceived. His closest friend from

his student days was Kanai Gupta, whose ancestors had been prominent middlemen for wealthy merchants. Kanai's father held a high position in a renowned kerosene company.

As luck would have it, a marriage was arranged for this very man's daughter. Madhusudan tied his scarf around his waist and dove into the work. Organizing the rations, decorating the venue with flowers and foliage, standing at the printing press to get invitations stamped in gold ink, renting chairs and carpets, standing at the gate to welcome guests, shouting himself hoarse while serving food—he left nothing undone. During this, he demonstrated such a sharp business acumen and practical sense that Rajani Babu was thoroughly impressed. He knew a capable man when he saw one and realized this boy would go far. Putting up the deposit money himself, he set Madhu up with a kerosene agency in Rajabpur.

The marathon of his success began; along that journey, the kerosene depot was soon left far behind, a mere speck in the distance. Stepping on the hefty figures of his profit ledgers, his business surged forward—from alleys to main roads, from retail to wholesale, from shop to office, from the chapter of preparation straight to the ascent to heaven. Everyone said, "This is what you call fate!"—implying his current carriage was running on the steam of his past lives. Madhusudan himself knew that Destiny had left no stone unturned in trying to cheat him; it was only because he made no errors in his calculations that the examiner's red pen found no flaws in the arithmetic of his life. Those who fail due to their own poor calculations are the ones who usually glare at the supposed biases of the examiner.

Madhusudan was a man of heavy gravity. He rarely spoke of his own wealth. Yet, one could easily guess that a high tide had flooded his dry riverbed. In domesticated Bengal, when an ordinary man reaches such heights, his thoughts turn naturally to marriage; the desire to extend the enjoyment of his wealth through a lineage into the life beyond death grows strong. Fathers of eligible daughters lost no opportunity to encourage Madhu, but he would reply, "First, let one stomach be completely filled; only then can one take responsibility for another." From this, it was clear that whatever the size of Madhusudan's heart, his stomach was certainly not small.

Around this time, thanks to Madhusudan's vigilance, Rajabpur established a solid reputation for its jute. Suddenly, Madhusudan bought up all the fallow land along

the riverbank while the rates were still dirt cheap. He fired massive brick kilns, brought in huge Sal timber from Nepal, lime from Sylhet, and trainloads of corrugated iron from Calcutta. The market folk were stunned! They thought, "Oh dear! He had saved up a little, and it was burning a hole in his pocket. Now comes the indigestion; the business is at death's door!"

But once again, Madhusudan's calculations were flawless. In the blink of an eye, a massive vortex of commerce hit Rajabpur. Drawn by its sheer gravitational pull, brokers flocked in, Marwari merchants arrived, laborers poured in, mills were set up, and coiled smoke from chimneys spread blackness across the sky.

Even without analyzing his ledger books, Madhusudan's majesty was now visible to the naked eye from afar. He was the sole owner of an entire market hub, complete with a walled two-story mansion bearing a stone plaque at the gate that read "Madhuchakra" (The Honeycomb). This name was bestowed by his former Sanskrit professor from college, who suddenly harbored far more affection for Madhusudan than he ever had in the past.

It was then that his widowed mother timidly approached him and said, "Son, I don't know when my time will come. Will I not get to see a daughter-in-law before I die?"

With a grave face, Madhu replied briefly, "Trying to marry is a waste of time, and so is being married. Where is my leisure for it?"

His mother did not have the courage to press the matter, for his time had a steep market value. Everyone knew Madhusudan was a man of his word.

More time passed. Riding the tide of prosperity, the company's headquarters moved from the rural district to Calcutta. Giving up hope of ever seeing the faces of grandchildren, his mother departed for the next world. Today, the Ghoshal Company's name is known far and wide; their business rubs shoulders with established British firms, with English managers heading various departments.

Now, Madhusudan announced on his own that he finally had the leisure for marriage. His credit in the matrimonial market was at its absolute peak. He possessed the power to break the pride of the most arrogant aristocratic families. News of many highly born, beautiful, accomplished, wealthy, and educated maidens began pouring in from all corners. With narrowed eyes, Madhusudan declared, "I want a daughter from the house of those Chatterjees."

A wounded lineage, much like a wounded wolf, is deeply terrifying.

CHAPTER 3

Now, to speak of the bride's side.

The Chatterjee family of Nurnagar is no longer in its prime. The dam holding their wealth is breaking. The minority shareholders split their portion of the estate and left; now, they prowl the borders of the remaining property with sticks in hand, looking for a piece to snatch. Furthermore, in the attempt to finely divide the rights to serve the family deity, Radhakanta, the actual crop revenue was squandered away in the courtyards of lawyers and pleaders, and the estate managers, too, took their cut. Nurnagar no longer wields its old authority—the income is gone, and the expenses have quadrupled. A nine-legged spider of debt, spinning a web at an interest rate of nine percent, is slowly wrapping around the entire estate.

There are two brothers and five sisters in the family. The penalty for the 'crime' of having too many daughters has not yet been fully paid. While the patriarch was still alive, four of the sisters were married off into high-ranking Kulin Brahmin families. For these grooms, their wealth was modern, but their prestige was ancient. The dowries demanded the heavy price of high caste and the long measure of empty fame. To fund this, the twelve-percent knot was tied tightly over the nine-percent noose of debt. The younger brother shook himself off, stood up, and said, "I am going to England to become a barrister. We cannot survive unless I earn." He left for England, leaving the immense burden of the household squarely on the shoulders of the elder brother, Bipradas.

It was during this time that the kites of destiny belonging to the Ghoshals and the Chatterjees entangled with one another once again. Let me tell you the history.

The Chatterjees owed a massive debt to the Tansukdas Halwai firm in Burrabazar. They had been paying the interest regularly, and no issues had been raised. Right around the time of the Puja holidays, Bipradas's former classmate, Amulyadhan, came to visit, ostensibly to show his goodwill. He was now an articled head clerk at a major attorney's firm. This bespectacled young man took a sideways glance at the declining state of Nurnagar. As soon as he returned to Calcutta, Tansukdas demanded his money back, claiming he was opening a new sugar business and needed the cash urgently.

Bipradas sat down, his head in his hands.

It was during this crisis that the names Chatterjee and Ghoshal collided for a second time. Shortly before this, Madhusudan had received a royal title from the British Government.

His old student-friend approached him and said, "The new 'Raja' is in a good mood; you might be able to secure a convenient loan from him right now." And so it was done—all the scattered debts of the Chatterjees were consolidated into a single loan of eleven lakh rupees at seven percent interest. Bipradas breathed a sigh of relief.

Kumudini is their last remaining sister, and she also represents the very last of their resources. The mere thought of scraping together a dowry and finding a suitable groom fills them with dread. She is beautiful—tall and slender, like the stalk of a tuberoses. Her eyes, though not unusually large, are a deep, intense black, and her nose is drawn with such flawless lines it seems carved from a flower petal. Her complexion is a luminous, glowing fair, like a polished conch shell; her arms are perfectly rounded—the kind of hands that seem like a blessing from Goddess Kamala, meant to be received with gratitude. Across her entire face rests an expression of compassionate, sorrowful patience.

Kumudini feels a deep sense of guilt regarding herself. She believes she is unlucky. She knows that men steer the household through their own strength, while women bring the Goddess of Wealth into the home through their good fortune. She has failed to do so. For as long as she has been old enough to understand, she has seen the evil eye of misfortune cast everywhere around her. And pressing down upon her family is the crushing weight of her unmarried status—a massive boulder; the greater her sorrow, the greater her humiliation. There is nothing to be done but to beat her own forehead in despair. The Creator did not grant women a path to earn a living; He only granted them the capacity to endure pain. Can something impossible not happen? A boon from a god, a hidden treasure of a Yaksha, the sudden repayment of some unpaid karmic debt from a past life? On certain nights, she rises from her bed, gazes out at the tops of the rustling pine trees in the garden, and whispers inwardly, "Where is my prince? Where is the jewel of seven kingdoms? Save my brothers, and I will remain your devoted servant forever."

The more she blames herself for her family's decline, the more she pours out the nectar of her heart, offering her brothers a love wrung from her own deep

suffering. Knowing they cannot fulfill their duties toward her, her brothers, with heavy hearts, surround Kumudini with intense affection. They are constantly eager to fill the void of parental love that God denied this orphaned girl. She is a fragment of moonlight, single-handedly bringing sweetness to the darkness of their poverty. Whenever she condemns herself as the harbinger of their misfortune, her elder brother Bipradas smiles and says, "Kumu, you are our good fortune—if we didn't have you, where would the grace in this house be?"

Kumudini was educated at home. She has almost no connection with the outside world. She resides in the twilight zone between the old era and the new. Her world is shadowy—ruled by ancient deities like Siddheshwari, Gandheshwari, Ghetu, and Shashthi. It is a world where one must not look at the moon on specific days; where the evil gaze of an eclipse must be chased away by blowing conch shells; where drinking milk during the Ambubachi festival cures the fear of snakes; where life is managed through chants, vows of sacrificing goats, offerings of betel nuts, husked rice, and five-paisa sweets, and the wearing of amulets. It is a world that relies on rituals to amend fate—a hope that is shattered a thousand times over. It is visibly clear that the branches of an "auspicious moment" rarely bear auspicious fruit, yet reality lacks the power to break the illusion of her dreams. In the realm of dreams, there is no logic; there is only obedience. Because this world lacks rational consistency, intellectual authority, or eternal truths of good and bad when it comes to fate, Kumudini's face bears such profound melancholy. She knows she is being punished without having committed a crime. For eight years, she has taken that stigma entirely upon herself—originating with the death of her father.

CHAPTER 4

In old, wealthy households, the era of the past resides in a fortress of solid masonry. The new era must cross many gates to enter. Those who live inside are vastly delayed in arriving at the new age. Bipradas's father, Mukundalal, also failed to catch up with the rapidly advancing modern world.

He was a tall man with a fair complexion, shoulder-length wavy hair, and large, expressive eyes that held a gaze of unchallenged authority. When he shouted in his deep voice, the hearts of his servants and followers would tremble. Although he maintained a wrestler to practice daily and possessed considerable physical strength, his refined body bore no signs of manual labor. He wore soft, pleated muslin shirts and exquisitely draped Farashdanga or Dhakai dhotis that trailed on the floor; the breeze heralding the master's arrival carried the rich fragrance of Istanbul attar. A servant always followed him carrying a gold betel-leaf box, and a uniformed orderly stood in constant attendance at the door. At the main entrance, while resting from mixing tobacco and grinding hemp, the old watchman Chandrabhan would sit on a bench, dividing his long beard into two and tying the halves over his ears, while junior guards stood watch with swords in hand. The walls of the gateway were adorned with various shields, curved swords, and centuries-old muskets, spears, and lances.

In the sitting room, Mukundalal sat on a thick mattress, leaning against a bolster. His sycophants sat on the floor below him, divided to his left and right. The hookah-bearer knew exactly which type of hookah matched the status of each guest—whether a silver-bound one, a plain one, or a humble gurguri. For the master himself, there was a massive albola, exuding the sweet fragrance of rosewater.

In another wing of the mansion was the "English" drawing room, furnished with 18th-century European decor. At the very front stood a massive, black-spotted mirror in a gilded frame, flanked by winged fairy statues holding candleholders. Below, on a table, sat a black marble clock inlaid with gold water, along with assorted European glass figurines. Straight-backed chairs, sofas, and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling beams were all draped in Holland covers. The walls displayed oil paintings of ancestors alongside portraits of one or two British officials who patronized the family. A British carpet covered the entire floor, adorned with large, boldly colored flowers. This room was only unveiled on special occasions to

host European district officials and dignitaries. It was the only "modern" room in the house, yet it felt like the most haunted, ancient chamber of all—suffocated by the heavy, stale air of disuse, a silent room completely divorced from daily life.

Mukundalal's luxurious habits were an essential part of the etiquette of his time. True wealth was measured by fearless, extravagant spending. To them, wealth was not a burden to be carried on the head, but a footstool beneath their feet. Their indulgence was grand in both spheres: public philanthropy in the outer court, and personal luxury in the inner court. Just as there was no hesitation in sheltering dependents, there was zero tolerance for insolence. A newly rich neighbor had once committed the grave offense of merely twisting the ear of the master's gardener's son; the amount Mukundalal spent purely on teaching this rich man a lesson would exceed what it costs to put a boy through college today. Yet, he didn't spare the gardener's son either. He whipped the boy so severely that he was bedridden. But because the whipping had been excessively severe in a fit of rage, it ended up benefiting the boy. Educated at the estate's expense, he works as a pleader today.

In keeping with the traditions of the old wealthy class, Mukundalal's life was divided into two realms: one for domesticity, the other for revelry. In one wing, the ten sacred rituals were performed; in the other, a myriad of vices. Inside the home resided the family deity and the lady of the house. There, life revolved around prayers, entertaining guests, festivals, fasting, feeding the poor and Brahmins, attending to neighbors, gurus, and priests. The realm of revelry lay just outside the domestic boundaries—a place steeped in Nawabi culture and buzzing with extravagant soirées. Here, women of the night came and went. The wealthy men of the time considered associating with them a means of learning polished manners. Wives had to endure a great deal, caught between the conflicting orbits of these two entirely opposing worlds.

Mukundalal's wife, Nandarani, was a proud woman; she never fully accustomed herself to this endurance. There was a reason for this. She knew with absolute certainty that no matter how far her husband's external flirtations went, she was the true anchor; his deep, underlying attachment was entirely to her. That is precisely why, whenever her husband wronged his own true love, she found it unbearable. And this is exactly what happened this time.

CHAPTER 5

There was much grandeur during the Raas festival. Entertainment equipment arrived, partly from Calcutta and partly from Dacca. The courtyard hosted Krishna-jatra plays, and on some days, Kirtan performances. Here, the women of the household and the ordinary neighbors crowded together. In previous years, the less savory, worldly entertainment had been held in the outer sitting room; the women of the inner quarters, lying awake at night with a piercing ache in their chests, could at least catch glimpses of it through the cracks in the doors. But this time, a whim dictated that the courtesans' dance would be held on a houseboat (bajra) on the river.

Unable to see what was happening, Nandarani's mind thrashed and wept in the darkness of suffocated words. Outwardly, she had to manage the household chores, supervise the feasts, and attend to guests with a smiling face. But with every movement, the thorn in her chest dug deeper, her breath caught in her throat, yet no one could know. Meanwhile, from outside, voices of satisfied guests periodically rose up: "Victory to the Queen Mother!"

Finally, the festival's duration expired, and the house emptied. Only the cacophony of crows and stray dogs remained, scavenging over the torn banana leaves and the shattered remnants of clay plates and cups. The decorators brought out their ladders to take down the lanterns, lowered the canopies, and the local boys started fighting over the leftover chandelier candles and decorative pith flowers. Amidst that crowd, the sound of occasional slaps and screaming cries shot up into the sky like high-pitched fireworks. The breeze blowing from the inner courtyard carried the sour stench of leftover rice and curries; everywhere there was exhaustion, fatigue, and grime. This emptiness became unbearable when Mukundalal still did not return today. Having no way to reach him, the dam of Nandarani's patience suddenly burst and shattered into pieces.

Summoning the head clerk from behind the curtain, she said, "Tell the master that I must leave for my mother's house in Vrindavan immediately. Her health is failing."

The head clerk rubbed his bald head for a moment and said softly, "It would be best to inform the master before you leave, Madam. I have received word that he will return home either today or tomorrow."

"No, I cannot delay."

Nandarani had also received the news that he was due back any day now. That was exactly why she was in such a rush to leave. She knew for certain that with a few tears and a little coaxing, everything would be forgiven. It happened like this every time. The fitting punishment always remained incomplete. This time, she simply would not allow it. And so, the punisher had to flee precisely after setting the punishment in motion. In the moments right before her departure, her feet refused to move—she threw herself face-down on the bed, sobbing uncontrollably. But the departure was not canceled.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon in the month of Kartik. The breeze in the sun was warm. The rustling of the Shishu trees lining the road mingled occasionally with the hoarse call of a cuckoo. From the road the palanquin was traveling on, the river could be seen just beyond the fields of unripe paddy. Nandarani could not restrain herself; she parted the palanquin doors slightly and looked in that direction. She caught sight of the houseboat moored on the sandy bank on the other side. A flag fluttered atop the mast. From a distance, she could make out the familiar figure of Gupi, the messenger, sitting on the roof of the boat; the sun glinted brightly off the brass badge on his turban. She forcefully slammed the palanquin doors shut, and the inside of her chest turned to stone.

CHAPTER 6

Like a storm-battered ship with a shattered mast, torn sails, and a dented hull, Mukundalal crept hesitantly into the harbor. His chest was heavy with the burden of guilt. The memories of his revelry filled his mind with a nauseating disgust, like the stale leftovers of a gluttonous feast. Had the enablers and orchestrators of his amusement been present, he would have had them grabbed and whipped. He silently vowed to never let such a thing happen again.

Seeing his disheveled hair, bloodshot eyes, and parched face, no one initially dared to give him the news of the mistress of the house. Filled with apprehension, Mukundalal walked into the inner chambers. "Forgive me, Barobou—I have sinned, it will never happen again," he rehearsed in his mind, pausing for a moment at the bedroom door before slowly stepping inside. He was absolutely certain he would find his proud wife lying on the bed in a fit of hurt pride. He intended to fall straight at her feet. But upon entering, he found the room empty. His heart sank.

Had he found Nandarani in their bed, he would have known that the proud woman had already come halfway to forgive his transgression. But with his wife absent from the bedroom, Mukundalal understood that his penance would be long and arduous. Perhaps he would have to wait until tonight, or perhaps even longer. Yet, enduring the wait was impossible for him now. He wanted to accept his full punishment immediately and extract her forgiveness; otherwise, he would not touch a drop of water. The day was advancing, and he had neither bathed nor eaten; could his devoted wife bear to watch this?

Stepping out of the bedroom, he saw Peary, the maid, standing in a corner of the veranda with her head covered. He asked, "Where is your mistress?"

She replied, "She left for Vrindavan the day before yesterday to see her mother."

As if unable to comprehend, he asked in a choked voice, "Where did she go?"

"To Vrindavan. Her mother is ill."

Mukundalal gripped the railing of the veranda for a moment. Then, with rapid steps, he went to the outer drawing-room and sat there alone. He did not speak a word. No one dared to approach him.

The head clerk timidly came and asked, "Shall I send someone to bring the mistress back?"

Without speaking, Mukundalal merely raised a finger to forbid it. Once the clerk left, he called for Radhu, the servant, and said, "Bring me brandy."

The entire household was stunned. Just as it is futile to try and suppress an earthquake when it shakes the deep core of the earth, and one must helplessly endure its destruction—this, too, was the same.

Day and night, he drank neat brandy. He barely ate. His body was already exhausted, and now, under this fierce abuse, delirium set in, accompanied by the vomiting of blood.

A doctor arrived from Calcutta and kept ice packs on his head day and night.

Mukundalal would fly into a rage at the sight of anyone. He believed the whole house was conspiring against him. Deep inside, a silent accusation festered—why did they let her leave?

The only person who could come near him was Kumudini. She would come and sit by his side. Mukundalal would stare blankly at her face, as if trying to find some resemblance to her mother in her eyes or somewhere in her features. Sometimes, he would pull her face to his chest and lie there quietly with his eyes closed as tears leaked from the corners of his eyes, but not once did he mistakenly ask about her mother.

Meanwhile, telegrams had been sent to Vrindavan. The mistress was supposed to return tomorrow. But word arrived that the railway tracks had washed away somewhere along the route.

CHAPTER 7

It was the third day of the lunar fortnight; a storm broke out in the evening. Tree branches snapped and crashed in the garden. Gusts of rain lashed out periodically like fits of angry impatience. The corrugated iron roof of the shed, built to feed the guests, was blown off and hurled into the pond. The wind, like an arrow-wounded tiger, roared and groaned, thrashing its tail as it swirled violently across the skies. Suddenly, a violent gust rattled the doors and windows.

Clutching Kumudini's hand, Mukundalal said, "Don't be afraid, Kumu my child, you haven't done anything wrong. Listen to that gnashing of teeth—they are coming to kill me."

Stroking the ice pack on her father's head, Kumudini said, "Why would they kill you, Father? It's just a storm; it will pass soon."

"Vrindavan? Vrindaban... Chandra... Chakrabarti! The priest from my father's time—but he's dead! He's become a ghost in Vrindavan. Who said he would come?"

"Don't speak, Father. Try to sleep."

"Look there, who is he warning? Beware! Beware!"

"It's nothing, the wind is just shaking the trees."

"Why, what is he so angry about? What great sin have I committed, tell me, child?"

"You've committed no sin, Father. Sleep a little."

"Brinda, the messenger? The one Madhu Adhikari used to play.

Why slander Him in vain, O Brinda, my Lord Govinda—"

Closing his eyes, he began to hum.

"Whose flute plays in Vrindavan? Oh friend, my friend, How can I stay indoors!

Radhu, bring the brandy."

Kumudini leaned over her father's face and said, "Father, what are you saying?" Mukundalal opened his eyes, bit his tongue, and fell silent. Even in his severely

disjointed state of mind, he had not forgotten that drinking in front of Kumudini was unacceptable.

A little later, he started singing again:

"Shyam's flute must be snatched away, Or else I must leave this Vrindavan."

Hearing these disjointed fragments of songs broke Kumu's heart. Feeling a surge of anger toward her mother, she rested her head at her father's feet, as if silently begging for forgiveness on her mother's behalf.

Suddenly, Mukundalal called out, "Dewanji!"

When the head clerk arrived, he said, "I can hear a thak-thak sound."

The clerk replied, "It's the wind rattling the doors."

"The old man has come, that Vrindabanchandra—bald head, walking stick in hand, a silk shawl over his shoulder. Come back to your own land! It's constantly going thak-thak-thak-thak. Is it a walking stick, or wooden sandals?"

The vomiting of blood had ceased for a while. At three in the morning, it started again. Mukundalal felt around the bed with his hands and said in a slurred voice, "Barobou, the room is so dark! Will you not light the lamp yet?"

Since returning from the houseboat, this was the first time Mukundalal had addressed his wife—and it was the last.

Returning from Vrindavan, Nandarani collapsed in a swoon at the doorstep of the house. She was carried to her bed. Nothing in the world appealed to her anymore. Her tears completely dried up. She found no solace even in her children. The family guru came and recited scriptures; she kept her face turned away. She refused to take off her iron bangle (the symbol of a married woman). She said, "Reading my palm, they told me my marital blessing would never wane. Could that be a lie?"

A distant sister-in-law, Kshema, wiping her eyes with the edge of her sari, said, "What was meant to happen has happened. Now, look to your household. Before passing, the master said, 'Will Barobou not light the lamp in the room?'"

Nandarani sat up in bed, gazed off into the distance, and said, "I will go. I will go to light the lamp. There will be no delay this time." As she spoke, her pale, emaciated face lit up, as if she were ready to set out right then with a lamp in her hand.

The sun moved into its northern course; the month of Magh arrived, on the fourteenth day of the bright lunar fortnight. Nandarani painted a thick mark of vermilion on her forehead and wrapped herself in a red Benarasi sari. Without a single glance back at her worldly life, she departed with a smile on her lips.

CHAPTER 8

After his father's death, Bipradas realized that the very tree sheltering them had its roots hollowed out by insects. Their property and assets were standing on the quicksand of debt—sinking slowly. There was no way out unless they curtailed their ceremonies and drastically reduced their lifestyle. Questions about Kumu's marriage constantly arose, and answering them became embarrassing. Finally, they had to abandon their home in Nurnagar. They moved to a house in the Bagbazar area of Calcutta.

In the old house, Kumudini had a vibrant, living ecosystem. Surrounded by flowers and fruits, cowsheds, the worship hall, crop fields, and people. She used to pick flowers in the inner gardens, fill her baskets, and ruin her appetite by eating raw plums mixed with salt, chili, and coriander. She plucked elephant apples and gathered mangoes in the orchards during the summer storms of Baisakh and Jaistha. At the eastern edge of the garden was the husking shed, where she always had a small part in the women's joyous chatter during the preparation of sweetmeats. The backyard pond, enclosed by moss-green walls, was cool in its dense shade, echoing with the calls of cuckoos, doves, magpie-robins, and shamas. Here, she swam every day, picked water lilies, watched the reflections on the water while sitting on the steps, and absentmindedly stitched wool. Month by month, season by season, human festivals were tied to the celebrations of nature. From Akshaya Tritiya to Dol Jatra and Basanti Puja—so many occasions! It was as if humanity and nature joined hands to weave the entire year into a magnificent tapestry.

Not that everything was perfectly beautiful or entirely happy. The dividing of the fish, the distribution of festival allowances, the mistress's favoritism, mothers defending their own sons during quarrels—all this fueled silent jealousy or loud complaints, whispered gossip or open slander. All of this existed in abundance. But above all, beneath the constant bustle of daily chores, there was a perpetual anxiety: what would the master do next? What disaster would brew in his sitting room? If it began, there would be no peace for days. Kumudini's heart would pound, her mother would hide in her room and weep, and her brothers' faces would turn pale. This was the massive machinery of a household, constantly swinging between good and bad, joy and sorrow.

From the midst of this, Kumudini arrived in Calcutta. It was like a vast ocean, yet where was a single drop of water to quench her thirst? Back home, even the sky and the wind had a familiar face. On the village horizon, a dense patch of woods here, a sandbank there, the glittering line of the river, the spire of a temple, vast empty fields, wild tamarisk bushes, the towpath—all these framed the sky with diverse lines and colors, making it uniquely hers—Kumudini's own sky. The sunlight, too, had a specific quality. Blending with the pond, the paddy fields, the cane thickets, the rust-colored sails of fishing boats, the glossy green of fresh bamboo shoots, the deep smooth green of the jackfruit trees, and the pale yellow of the opposite riverbank—the light took on a familiar, beloved form. Here in Calcutta, that eternal sky and light, fractured by the harsh, unyielding lines of unfamiliar rooftops and walls, stared down at her with the cold, critical eyes of a stranger. Even the local gods seemed to have ostracized her.

Bipradas would pull her near his armchair and ask, "Well, Kumu, feeling homesick?"

Kumudini would smile and say, "No, Dada, not at all."

"Will you go to see the museum, sister?"

"Yes, I will."

She said it with so much forced enthusiasm that had Bipradas not been a man, he would have realized it wasn't natural. She was relieved when she didn't have to go. Unaccustomed to being among crowds of outsiders, she felt endless anxiety going into public spaces. Her hands and feet would turn ice-cold, and she could barely keep her eyes open to look at anything properly.

Bipradas taught her to play chess. An exceptional player himself, he found amusement in Kumu's amateurish moves. Eventually, playing regularly, Kumu's hand became so steady that Bipradas had to play cautiously. Lacking female companions of her own age in Calcutta, the brother and sister became like two brothers. Bipradas had a deep passion for Sanskrit literature; Kumu earnestly learned grammar from him. When she read Kumārasambhava, she began to see Shiva in her prayers—the great ascetic who was the ultimate reward for the ascetic Uma's supreme penance. In the maiden's contemplation, her future husband appeared illuminated by the divine aura of sacred purity.

Bipradas had a hobby of photography, and Kumu learned that too. One would take the pictures, the other would develop them. Bipradas was an expert marksman. When they went home for the holidays, he would practice his pistol shooting by floating green coconuts, wood-apple shells, and walnuts in the backyard pond; he would call Kumu, "Come on, Kumu, give it a try."

Whatever caught her brother's fancy, Kumu adopted it with great care. She learned to play the esraj from him, and eventually, her skill reached a point where her brother conceded, "I admit defeat."

Thus, the elder brother she had revered most since childhood became her closest companion in Calcutta. Coming to the city had served at least one purpose. By nature, Kumu was solitary in her mind. Like the mountain-dwelling Uma, she lived in a mythic hermitage of her own making, on the pristine shores of Manasarovar. For people born solitary like this, open skies, vast seclusion, and within it, one person to whom they can devote their entire heart and soul, are essential. Because this emotional distance from immediate worldly matters is not typical of women, other women do not like it at all. They perceive it either as arrogance or heartlessness. That is why, even back in the village, Kumudini never developed deep friendships among her female peers.

While their father was still alive, Bipradas's marriage was nearly finalized, but just two days before the turmeric ceremony, the bride died of a severe fever. When his horoscope was examined in Bhatpara, it was revealed that the malefic planetary influences concerning his marriage would take time to wane. The marriage was put on hold. Meanwhile, their father passed away. Since then, no favorable time for matchmakers ever arrived in Bipradas's household. Once, a matchmaker held out the hope of a massive dowry. It had the opposite effect. Resting his hookah against the wall with a trembling hand, the matchmaker had to hastily flee out onto the street that day.

CHAPTER 9

Subodh's letters from England used to arrive regularly. Now, there were occasional gaps. Kumu eagerly watched for the mail. This time, the bearer handed the letter directly to her. Bipradas was standing before the mirror, shaving. Kumu ran to him and said, "Dada, Chhordada's (second elder brother's) letter!"

Finishing his shave, Bipradas sat in his armchair and opened the letter, almost with a sense of dread. After reading it, he crumpled the paper in his hand as if it were a sharp, physical pain.

Frightened, Kumudini asked, "Chhordada isn't sick, is he?"

"No, he is fine."

"Tell me what he wrote in the letter, Dada."

"Things about his studies."

For some time now, Bipradas had stopped letting Kumu read Subodh's letters. He would read out little snippets. This time, not even that. Kumu did not have the courage to ask for the letter, but her mind grew restless.

At first, Subodh used to manage his expenses carefully. The memory of his family's hardships was still fresh in his mind. But as those memories faded into shadows, his expenses grew. He claimed that without maintaining a lavish lifestyle, it was impossible to breach the high social circles there. And failing to do so would defeat the very purpose of coming to England.

Forced by circumstances, Bipradas had already wired him extra money once or twice. Now, the demand was for a thousand pounds—urgently needed.

Holding his head in his hands, Bipradas wondered, Where will I get it? I am toiling to the bone to save money for Kumu's wedding, and now that very fund will be drained? What good is Subodh becoming a barrister if the price is Kumu's ruined future?

That night, Bipradas paced back and forth on the veranda. He didn't know that sleep had also eluded Kumudini's eyes. When she could bear it no longer, Kumu ran to him, grasped his hand, and said, "Tell me the truth, Dada, what is wrong with Chhordada? I beg you, don't hide it from me."

Bipradas realized that hiding it would only magnify her fears. After a moment of silence, he said, "Subodh has asked for money. I don't have the means to send that much."

Kumu held his hand tighter and said, "Dada, let me say something. Promise you won't get angry."

"If it's something to be angry about, how can I survive without getting angry?"

"No, Dada, I'm not joking. Listen to me—mother's jewelry is kept for me. Use that—"

"Hush, hush! How could we ever lay a hand on your jewelry!"

"But I can."

"No, neither can you. Let it go. Now go to sleep."

The morning in Calcutta dawned with the cawing of crows and the clatter of the scavenger's cart. In the distance, the whistle of a steamer, then an oil mill, blew. On the street in front of the house, a man walked by with a ladder on his shoulder, putting up posters for fever pills; two bulls pulling an empty cart bolted down the street, goaded by the driver's frantic urging; a loud argument broke out between a Hindustani woman and an Odia Brahmin competing for water from the public tap. Bipradas sat on the veranda, the pipe of his hookah in hand, the unread newspaper lying on the floor.

Kumu came and said, "Dada, don't say 'no'."

"Are you going to interfere with my freedom of choice now? Under your rule, night must become day, and 'no' must become 'yes'."

"No, listen to me—let my jewelry put an end to your worries."

"Do you think I call you an old soul for nothing? By what logic did you ever think your jewelry could end my worries?"

"I don't know, but I cannot bear to see you worry like this."

"Worries must be resolved by thinking them through; trying to cheat them away only makes things worse. Have a little patience, I am making an arrangement."

Bipradas wrote back by the next mail, stating that sending the money would mean touching Kumu's dowry fund, which was impossible.

In due time, the reply arrived. Subodh wrote that he did not want Kumu's dowry money. Instead, he requested that his own half-share of the estate be sold to send him the funds. Along with the letter, he enclosed a Power of Attorney.

This letter pierced Bipradas's chest like an arrow. How could Subodh write such a cruel letter! He immediately summoned the old head clerk and asked, "Didn't Bhushan Ray want to take the Karimhati estate on lease? How much salami (premium) will he pay?"

The clerk replied, "It could go up to twenty thousand."

"Send for Bhushan Ray. I want to negotiate."

Bipradas was the eldest son. At the time of his birth, his grandfather had gifted this specific estate exclusively to him. Bhushan Ray was a massive moneylender, dealing in loans worth two to two-and-a-half million rupees. His birthplace was Karimhati, which was why he had been trying to secure the lease of his own village for a long time. In times of financial crisis, Bipradas would occasionally consider it, but the tenants would come weeping. They would say, "We will never accept him as our landlord." And so, the proposal fell through time and again. This time, Bipradas hardened his heart. He knew for certain that Subodh's demands for money would not end here. He said to himself, Let the premium from my estate serve Subodh for now; we shall see about the rest later.

The head clerk did not dare argue to Bipradas's face. Secretly, he went to Kumu and said, "Sister, the master listens to you. Forbid him; this is unjust."

Everyone in the household loved Bipradas. They could not bear the thought of the eldest master sacrificing his personal property for anyone else.

The day advanced. Bipradas was shifting through the deeds of the estate. He hadn't bathed or eaten yet. Kumu repeatedly sent for him. Finally, he came into the inner quarters with a haggard face. He looked like a tree scorched by lightning. It felt like a spear piercing Kumu's heart.

After bathing and eating, Bipradas sat on the bed with his legs outstretched, leaning against the bolster, holding the hookah pipe. Kumu sat by his pillow, gently stroking his hair, and softly said, "Dada, you cannot lease out your estate."

"Have you been possessed by the ghost of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah? Tyranny in everything?"

"No, Dada, don't try to deflect the topic."

Bipradas could hold it in no longer. Sitting up straight, he moved Kumu from his pillow to sit in front of him. Clearing the tightness in his throat with a small cough, he said, "Do you know what Subodh wrote? Look at this."

He pulled the letter from his shirt pocket and handed it to Kumu. Kumu read the whole thing, covered her face with both hands, and cried, "Oh mother! How could Chhordada write such a letter?"

Bipradas said, "When he has learned to distinguish between his property and my property today, how can I keep my estate separate anymore? Today, his father is not here; in his time of need, if I don't give to him, who will?"

Kumu could not say another word. Tears streamed silently from her eyes. Bipradas leaned back against the bolster and closed his eyes.

After massaging her brother's feet for a long time, Kumu finally said, "Dada, mother's wealth still belongs to mother. While her jewelry is here, why must you—"

Bipradas started and sat up again. "Kumu, this is what you absolutely fail to understand. If Subodh roams around England watching theaters and concerts funded by your jewelry today, could I ever forgive him? No. Could he ever stand with his head held high again? Why do you want to punish him so harshly?"

Kumu remained silent. She could find no way out. Then, as she had thought many times before, she began to wonder—could something impossible not happen? Could some planet or star in the sky not sweep away all obstacles in a single instant? A good omen had indeed appeared; for the past few days, her left eye had been twitching repeatedly. Her left eye had twitched many times before in her life, and she had never needed to give it much thought. But this time, she clung to the

omen in her mind. It was as if its promise simply had to be kept—the truth of an auspicious sign could not be broken.

CHAPTER 10

It was a rainy day. Bipradas was not feeling well. Wrapped in a quilt, he was half-lying down, reading the newspaper. Kumu's beloved cat had claimed a spare corner of the quilt and was fast asleep, curled in a ball. Resignedly tolerating this audacity, Bipradas's terrier lay at its master's feet, occasionally growling in its sleep.

Just then, another matchmaker arrived.

"Namaskar."

"Who are you?"

"Sir, your esteemed ancestors knew me very well—(a lie)—you were but a child then. My name is Nilmani Ghatak, son of Rangamani Ghatak."

"What do you need?"

"I bring news of an excellent groom. Perfectly suited for your house."

Bipradas sat up slightly. The matchmaker mentioned the name of Raja Bahadur Madhusudan Ghoshal.

Surprised, Bipradas asked, "Does he have a son?"

The matchmaker bit his tongue. "No, he never married. Immense wealth. He has delegated the business matters to others and has now set his mind on starting a family."

Bipradas sat silently for a while, pulling on his hookah. Then, suddenly, with an almost forced emphasis, he said, "We do not have a girl of matching age in our house."

The matchmaker refused to give up. He began an elaborate, winding explanation of the sheer magnitude of the groom's wealth and the vast extent of his influence in the Governor's court.

Bipradas sat stunned once again. And again, with unnecessary vehemence, he repeated, "The ages will not match."

The matchmaker said, "Think it over. I will return in a few days."

Bipradas let out a deep sigh and lay back down.

Kumu, about to enter the room with hot tea for her brother, stopped outside the door upon seeing a wet, tattered umbrella wrapped in a towel and a pair of mud-caked slippers. Much of their conversation reached her ears. The matchmaker was saying, "The Raja Bahadur will become a Maharaja before the year is out; these are words straight from the Governor's own mouth. That is why he is finally concerned that the position of Maharani can no longer remain vacant. Your astrologer, Kinu Bhattacharya, is a distant relative of mine by marriage; he showed me the girl's horoscope. The signs match perfectly. Armed with this, I've scoured the horoscopes of every girl in the city—not a single one like this fell into my hands. Mark my words, I am telling you, this match is already made in heaven; it is the absolute decree of Prajapati, the Lord of Marriage."

At that precise moment, Kumu's left eye twitched again. What an extraordinary mystery of good omens! How many times had Kinu the astrologer read her palm and declared that she would be a queen! And today, the ultimate fruition of her horoscope had arrived at her door, unasked. Their family astrologer had come to Calcutta just a few days ago to collect his annual fee; he had predicted that starting from the month of Ashadh, the Taurus sign would see royal honors, financial gain through a woman, and the destruction of enemies. The negative aspect included an affliction to the wife, perhaps even the loss of the wife. Bipradas's zodiac sign was Taurus. He did suffer from occasional physical ailments. The proof was right here—since last night, he had clear symptoms of a cold. The month of Ashadh had arrived. There was no immediate need to worry about the 'wife's affliction or death' part, as he was unmarried. Therefore, the current time was highly auspicious.

Sitting beside her brother, Kumu asked, "Dada, do you have a headache?"

Her brother said, "No."

"The tea hasn't gone cold, has it? I couldn't come in seeing you had a visitor."

Bipradas looked at Kumu's face and sighed deeply. The cruelty of fate is most unbearable when it brings a golden chariot whose wheels cannot move. The pain of hesitation in her brother's expression hurt Kumu. Why was Dada doubting a gift from destiny? The thought that personal choice was a necessary factor in marriage had never even entered Kumudini's head. Since childhood, she had witnessed the marriages of her four elder sisters one by one. Marriages into high Kulin Brahmin families—there was never much room for 'choice' beyond caste status. Yet, they

were living their domestic lives with their children; the days were passing by. When they suffered, they did not rebel; they couldn't even imagine that things could have been any other way. Does a mother get to choose her son? She accepts him. He may turn out bad, or he may turn out good. A husband is the same. The Creator hasn't opened a shop. Who can sit in judgment over destiny?

After all this time, the prince had crossed the vast, mythical plains of her misfortune, arriving in disguise. Kumu could hear the rumble of his chariot wheels in the beating of her heart. She had no desire to scrutinize the outward disguise.

Hurrying to her room, she opened the almanac and saw that today was Manorath-Dwitiya—a day for the fulfillment of desires. In the evening, she summoned the few Brahmins among the household staff, fed them a modest feast, and gave them whatever small monetary offering she could afford. They all blessed her: "May you live as a queen; may you be blessed with wealth and children."

The matchmaker arrived at Bipradas's drawing-room for the second time. Snapping his fingers and loudly chanting "Shiva, Shiva," the old man let out a huge yawn. This time, Bipradas did not have the courage to end the matter with a rejection. He thought, How can I take on such a massive responsibility? How can I know for certain that this match isn't the best thing for Kumu? Promising to give his final word the day after tomorrow, he bid the matchmaker farewell.

CHAPTER 11

The evening darkness grew dense with the shadows of clouds and the pouring rain. Kumudini did not have much furniture. A small bed stood on one side, while a clothes rack held a couple of rolled-up saris and a pale, champa-colored towel. In the corner sat a jackfruit-wood chest where she kept her daily clothes. Under the bed were a green tin box containing her betel-leaf preparations and another box for her hair accessories. A wooden alcove in the wall held a few books, an inkwell, a pen, some writing paper, and the pair of slippers her mother had knitted from wool, which her father had worn constantly. At the head of her bed hung a portrait of the divine couple, Radha and Krishna. An esraj leaned against the corner of the wall.

Kumu had not lit the lamp in the room. Sitting on the wooden chest, she gazed out the window. Before her, the brick-bodied expanse of Calcutta looked like a colossal, armor-plated beast from a primeval age, appearing blurry through the sheets of rain. Occasional pinpricks of light flickered across its body. Kumu's mind was wandering through the future ordained by her destiny. The house, the people—everything there was shaped by her own idealized vision. And at the center of it all was the establishment of her own image as a devoted, virtuous wife—how much devotion, how much worship, how much selfless service she would offer! There was a deep wound in the sacred character of her own mother; for a brief time, she had lost her patience over her husband's transgressions. Kumu vowed she would never make that mistake.

Hearing Bipradas's footsteps, Kumu startled. Seeing her brother, she asked, "Shall I light the lamp?"

"No, Kumu, there's no need," Bipradas said, coming to sit beside her on the chest. Kumu quickly stepped down to the floor and began gently massaging his legs.

In a gentle voice, Bipradas said, "We had a visitor in the drawing-room, which is why I didn't send for you. Have you been sitting here alone all this time?"

Slightly embarrassed, Kumu replied, "No, Aunt Kshema was here for a long time." To change the subject, she asked, "Who came to the drawing-room, Dada?"

"That is what I came to tell you. This year, in the month of Jaistha, you crossed eighteen and stepped into your nineteenth year, didn't you?"

"Yes, Dada. Is there a fault in that?"

"It's not about fault. Today, Nilmani Ghatak, the matchmaker, came. My dear sister, do not be shy. When Father was alive, you were ten—a marriage had almost been finalized. If it had happened, no one would have waited for your consent. Today, I cannot do that. You must have heard the name of Raja Madhusudan Ghoshal. They are not lacking in aristocratic lineage. But there is a vast difference in age between you two. I could not agree to it. Now, with a single word from you, I can put an end to this matter. Don't be shy, Kumu."

"No, I won't be shy," she said, remaining silent for a moment. "The man you are speaking of—my match with him has surely already been ordained." This was merely an echo of the matchmaker's words, which had somehow lodged deep within her mind.

Surprised, Bipradas asked, "How is it ordained?"

Kumu remained silent.

Stroking her head, Bipradas said, "Don't be childish, Kumu."

Kumudini replied, "You won't understand, Dada. I am not being childish at all."

She had boundless reverence for her brother. But her brother did not believe in divine omens, and Kumudini knew this was the one blind spot in his vision.

Bipradas said, "But you haven't even seen him."

"So be it. I know for certain."

Bipradas knew very well that this was the point of infinite distance between the brother and sister. In this dark, mystical chamber of Kumu's heart, her brother held no sway. Yet, Bipradas tried once more, "Look, Kumu, this is a matter of a lifetime. Do not make a stubborn vow based on a fleeting whim."

Desperate, Kumu replied, "It is not a whim, Dada, not a whim. I touch your feet and swear—I cannot marry anyone else."

Bipradas was startled. How do you argue where logic and cause-and-effect hold no ground? One cannot wrestle with a moonless night. Bipradas realized Kumu had constructed some divine omen in her mind. He was right. Just that morning, praying silently to the deity, she had made a vow: she would pair up an odd cluster of flowers, and if the final remaining flower was blue like her Lord, she would accept it as His will. The very last flower had been a blue Aparajita.

Not far away, the gongs and bells of the evening aarti rang out from the Mallick household. Kumu folded her hands in reverence. Bipradas sat there for a long time. Lightning flashed intermittently; the pouring rain did not cease.

CHAPTER 12

Bipradas tried a few more times to reason with Kumudini. Kumu would not answer, simply keeping her head bowed and picking at the edge of her sari.

The marriage proposal was finalized; the only negotiations left were about a single issue. Where would the wedding take place? Bipradas wanted it at their Calcutta house. Madhusudan stubbornly insisted on Nurnagar. The groom's side prevailed.

To make preparations, they had to move back to Nurnagar a bit early. Just as the parched earth turns vibrant green the moment the Ashadh rains fall after the harsh summer of Baisakh and Jaistha, a new flush of life colored Kumudini inside and out. The joy of uniting with the man she had idealized in her mind kept her constantly thrilled. The golden autumn sunlight seemed to speak to her eye-to-eye, sharing secrets from a timeless eternity. On the veranda outside her bedroom, Kumu would scatter puffed rice for the birds; she would leave out pieces of bread, and squirrels would dart over with alert eyes, standing on their hind legs to nibble at the bread held in their front paws. Kumu would sit hidden, watching them with delight. Her heart was brimming with boundless grace for the world. In the afternoon, while bathing, she would sit quietly immersed to her neck in the backyard pond, feeling as though the water were conversing with her very skin. The slanting evening light, filtering through the branches of the pomelo tree on the western bank, shimmered like streaks of gold on the pitch-black touchstone of the water; as she watched, a tremor of ineffable ecstasy rippled through her body in that play of light and shadow. At noon, she would sit alone in the attic room on the roof, listening to the call of the doves from the neighboring blackberry tree. The deity she was welcoming into the temple of her youth was an embodiment of dense, spiritual emotion, infused with the sweetness of the eternal union of Radha and Krishna. Sitting on the roof, she would slowly play her brother's Bhupali raga on the esraj:

Today my beloved has come to my house, Every hair on my body thrills with joy.

At night, sitting on her bed, she would bow in reverence; in the morning, waking up on the bed, she would bow again. To whom she bowed was not entirely clear—it was the spontaneous overflow of anchorless devotion.

But the doors to a temple housing an imaginary idol cannot remain closed forever. When the beauty of that idol begins to take a beating from the heat and force of

whispered rumors, how can the deity's perfection endure? That is a day of deep sorrow for the devotee.

One day, old Tinkari from Telenipara walked right up to Kumudini and said to her face, "Well, girl, what a king our Kumu has scored for herself! You know that gypsy song—

There was a thicket of jackal-bushes licked by dogs, They cut it down and made a throne.

He is the king of that jackal-bush thicket. He's just the son of Anando the clerk from Rajabpur. During the year of the great famine, he made his fortune bringing in rice from the Burmese borders and selling it high. Yet, he made his old mother cook and slave for him until her dying day, working her to the bone."

The women eagerly grabbed hold of Tinkari and asked, "Did you know the groom?"

"Of course I knew him! His mother is a girl from our neighborhood, from the family of the Chakraborty priests. (Lowering her voice) To tell you the truth, child, good Brahmin families don't marry into their house. But let it be—the Goddess of Wealth doesn't care about caste."

As I mentioned earlier, Kumudini's mind was not molded in the modern cast. The purity of caste and lineage was a very real thing to her. Therefore, the more her heart shrank in discomfort, the angrier she became at those who gossiped. Suddenly bursting into tears, she ran out of the room. The women nudged each other and sneered, "Look at her, so much sympathy already! Seems she has surpassed even Sati at Daksha's sacrifice."

Bipradas had a modern mindset, yet the inferiority of the groom's lineage made him uncomfortable. He tried his best to suppress the rumors. But just as pressing down on a torn pillow only makes more cotton spill out, his efforts had the opposite effect.

Meanwhile, they learned from Damodar Biswas, an elderly tenant, that the Ghoshals had once been the lords of Sheyakuli, the village adjacent to Nurnagar. It was now under the Chatterjees' control. Damodar's face lit up with devotion as he narrated how, during the lawsuit over the immersion of the idols, the Ghoshals themselves were effectively "immersed," and how the Chatterjees' ancestors had

managed not only to drive them out of the village but out of society itself. The fact that the Ghoshals were once equal to the Chatterjees in wealth, status, and lineage was good news, but Bipradas was gripped by a sudden fear: was this marriage simply an extension of that ancient feud?

CHAPTER 13

The wedding was set for the month of Agrahayan. Lakshmi Puja on the twenty-fifth of Ashvin had passed. Suddenly, on the twenty-seventh of Ashvin, an overseer from the engineering department of the Ghoshal Company arrived with tents, various equipment, and a gang of laborers from the western provinces. What was all this? They were to pitch tents by the Ghoshal-dighi in Sheyakuli, where the groom and his party would arrive and stay several days in advance.

What kind of nonsense was this? Bipradas said, "However many of them wish to come, for however long, we will make the arrangements. What is the need for tents? We have a separate guest house; we are vacating it for them."

The overseer replied, "It is the Raja Bahadur's order. He has also instructed us to clear the jungles around the pond—you are the landlord, so we seek your permission."

Flushing red, Bipradas said, "Is this proper? We can clear the jungle ourselves."

The overseer answered politely, "That is the ancestral homestead of the Raja Bahadur; it is his wish to have it cleared himself."

The request wasn't entirely unreasonable, but the relatives began to grumble. The tenants said, "This is an attempt to one-up our masters. His coffers have suddenly swollen, and he can't hide it; isn't all this just to beat his own drum? If this were the old days, we would have dispatched the groom and his whole parade straight to hell. If the younger master were here, he wouldn't have tolerated this either; we'd see where those fancy babus and their tents ended up."

The tenants came to Bipradas and said, "My Lord, we cannot back down against them. Whatever it costs, we will pay it ourselves."

Nabagopal, the head of the minority-shareholding branch, came and said, "We cannot endure this insult to our lineage. Once, our ancestors ground these Ghoshals down to the bone; today, they have the audacity to march into our territory and flash their money at us! Do not fear, Dada, whatever the cost, we are with you. Our property may be divided, but our family pride is not."

Saying this, Nabagopal forcefully took charge of the arrangements.

Bipradas could not bring himself to visit Kumu for days. How could he look her in the face? Society lacked the mercy or decency to keep the groom's arrogance a secret from Kumu. Everyone exaggerated the details directly to her. The women directed their anger at her. It was because of her that their ancestors' heads were bowed in shame. Going to be a Queen! What a fine specimen of a King!

Kumu had managed to suppress the issue of caste with her devotion. But seeing the meanness of the groom's side, using their wealth to belittle her own family, filled her heart with despair. She constantly hid from people. Today, the Ghoshals' shame felt like her own. Her heart ached to hear something from her brother. But her brother was nowhere to be seen; he didn't even come to the inner quarters for his meals.

One day, while Bipradas was in the inner garden checking the spot where a shed was to be built for the confectioners, he suddenly saw Kumu sitting on the bottom steps of the backyard pond, staring down at the water. Seeing her brother, she quickly came up. In a choked voice, she said, "Dada, I don't understand anything." Covering her face with her sari, she burst into tears.

Her brother gently rubbed her back and said, "Don't listen to what people say, sister."

"But what are they doing? Will you have any honor left?"

"Try to see it from their perspective too. He is returning to his ancestors' birthplace; won't he want to celebrate with pomp? Try to separate this from the matter of the wedding."

Kumu remained silent. Bipradas could bear it no longer and said desperately, "If you have even the slightest doubt in your mind, I can still call off the wedding."

Kumudini shook her head vigorously and said, "Shame! How could that be?"

Before the Inner Knower, the knot of truth had already been tied. Whatever remained was purely external.

Bipradas's modern mind grew impatient with such intense orthodoxy. He said, "The bond of marriage is only true when there is honesty on both sides. A perfectly tuned esraj has no meaning if the hand playing it is out of tune. Look at our mythology: as is Sita, so is Rama; as is Mahadev, so is Sati; as is Arundhati, so is Vashistha. Modern

men have no virtue in themselves, so they preach a one-sided chastity. They provide no oil, yet they command the wick to burn—burning with dry hearts, these women just turn to ash."

It was useless to say this to Kumu. From that moment, she forcefully chanted in her mind: Whether he is good or bad, he is my ultimate salvation.

He whose mind is untroubled by sorrows, who is free from the desire for pleasures, Who is devoid of attachment, fear, and anger—

This is the defining trait not only of the ascetic's code (yati-dharma) but also of the devoted wife's code (sati-dharma). That devotion is beyond happiness and sorrow—it holds no anger, no fear. And passion? What is the absolute necessity of that? Passion involves a ledger of giving and receiving; devotion is greater than that. It is not an appeal, it is a surrender. The code of a devoted wife is detached—what in English is called "impersonal." The individual named Madhusudan might have flaws, but the abstract concept of "Husband" is flawless and immaculate. To that impersonal, meditative ideal, Kumudini surrendered herself single-mindedly.

CHAPTER 14

The jungle around the Ghoshal-dighi was cleared—it was unrecognizable. The ground was perfectly leveled, intersected by red brick-dust paths lined with lampposts. All the waterweeds had been removed from the pond. Moored near the steps were two sleek, new English-style sailing boats; one bore the name "Madhumati" and the other "Madhukari." In front of the tent where the Raja Bahadur himself would stay, the name "Madhuchakra" was embroidered in red silk on yellow broadcloth, framed on the entrance. There was a tent for the inner quarters, with a pathway extending right into the water, enclosed by mats. Right above the bathing steps, a wooden plaque on a massive neem tree read, "Madhusagar" (Ocean of Madhu). Across a patch of land, geometrically shaped flowerbeds brimmed with sunflowers, tuberose, marigolds, balsams, cannas, and crotons, along with various colorful English flowers in square wooden planter boxes. In the center was a small paved pool featuring a cast-iron statue of a naked woman blowing into a conch shell, from which a fountain of water would spray. This area was named "Madhukunja." At the entrance stood an ornate iron gate flying a flag that read "Madhupuri."

Everywhere, the stamp of the name "Madhu." People began arriving in droves from afar to witness this magically conjured city of colorful fabrics, canvas walls, canopies, flags, bright flowers, and Chinese lanterns. Meanwhile, a squad of orderlies—wearing gleaming badges, turbans with red borders on yellow, and red broadcloth uniforms trimmed with gold lace—strutted around in squeaky English shoes. They fired blank shots from muskets in the evening and struck gongs at the change of every watch, day and night; the English swords dangling from some of their leather belts constantly poked at the landlord's soil with every step. The Chatterjees' old retainers, dressed in tattered, outdated uniforms, were too ashamed to even step out of their quarters.

Seeing all this, the Chatterjee family burned with fury. Today, driving it straight into the ribs of Nurnagar, the Ghoshals' victory flag flew high on a spear shaft.

Such was the prelude to this auspicious union.

CHAPTER 15

Bipradas called Nabagopal and said, "Nabu, trying to compete in extravagance—that is the work of the vulgar."

Nabagopal replied, "The four-faced Brahma shook the dust off his feet and created mostly common men; his four mouths are only there to speak big words. Since fifteen-and-a-half annas (the vast majority) of people are vulgar, to maintain one's honor before them, one must take the vulgar route."

Bipradas said, "Even then, you won't be able to match them. It is better we conduct our affairs in a pure, spiritual manner; that will look better. We will bring in worthy Brahmin scholars and perform the rituals flawlessly according to the Sama Veda. Let them boast, they have become Rajas; we are Brahmins, our duty is sacred action."

Nabagopal said, "Dada, you've forgotten the almanac; this is not the Satya Yuga. You're trying to sail a boat over mud! You have your tenants—Tinu Sarkar, your leaseholder Bhadu Paramanik, Kamaraddi Biswas, Panchu Mandal—do you think they will understand a single syllable of your ascetic Brahminism of eating boiled green bananas and rice? Are they the great-grandsons of the sage Yajnavalkya? Their hearts will break. You stay quiet; you don't need to worry about a thing."

Joining hands with the tenants, Nabagopal set to work with full force. Thumping their chests, everyone declared, "Why worry about money?" The clerks, the officers, the foot soldiers, and the guards—everyone was outfitted in new red broadcloth shawls and colored dhotis. A towering music pavilion (nahabat-khana), draped in red fabric, hung with tassels and flying flags, was erected; its spire could be seen from seven miles away. Between the two branches of the family, they brought out their eight elephants, strapped on their ornate saddles, and paraded them back and forth along the road in front of the Ghoshal-dighi for no reason at all, swinging their trunks as the heavy bells around their necks chimed dong-dong. "Whatever happens, elephants don't come out of jute sacks!" everyone laughed uproariously, slapping their thighs.

The wedding date was the twenty-seventh of Agrahayan; there were still ten days left. Around this time, word of mouth arrived that the Raja was coming with his entourage. A dilemma arose: what was the proper course of action? Madhusudan

had sent no official word to them. Perhaps he believed that courtesy was for commoners, and that rudeness was a royal prerogative. Under such circumstances, would it be appropriate for them to go out of their way to receive him at the station uninvited? The proper response to not being informed was not to inquire.

All this was logically true, but logic cannot ward off worldly sorrow. Bipradas had a deep affection for Kumu; the thought of anything hurting her surpassed all arguments. It is so easy to torment women; their vulnerable hearts are exposed on all sides. Society has handed the whip to the powerful, while no laws or rules look out for the sensitive, unarmored backs of the defenseless. In such a situation, it is cowardice to try to save one's own pride by throwing the treasure of one's affection into the storm of anger, hatred, and jealousy—this was the burden on Bipradas's mind.

Without telling anyone, Bipradas rode his horse to the station. The train arrived at five o'clock in the afternoon. The Raja stepped out of his saloon car with his entourage. Seeing Bipradas, he offered a dry, brief nod and said, "What is this? Why did you take the trouble?"

Bipradas: "Not at all! This is your first visit to my land; shouldn't I welcome you?"

Raja: "You are mistaken. I haven't come to your land yet. That will be on the day of the wedding."

Bipradas could not comprehend the meaning of the remark. The crowded platform was no place for an argument, so he merely said, "The houseboats are ready at the riverbank."

The Raja replied, "That won't be necessary. Our steam launch has arrived."

Bipradas realized things were not going well. Yet, he tried once more: "Provisions for your meals and a kitchen boat are all prepared."

"Why did you go to such trouble? We won't need a thing. Look, remember one thing: I have come to the birthplace of my ancestors—not to your land. I am supposed to go there on the day of the wedding."

Bipradas understood there was no hope of softening him. His heart sank. He went to the station's waiting room and lay down on a chair. It was a winter evening; darkness had fallen. The bell rang for the train arriving from the north, and the

station lights flickered on. Letting go of the reins and allowing the horse to walk at its own pace, Bipradas finally returned home late into the night. Where he had gone, or what had happened—he told no one.

That very night, he caught a chill and developed a cough. It steadily worsened. In his attempt to ignore it, he only aggravated the illness. Finally, with much coaxing, Kumu managed to make him lie down in bed. The entire burden of managing the ceremonies fell onto Nabagopal's shoulders.

CHAPTER 16

Two days later, Nabagopal arrived and said, "Give me some advice, what should I do?"

Anxious, Bipradas asked, "Why? What has happened?"

"He has brought along a few Englishmen—probably brokers, or foreign tavern-keepers. Yesterday, they returned from the Pirpur sandbanks with no less than two hundred slaughtered snipes. Today, they are heading to the Chandandaha wetlands. It's duck season in this winter cold—there will be a massacre of monstrous proportions. A slaughter monumental enough to satiate the voracious appetites of epic demons like Ahiravan, Mahiravan, Hidimba, Ghatotkach, and even Kumbhakarna; a feast that would stagger even the ten-headed Ravana in the underworld."

Bipradas sat stunned; he did not utter a word.

Nabagopal continued, "By your strict orders, no one is allowed to hunt in those wetlands. You once even barred the District Magistrate—we were terrified he might mistake you for a swan and shoot you in retaliation! But the man was a gentleman, and he left. These men, however, hold no reverence for beast, bird, or holy man. Still, if you give the word, perhaps just this once..."

Bipradas interrupted hurriedly, "No, no, do not say a word to them."

Bipradas was once the finest tiger hunter in the district. But on one occasion, after killing a bird, he was struck by such profound remorse that he completely banned the hunting of birds within his estate ever since.

Kumu, who was sitting by his pillow stroking his head, tightened her face after Nabagopal left and said, "Dada, send word to forbid them."

"Forbid them from what?"

"From killing the birds."

"They will misunderstand, Kumu; they won't tolerate it."

"Let them misunderstand. Does honor and insult belong solely to them?"

Looking at Kumu's face, Bipradas smiled inwardly. He knew that with fierce devotion, Kumu was mentally practicing the spiritual code of a devoted wife—to be the shadow that mirrors the form with absolute purity. Could a divergence between the body and its shadow be allowed over the mere lives of a few birds?

In an affectionate tone, Bipradas said, "Do not be angry, Kumu. I, too, killed birds once. I didn't realize it was wrong back then. They are in that same state now."

The hunting, the picnics, and the evening dances for the English guests to the accompaniment of a brass band went on with tireless enthusiasm. There was tennis in the afternoons, and sailboat racing on the pond with the boats rigged to three or four sails, with wagers placed. The villagers stood along the banks to watch. At night, after dinner, roars of "For he's a jolly good fellow" echoed through the air. The primary heroes and heroines of this revelry were the foreign men and women, which thoroughly astounded the villagers. Watching them fish with rods while wearing solar topees was an equally bizarre spectacle. Against all this, what chance did traditional stick-fighting, wrestling, boat races, amateur village theater, and the gathering of four elephants stand?

Two days before the wedding was the turmeric ceremony. Everyone was astonished by the sheer extravagance of the gifts sent from the groom's house, ranging from precious jewelry to exquisite dolls. The procession of bearers carrying the gifts seemed endless! The Chatterjees, in turn, tipped them with a very generous hand.

Finally, the battle of the wedding feasts—the Drona Parva of this matrimonial Kurukshetra—began over the feeding of the masses.

That day, public invitations to Madhupuri, on the banks of Madhusagar, were announced by the beating of drums. No one was excluded, invited or uninvited. Nabagopal was furious. What sheer audacity! We are the landlords here; by what right does he erect his 'Madhupuri' in our domain?

Meanwhile, the massive scale of their feast became glaringly obvious to everyone. This was no ordinary vegetarian fare. Fish, yogurt, thickened milk, sweets, ghee, flour, and sugar were brought in with great fanfare. Gigantic clay ovens were dug under the trees; cooking pots, cauldrons, pitchers, and vats of all sizes were lined up. Rows of bullock carts arrived laden with potatoes, eggplants, green plantains,

and vegetables. The feast was to be held in the evening under the glow of elaborate chandeliers.

On the other hand, a midday feast was organized at the Chatterjees' estate. Flocks of tenants had pooled their resources and made the arrangements themselves. Separate seating was arranged for Hindus and Muslims. The Muslim tenants were the majority—before the night was even over, they had set up their own cooking fires. Whatever the meal lacked in extravagant ingredients, it made up for fourfold with the frequent, thunderous cheers for the Chatterjees. Nabagopal Babu himself sat fasting until nearly five in the afternoon, personally overseeing the feeding of everyone. Then came the distribution of alms to the poor. The leading tenants managed the charity distribution themselves. Amidst the joyous uproar and cheers, it felt like the churning of the cosmic ocean.

Over at Madhupuri, the cooking had gone on all day. The aroma spread far and wide. The discarded clay cups, pots, and banana leaves piled up like mountains. A relentless cacophony of crows fought over the scraps of fish and vegetable peels, and the local stray dogs engaged in vicious, barking brawls. The time arrived, the chandeliers were lit, and the hired brass band from Metiabruz played melodies from Eman-Kalyan to Kedara. Yet, from time to time, anxious servants whispered into the Raja Bahadur's ear that not enough people had shown up to eat. Today was market day; a few villagers from neighboring estates, seeing the leaves laid out, had sat down to eat. There were also a handful of beggars and paupers.

Retreating into a secluded tent, Madhusudan's face darkened, and he let out a suppressed, low growl: "Hn."

His younger brother, Radhu, approached and said, "Dada, why stay any longer? Let's go."

"Where?"

"Back to Calcutta. They are playing dirty tricks. Brides from families far grander than theirs are waiting just for you to wiggle your little finger. You only have to say the word."

Madhusudan roared, "Get out of here!"

What had happened a hundred years ago was repeating itself today. Once again, one faction had built the spire of their extravagance far higher than the other's, and the other faction had blocked their path. But the true victory and defeat are never visible from the outside. That battleground lies hidden from the public eye.

The Chatterjees' tenants shared a hearty laugh over it. Bipradas was confined to his sickbed; none of this reached his ears.

CHAPTER 17

On the day of the wedding, by the Raja's strict orders, all pomp and celebration on the way to the bride's house were completely canceled. No lights were lit, no bands played; he was accompanied only by his own priest and two bards. The groom arrived at the wedding house in a palanquin in utter silence; the onlookers barely even realized he was there. Meanwhile, over at the tents of Madhupuri, the lights blazed, the band played loudly, and the groom's party engaged in a raucous, contrasting uproar of feasting and revelry. Nabagopal understood that this was a retaliatory strike. In such situations, the bride's side usually falls at the groom's feet, begging for appeasement; Nabagopal did absolutely nothing of the sort. He did not even bother to ask what had happened to the groom's party.

Before heading to the wedding pavilion in her bridal attire, Kumudini came to bow to her brother; her entire body was trembling. Bipradas had a fever of a hundred and five degrees, with mustard plasters applied to his chest and back. Touching her head to his feet, Kumudini could hold it in no longer and burst into muffled sobs. Aunt Kshema covered her own mouth and said, "Shame! You must not cry like that."

Bipradas sat up slightly, took her hand, made her sit beside him, and gazed at her face in silence for a long time—tears rolling down from his eyes. Aunt Kshema gently reminded, "It is time."

Placing his hand on Kumu's head, Bipradas said in a choked voice, "May the Bestower of All Good grant you His blessings." With that, he collapsed heavily back onto the bed.

Throughout the entire wedding ceremony, tears simply poured from Kumu's eyes. When she placed her hand in the groom's, her hand was icy cold and trembling violently. During the Shubhadrishti (the ceremonial first look), did she even look at her husband's face? Perhaps not. Taking their overall behavior into account, a deep fear of her husband had taken root within her. The bird felt that what awaited her was not a nest, but a noose.

Madhusudan was not ugly to look at, but his appearance was exceedingly severe. In his dark face, the first thing that caught the eye was a large, curved, hawkish nose that swooped down over his lips as if standing guard. His broad, sloping

forehead swelled above his thick eyebrows like a river obstructed by a dam. Beneath the shadow of those brows, the gaze of his narrow, slanted eyes was piercing. He was clean-shaven, his lips pressed tight, his jaw heavy. His coarse hair was tightly curled like an African's, cropped close to the scalp. He had a very stocky, muscular build; he looked younger than his years, save for the greying hair at his temples. He was short, almost the same height as Kumudini. His arms were hairy and somewhat disproportionately short for his body. Altogether, the man seemed utterly dense, carved out of solid stone. From head to toe, he appeared coiled with some constant, rigid resolve. Like a stubborn cannonball fired from the artillery of Destiny, moving inexorably toward its singular target. One look at him and it was clear: he had absolutely no time to spare for frivolous words, frivolous matters, or frivolous people.

The wedding took place in such an atmosphere that everyone felt disheartened. At the very first contact between the bride's and groom's sides, such a discordant clang rang out that the music of the celebration was completely drowned out. Every now and then, a question swelled up in Kumu's heart with deep anguish: "Has my Lord truly deceived me?" She fought desperately to suppress her doubts; sitting alone in a closed room, she bowed her head to the floor repeatedly, praying that her mind would not weaken. The hardest task of all was hiding her doubts from her brother.

Since their mother's death, Bipradas had relied entirely on Kumudini's care. Managing his clothes, his daily expenses, his bookshelves, the horse's feed, cleaning his guns, caring for the dogs, maintaining his cameras, looking after the musical instruments, and tidying his bedroom and sitting room—everything was in Kumu's hands. He had grown so accustomed to it that if Kumu's touch was missing from his daily routine, nothing felt right. During these last few days before her departure, while nursing her brother on his sickbed, it took a monumental effort on Kumu's part to ensure that not a single shadow of her own anxieties fell upon her care. Bipradas was incredibly proud of Kumu's skill with the esraj. The shy Kumu rarely played willingly. Yet, over these past two days, she had voluntarily played the complex melodies of Kanada and Malkaush for her brother. Within those melodies lay her hymns to her deity, her prayers, her fears, and her self-surrender. Bipradas lay with his eyes closed, listening silently, occasionally requesting specific ragas—Sindhu, Behag, Bhairavi—melodies that wept with the agony of separation. In those

notes, the silent grief of the brother and sister merged into one. In spoken words, neither said a thing; they offered no verbal comfort, they voiced no sorrow.

Bipradas's fever, cough, and chest pain did not subside—in fact, they worsened. The doctor suspected influenza, warning it could develop into pneumonia, and that extreme caution was needed. Kumu's anxiety knew no bounds. The arrangement was that she would spend the Kal-Ratri (the ominous night after the wedding) here and leave for Calcutta the following day. But word arrived that Madhusudan had suddenly made a stubborn demand: he would take her away the very morning after the wedding. Kumu understood this was not out of tradition, not out of necessity, and not out of love—it was purely an assertion of dominance. To demand a favor under such circumstances struck the proud girl like a thunderbolt. Yet, swallowing her pride and bowing her head, Kumu had approached her husband on their wedding night and pleaded in a trembling voice for just one thing: to be allowed to stay at her father's house for two more days, so she could leave seeing her brother in a slightly better state. Madhusudan replied curtly, "Everything has already been finalized." In that iron-clad, unilateral 'finalization,' there was not an inch of space for Kumu's heartbreaking agony. Later that night, Madhusudan tried to engage her in conversation; she did not answer a single word, lying with her face turned toward the edge of the bed.

While it was still dark, at the first hesitant chirping of the birds, she left the bed.

Bipradas had tossed and turned all night. In the evening, despite his fever, he had insisted on going to the wedding pavilion. The doctor had to use immense effort to keep him in bed. He had sent messengers frequently to gather news. The reports he received were like wartime dispatches—mostly fabricated. Bipradas asked, "When did the groom arrive? I didn't hear any music or bands."

The messenger, Shibu, replied, "Our son-in-law is very considerate—hearing of the illness in the house, he stopped everything. You couldn't even hear the footsteps of the procession, it was so quiet."

"Shibu, was there enough food? That was my one worry, this isn't Calcutta!"

"Not enough? What are you saying, My Lord! So much had to be thrown away! There's enough left over to feed just as many people again."

"Were they satisfied?"

"Not a single complaint was heard from anyone's lips. Not even a whisper. I've seen so many weddings, where the demands of the groom's party give the bride's father a fainting spell. They were so quiet, you couldn't even tell if they were there or not."

Bipradas said, "They are from Calcutta, you see, so they know proper manners. They understand that insulting the house from which they are taking a daughter is an insult to themselves."

"Ah, My Lord, I will go and repeat exactly what you just said to their men. They will be pleased to hear it."

Kumu had realized by yesterday evening that his illness was taking a turn for the worse. Yet, the sorrow that she would no longer be able to nurse her brother fluttered frantically in her chest like a trapped bird. To her brother, the care of her hands was stronger than any medicine.

After bathing and offering flowers to the deity, Kumu entered her brother's room before the sun had even risen. After battling a severe illness for hours, when a brief respite arrives, it brings with it a weary detachment; Bipradas's mind was loose in that state of detachment. His attachment to life, his worldly concerns—all seemed grey to him, like a barren, harvested field. The doors had been closed all night; at dawn, the doctor had opened the eastern window. Through the dew-soaked leaves of the peepal tree, the rosy hue of the sky was slowly turning a bright white. On the nearby river, the large, patched sails of merchant boats swelled against the crimson dawn. From the music pavilion, the melancholic notes of the Ramkeli raga drifted in.

Sitting beside him, Kumu took her brother's dry, feverish hand between her two cold ones. Bipradas's terrier was lying quietly under the bed, looking despondent. As soon as Kumu sat on the bed, the dog stood up, placed its front paws on her lap, and wagging its tail, looked at her with mournful eyes, letting out a faint whimper as if asking a question.

A train of thought had been running deep within Bipradas's mind, which caused him to suddenly say in a disjointed manner, "Sister, none of this is real—who is big, who is small, who is above, who is below; these are all fabricated concepts. What

does it matter where the bubbles are positioned within the foam? Just remain true and natural within yourself, and nothing can ever destroy you."

"Bless me, Dada, bless me," Kumu said, covering her face with both hands to stifle her sobs.

Leaning against his pillow, Bipradas sat up slightly, pulled Kumu's face down, and kissed the top of her head.

The doctor entered the room and said, "That is enough, Kumudidi. He needs to remain completely calm now."

Kumu patted and adjusted the patient's pillow, pulled the warm blanket over him, straightened the clutter on the bedside table, and whispered close to her brother's ear, "Once you are cured, come to Calcutta, Dada. I will see you there."

Keeping his large, affectionate eyes fixed on Kumu's face, Bipradas said, "Kumu, the western clouds drift to the east, the eastern clouds drift to the west; it is all the work of the wind. That same wind is blowing through our lives. Accept it as simply and naturally as the clouds do, sister. Do not worry about us anymore. Occupy the seat of the Goddess of Wealth in the home you are going to—this is the deepest blessing of my heart. We ask for nothing more from you."

Kumu kept her head resting at her brother's feet. "From today, I have nothing more to ask for. I will have no part in the daily life here anymore." To accept such a monumental severance in a single moment was impossible. Just as an anchor desperately clings to the earth when a storm tears a boat away from the shore, Kumu's final, frantic bond clung to her brother's feet. The doctor approached again and said gently, "That is enough, sister." He then wiped his own tear-filled eyes. Stepping out of the room, Kumu collapsed onto the chair outside the door, muffled her face in the end of her sari, and wept silently. Suddenly, she remembered that she had baked flatbread mixed with molasses last night so she could feed her brother's horse, "Besi," with her own hands before leaving. The groom had tied him in the backyard garden early this morning. Kumu went there and saw the horse grazing under the hog plum tree. Hearing Kumu's footsteps from afar, he pricked up his ears, and upon seeing her, let out a joyful neigh. Resting her left hand on his shoulder, Kumu held the bread to his mouth with her right hand and fed him. As he ate, he kept glancing at Kumu's face out of the corner of his large, dark, affectionate

eyes. When he was done, Kumu planted a kiss on the broad forehead between Besi's eyes and ran away.

CHAPTER 18

Bipradas had been certain that Madhusudan would come to see him at least once during these few days. When he did not, Bipradas had no illusion left: the marital alliance between the two families had arrived merely as the severing sword of their estrangement. In the utter exhaustion of his illness, he accepted this fact with stoic calm. Calling the doctor, he asked, "May I play the esraj for a bit?"

The doctor said, "No, let it be for today."

"Then call Kumu, ask her to play a little. Who knows when I shall hear her play again."

The doctor replied, "They have to catch the nine o'clock train this morning; otherwise, they won't reach Calcutta before sunset. Kumu has no time left."

Bipradas sighed and said, "No, her time here has ended. She managed to spend nineteen years; now she won't spend even one more hour."

At the time of departure, the husband and wife came together to offer their obeisance. Feigning courtesy, Madhusudan said, "My word, your health does not look good at all."

Bipradas offered no reply to that, simply saying, "May God bless you both."

"Dada, take a little care of your health," Kumu said, falling at Bipradas's feet once more and weeping.

With the ululation of women, the blowing of conch shells, and the beating of drums, cymbals, and the brass band, a cyclone of noise erupted. They departed.

Seeing them walk away tied together by the ceremonial knot between their garments, Bipradas, for some unknown reason, found the sight grotesque today. In ancient history, Timur and Genghis Khan built towers of human skulls. But if one were to pile up the invisible triumphal arches of life and death created by this tying of the bridal knot, its peak would surely pierce the depths of some hell! But what a strange thought to enter his mind today!

Bipradas had never been particularly enthusiastic about religious worship. Yet today, he folded his hands and began to pray silently.

Suddenly, he started and said, "Doctor, call the Dewanji, please."

Bipradas had suddenly remembered something. A few days before he had come here for the wedding, when his mind was fraught with anxiety over sending money to Subodh, and he was exhausted from poring over ledgers—it was around eleven in the morning—a man in an utterly dilapidated state had arrived. His face was unshaven and haggard, his arms skeletal, showing every vein, wearing a soiled shawl, a short dhoti, and a pair of torn slippers. Bowing, he said, "Elder Master, do you remember me?"

Observing him closely, Bipradas said, "Why, is it Baikuntha?"

In a room adjacent to the school Bipradas attended as a boy, Baikuntha used to sell schoolbooks, notebooks, pens, knives, bats, balls, spinning tops, and paper-wrapped peanuts. His shop was the ultimate hangout for the older boys; no one could match him in spinning the most bizarre, impossible tall tales.

Bipradas asked, "Why are you in such a state?"

A few years ago, when he was relatively well-off, he had married his daughter into a respectable household. Because they didn't strictly need a dowry, the groom's demand was consequently exorbitant. They settled on twelve hundred rupees, plus eighty tolas of gold jewelry. Because she was his only, beloved daughter, he had desperately agreed. He couldn't gather all the money at once, so the in-laws had been bleeding the father dry by torturing the daughter. His resources were completely exhausted, yet two hundred and fifty rupees were still owed. This time, the insults directed at the girl crossed all limits. Unable to bear it, she had fled to her father's house. In doing so, she had broken the jail's rules for an inmate, and her offense had only multiplied. If he could just pay off that two hundred and fifty rupees and save the girl, the father might finally find a moment to think about dying.

Bipradas smiled a melancholy smile. That day, considering any substantial help was entirely out of the question. He hesitated for a moment, then got up, emptied a pouch from his box, brought out a ten-rupee note, and placed it in Baikuntha's hand. He said, "Try a few other places; I have no more capacity."

Baikuntha did not believe that for a second. He dragged his feet away, his slippers making a deeply displeased sound.

He had completely forgotten the incident of that day, but today, Bipradas suddenly remembered. The Dewanji was summoned and ordered: Two hundred and fifty rupees must be sent to Baikuntha today. The Dewanji stood silently, scratching his head. Yes, the wedding had been completed by spending out of sheer stubborn rivalry, but the debts for it would have to be paid off for a long time to come. In these current days, two hundred and fifty rupees was a massive sum.

Reading the expression on the Dewanji's face, Bipradas slipped the diamond ring off his finger and said, "Take the two hundred and fifty rupees from the money I deposited in the bank in the younger master's name, and keep my ring as collateral against it. Make sure the money is sent to Baikuntha in Kumu's name."

CHAPTER 19

The final chapter of this matrimonial battle of Lanka was still pending.

The initial arrangement was that the bride and groom would depart only after completing the Kushandika (a post-wedding Vedic ritual) in the morning. Nabagopal had kept all the preparations ready. Suddenly, stepping out of Bipradas's room after taking his leave, the Raja Bahadur declared: the Kushandika would take place at the groom's camp, in Madhupuri.

To Nabagopal, the arrogance of this proposal was intolerable. Had it been anyone else, a bloody brawl would have ensued today. Even so, the sheer force of Nabagopal's verbal objections had escalated almost to the point of summoning the club-wielding guards before it finally ceased.

The humiliation struck deeply within the inner quarters. Relatives and kinsfolk had gathered from far and wide, and there was no shortage of malicious gossips among them. To suffer such an outrage in front of everyone! Aunt Kshema sat with a dark, sullen face. When the bride and groom came to take her leave, words of blessing refused to come out of her mouth. Everyone murmured that had this been done in Calcutta, no one would have had room to complain. Humiliated on behalf of her father's house, Kumu shrank into herself—it felt as though she were the sole culprit standing before all her ancestors. In her mind, full of hurt pride toward her deity, she asked repeatedly, "What sin have I committed against You that I am being punished so severely? I accepted everything placing my absolute faith in You alone."

The bride and groom boarded the carriage. The brass band Madhusudan had brought from Calcutta struck up a loud, raucous dance tune. Under a massive canopy, arrangements for the sacred fire (Homa) were made. The English male and female guests watched—some seated on cushioned chairs, others leaning in close to observe. Meanwhile, tea and biscuits were served to them. A gigantic wedding cake was also displayed on a side table. When the ritual ended and they came forward to congratulate him, Kumu stood with her head bowed, her face flushed red. A rather plump, middle-aged Englishwoman lifted the edge of her Benarasi sari to examine it; she also displayed great curiosity in turning and inspecting the thick gold armlet on Kumu's arm. She offered compliments in English. Regarding the

ceremony, one group said to Madhusudan, "How interesting," while another group chimed in, "Isn't it?"

Kumu had seen how this Madhusudan behaved with her brother and other relatives—and today, she saw him in the company of his English friends. He was excessively fawning, obsequious in his politeness, his face constantly blooming with accommodating smiles. Like the moon, which wears a face of luminous light on one side and eternal darkness on the other, such was Madhusudan's character. Toward the English, his sweetness was as bright and soothing as the light of a full moon. The other side was unapproachable, hideous, and impenetrable in the immobility of solid ice.

In the saloon car of the train, Madhusudan sat with his English friends; in another reserved carriage, Kumu sat among the women. Some picked up her hand and squeezed it to examine it, some lifted her chin to analyze her facial features; some called her lanky, others called her too skinny. One woman asked with feigned innocence, "Oh my, what complexion cream do you use, dear? Did your brother send you something from England?" They all collectively concluded that her eyes were not particularly large, and the size of her feet was rather big for a woman. They proceeded to handle and evaluate every single piece of her jewelry—old-fashioned, heavy in weight, pure gold—but what dreadful designs, heaven forbid!

In their carriage, the window on the side opposite the station platform was open; Kumu kept her gaze fixed there, trying her best to block out their words. She saw a dog missing a leg, limping on three legs, sniffing the dirt. Ah, if only she had some food at hand! She had nothing. Kumu thought to herself: precisely because of the loss of that one leg, everything that was once natural and easy for the dog had become impossibly difficult. Just then, Kumu heard a gentleman standing outside the saloon car say, "Look here, a recruiter was tricking this peasant girl into going to the Assam tea gardens; she managed to escape. She has enough ticket money to get to Goalundo; her home is in Dumraon. If you help her, this girl's life will be saved." Kumu heard a loud, aggressive shout of dismissal from the saloon car. She could bear it no longer. Opening the window on the right side, she emptied her beaded purse, placed ten rupees in the girl's hand, and immediately shut the window.

Seeing this, one woman exclaimed, "Look at our bride's generous hand!" Another said, "Not generous, she's opening the door to drive the Goddess of Wealth out." Yet another chimed in, "She's learned how to throw money away; learning to keep it would have been more useful." They decided this was sheer arrogance—when the great masters hadn't given the girl a single penny, this one casually tosses coins at her with a clink! What is she so haughty about? They assumed this, too, was simply an extension of the eternal rivalry between the Chatterjees and the Ghoshals.

At that moment, a slightly plump, dark-skinned young woman with large, expressive eyes and a face brimming with affection—perhaps Kumu's age—came and sat next to her. She whispered, "Feeling homesick, sister? Don't listen to their words. They will poke and prod like this for a couple of days, and once the poison leaves their throats, they will stop." This girl was Kumu's middle sister-in-law, Nabin's wife. Her name was Nistarini, but everyone called her Motir Ma.

Motir Ma started a conversation: "The day I arrived in Nurnagar, I saw your elder brother at the station."

Kumu was startled. This was the first time she was hearing that her brother had gone to the station to welcome them.

"Ah, what a handsome man! I have never seen anyone like him. I remembered a line I once heard in a Kirtan song—

A tide of nectar swells at the beauty of Gora— Washing away the hearts of the women of Nadia.

That is exactly what came to my mind."

In an instant, Kumu's heart melted. She turned her face away and stared out the window—the fields, forests, and sky outside blurred through a mist of tears.

Motir Ma knew exactly where Kumu's heart ached, so she continued talking about her brother in various ways. She asked if he was married.

Kumu said, "No."

Motir Ma exclaimed, "Goodness me! A form like a god, and his house is still empty! I wonder which fortunate woman has that groom written in her destiny!"

Kumu was thinking—Dada had gone there, setting aside all his pride, just for my sake! And yet, they didn't even come to see him once! Simply by the sheer power of money, they dared to humiliate a man like him! That must be why his health completely broke down.

With futile remorse, she repeatedly cried out in her mind—Why did Dada go to the station? Why did he lower himself? For me? Why didn't I just die?

Her mind kept beating its head against an event that had already happened and could not be undone. She could only remember that pale face exhausted by illness, those serene, profound eyes overflowing with blessings.

CHAPTER 20

The train reached Howrah; it must have been around four in the afternoon. Bound together by their ceremonial garments, the bride and groom went and sat in a Brougham carriage. Before the countless prying eyes of the Calcutta daylight, Kumu's body and mind shrank into themselves. The profound sense of purity that had permeated every inch of her being throughout her nineteen years of maidenhood was like Karna's natural armor; how could she suddenly rip it away? There is a magical incantation that causes this armor to shed naturally in an instant. But that incantation had not yet resounded in her heart. The man sitting beside her was still a stranger to her soul. From his end, only obstacles had arisen in the path to becoming her own. The harshness in his demeanor and actions had continuously shoved Kumu away, keeping her at a distance.

For Madhusudan, however, Kumu was a new discovery. This exceedingly practical man had possessed very few opportunities to truly acquaint himself with womankind until now. In the crowded marketplace of his commercial world, the touch of a commercial woman had never enticed him. To say that no woman had ever stirred his mind would be untrue, but it had only ever been a minor earthquake—the building had never sustained damage. Madhusudan had seen women very briefly, only among the wives and daughters of households. They did domestic chores, bickered, gossiped, and occasionally wept over the most trivial matters. His interaction with them in his life was entirely negligible. He had never imagined that his own wife would occupy anything more than this insignificant department of the world, living out a shadowy, domestic, female existence behind walls, directed by the side-glances of the masters of the house. The idea that there was an art to interacting with a wife, or that it might involve a complex problem of winning or losing, had never even entered a corner of his highly calculating, cautious brain. Just as a butterfly is superfluous to a massive forest tree, yet the tree simply accepts the butterfly's presence, Madhusudan had thought of his future wife in exactly the same way.

Then, after the wedding, he truly looked at Kumu for the first time. There is a kind of beauty that feels like a divine apparition, possessing an extraordinary quality far beyond the ordinary events of the earth—something that exceeds expectations at every single moment. Kumu's beauty was of that caliber. She was like the morning

star, completely distinct from the world of the night, yet residing just beyond the world of the dawn. In his subconscious mind, without even realizing it, Madhusudan vaguely felt that Kumu was superior to him—at the very least, a thought arose as to how he should behave with her, and what words would be appropriate to say.

Wondering how to initiate a conversation, Madhusudan suddenly asked Kumu, "The sun is coming in from this side, isn't it?"

Kumu did not answer. Madhusudan pulled the curtain shut on the right side.

A few moments passed in silence. Again, out of nowhere, he asked, "You aren't feeling cold, are you?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled an English woolen blanket from the opposite seat, draped it over Kumu's legs and his own, establishing a cooperative bond through a shared covering. His body and mind thrilled with delight. Startled, Kumudini was about to push the blanket away, but restraining herself, she shrank away and pressed herself tightly against the far edge of the seat.

A little while passed like this, when suddenly Madhusudan's eyes fell on Kumu's hand.

"Let me see," he said, suddenly lifting her left hand close to his eyes. "What kind of ring is this on your finger? It looks like a sapphire."

Kumu remained silent.

"Look, sapphires do not suit my luck. You will have to take it off."

Sometime in the past, Madhusudan had purchased a sapphire; that very year, his cargo boat, heavily loaded with jute, crashed against the Howrah Bridge and sank. Since then, he had never forgiven the sapphire stone.

Kumudini slowly tried to free her hand. Madhusudan did not let go; he said, "Let me take it off."

Kumu startled and said, "No, let it be."

Once, she had won a game of chess; her brother had taken the ring off his own finger and given it to her as a prize.

Madhusudan smiled inwardly. I see she has quite a greed for this ring. Finding a similarity between himself and Kumu here, he felt a bit of relief. He realized that through the medium of hairpieces, necklaces, bangles, and armlets, he would easily find a straightforward path to manage this proud girl in due time—through this path, she would have no choice but to submit to Madhusudan's influence, even if he was quite a bit older.

Taking off a massive, rose-cut diamond ring from his own hand, Madhusudan smiled and said, "Don't worry, I am putting another ring on your finger in its place."

Kumu could bear it no longer; with a slight effort, she pulled her hand free. This time, Madhusudan's mind flared up. He would not tolerate any diminishing of his authority. In a dry, forceful voice, he commanded, "Look, you have to take that ring off."

Kumudini kept her head bowed in silence; her face had flushed red.

Madhusudan spoke again, "Are you listening? I am telling you it is better to take it off. Give it to me." He reached out to grab her hand.

Pulling her hand back, Kumu said, "I am taking it off."

She took it off.

"Give it, give it to me."

Kumudini said, "I will keep it myself."

Annoyed, Madhusudan snapped, "What is the point of keeping it? Do you think this is some incredibly valuable item? I am telling you, you absolutely cannot wear it."

Kumudini said, "I won't wear it." Saying this, she placed the ring inside her beaded purse.

"Why? Why so much affection for this insignificant thing? You are quite stubborn, aren't you!"

Madhusudan's voice was harsh; it grated on the ears like the friction of sandpaper. Kumudini's entire body recoiled in disgust.

"Who gave you this ring?"

Kumudini remained silent.

"Was it your mother?"

Feeling she absolutely had to reply, she said in a half-whisper, "Dada."

Dada! Well, that explained everything. Madhusudan knew very well what state her brother was in. That brother's ring was a harbinger of pure misfortune—it could not be brought into his house. But what pricked him even more was the realization that, even now, to Kumudini, her brother was the most important person in the world. Just because it was natural didn't mean it was tolerable. When a new, wealthy moneylender buys out an old landlord's estate at an auction, and the loyal tenants sigh while reminiscing about the old regime, it burns the new owner with jealousy; this was exactly the same. From today, I am her only one, and she must be made to realize this as soon as possible. Besides, after the humiliation his groom's party had faced over the wedding feast, Madhusudan simply could not believe that Bipradas had no hand in it. Even though Nabagopal had told him the day after the wedding, "Brother, do not even hint to my Dada about the marketplace-style manners you imported to the wedding house; he knows nothing of it, and his health is very poor."

He dropped the matter of the ring for the moment, but kept it strictly in mind.

Meanwhile, apart from her beauty, Kumudini's value had suddenly skyrocketed for another reason. While still in Nurnagar, on the exact day of the wedding, Madhusudan had received a telegram: his recent linseed shipment had yielded a profit of nearly twenty lakh rupees. There was no doubt in his mind—this was the good luck of his new bride. Wealth follows the wife's fortune—the proof was right in his hands. Therefore, sitting in the carriage with Kumu beside him, he harbored a deep, supreme satisfaction that he was bringing home a living, divinely ordained ledger of his future profits. Had this not been the case, today's Brougham chariot ride might have ended in disaster.

CHAPTER 21

Since receiving the title of Raja, the name "Madhuprasad" (The Palace of Madhu) had been engraved at the gates of the Ghoshal residence in Calcutta. Today, a traditional music pavilion was set up on one side of those iron gates, while a brass band played from a tent in the garden. Above the gate, formed in a semicircle of gaslights, were the words: "Prajapataye Namah" (Homage to the Lord of Marriage). By evening, this inscription would blaze with light. The gravel path leading from the gate to the house was lined with festoons of debdaru leaves and marigold garlands; red fabric covered the steps leading up to the elevated ground floor of the mansion.

Plowing through the crowd of relatives and friends, the bride and groom's carriage pulled up to the portico. Conch shells, ululations, drums, cymbals, the traditional pavilion musicians, and the brass band all erupted at once—sounding as though ten or fifteen freight trains of noise had collided at full speed. A distant grandmother-in-law of Madhusudan's—a ripe old woman with a part in her hair as wide as the thick streak of vermilion filling it, wearing a broad red-bordered sari and heavy gold bangles alongside conch-shell bracelets on her plump wrists—sprinkled water from a silver pot onto the bride's feet and wiped them with the end of her sari. She slipped an iron bangle onto Kumu's wrist, placed a drop of honey in her mouth, and declared, "Ah, after all these days, a full moon has risen in our blue sky; a golden lotus has bloomed in the blue lake."

The bride and groom stepped down from the carriage. The gazes of the young male guests were filled with envy. One said, "The demon has plundered heaven; the nymph is bound in golden chains." Another remarked, "In the old days, kings would have waged wars over a girl like this; today, the deed is done with money from exporting linseed. The gods of the Kali Yuga have no taste. Every planet and star in the wheel of destiny now belongs to the merchant caste."

Then came the rituals of welcome and the various women's ceremonies. By the time they concluded, evening had fallen, bringing the rites to an end just as the Kal-Ratri (the ominous night of separation after the wedding) began.

Kumu clearly remembered the wedding of only one of her older sisters. But she had never seen a new bride enter their own house. Since before her youth began, she had lived in Calcutta, enveloped in her brother's pure affection. The girl's imaginary

world had never been molded in the coarse cast of an ordinary household. In her childhood, when she prayed to Shiva desiring a good husband, she had envisioned her future lord as that great ascetic, Shiva himself, radiant as a silver mountain. She knew her own mother as the ultimate ideal of a devoted wife. What soothing, tranquil grace, what immense patience, what silent suffering, what deep devotion to the gods, what auspicious conduct, and what tireless service she possessed! On the other hand, there were flaws in her husband's behavior and lapses in his character; despite this, his character was vast in its generosity and firm in its masculinity. It held not a trace of meanness or deceit; his sense of dignity seemed to belong to the mythic ideals of a distant past. Throughout his life, he proved every day that honor was greater than life itself, and spiritual wealth greater than material money. He, and men of his stature, were people of grand proportions. Their pride lay in preserving their untarnished honor even at a personal loss, not in broadcasting the arrogance of untarnished savings.

On the day Kumu's left eye had twitched, she had stood ready, armed with all her devotion and a complete resolve for self-sacrifice. The thought that there could be any obstacle or diminishment had never even entered her imagination. How had Damayanti known in advance that she must choose Nala, the King of Vidarbha? A certain, unmistakable message had reached her heart—had Kumu not received an equally certain message? The preparations for the welcoming were complete, the King had arrived, but where was the man she had so clearly envisioned in her mind? She would not have minded his looks, nor his age. But the King? Where was that true King?

And today, when she was summoned into her new household through the gates of this ceremony, why did no thunderous, majestic, auspicious sound ring out, through which this new bride might hear the blessing-mantras of the seven celestial sages? Why did a hymn of praise, one that fulfills all rituals, not rise in a resonant voice—

Jagatah pitarau vande Parvatiparameshvarau (I bow to the parents of the universe, Parvati and the Supreme Lord)

That "Parents of the Universe," within whom the Eternal Male and the Eternal Female are seamlessly united like a word and its meaning?

CHAPTER 22

When Madhusudan first moved to Calcutta, he bought an old courtyard house; that enclosed structure now served as his inner quarters. Later, right in front of it, he added a massive new wing built in the modern fashion, which served as his outer sitting-room and reception area. Though connected, these two wings belonged to entirely different species.

The outer wing featured marble floors everywhere, covered with English carpets; the walls were lined with patterned wallpaper and hung with various pictures—some engravings, some oleographs, some oil paintings. The subjects ranged from hunting dogs chasing a deer, to famous horses that had won the Derby, to foreign landscapes, and nude women bathing. Furthermore, the walls displayed an incongruous, haphazard collection of objects in inappropriate places: Chinese porcelain, brass plates from Moradabad, Japanese fans, Tibetan yak-tail whisks, and more. The responsibility for selecting, purchasing, and arranging these furnishings lay with Madhusudan's English assistant. In addition, there was a veritable forest of chairs and sofas upholstered in velvet or silk. Glass cabinets held sumptuously bound English books, untouched by human hands save for the dusting-cloth of the servant. Side tables held photo albums, some containing pictures of family members, others filled with portraits of foreign actresses.

In the inner quarters, the ground-floor rooms were dark, damp, and blackened with soot. The courtyard was littered with refuse—the water tap was located there, and the washing of utensils and clothes was a constant, ongoing process; even when not in use, the tap was almost always left running. Wet clothes hung from the upper verandas, and the scraps dropped by a cockatoo on a perch rained down into the courtyard. The veranda walls bore the indestructible monuments of betel-juice stains and various other grime. Behind the porch on the western side of the courtyard was the kitchen; the smells of cooking and coal smoke from there permeated every room upstairs. Outside the kitchen lay a small, walled patch of land; in one corner sat a mounting pile of burnt coal, oven ash, broken tubs, torn baskets, and worn-out sieves. At the other end, a couple of cows and calves were tied up, their hay and dung accumulating, and the entire boundary wall was plastered with circles of drying cow-dung cakes. On one side stood a single neem tree; tying cows to its trunk had stripped away its bark, and the constant beating

with sticks to harvest its leaves had left the tree thoroughly battered. This was the only patch of land for the inner quarters; all the remaining grounds belonged to the outer wing. That area was beautifully manicured with vine-draped arbors, diverse flowerbeds, trimmed lawns, gravel paths, stone statues, and iron benches.

Kumudini's bedroom was on the third floor of the inner wing. It featured a massive mahogany bed; the frame held a net canopy trimmed with silk fringes. Towards the foot of the bed hung a full-length painting of a naked woman, feigning modesty by pressing her arms across her breasts. At the head of the bed hung an oil painting of Madhusudan himself, in which the intricate embroidery of his Kashmiri shawl was the most prominent feature. On one wall stood a chest of drawers for clothes, topped with a mirror; flanking the mirror were two porcelain candleholders. In front of it, resting on a porcelain tray, was a powder box, a silver-backed comb, three or four kinds of perfume, a perfume atomizer, and various other foreign cosmetics purchased by the English assistant. A multi-branched pink glass vase held a bouquet of flowers. On another side was a writing desk, complete with an expensive stone inkstand, pens, and a paper knife. Thickly cushioned sofas and armchairs were scattered about—here and there stood side tables, suitable for drinking tea or playing cards. Madhusudan had given special thought to what a bedroom fitting for a new Maharani ought to look like. The result was such that this topmost room of the inner quarters felt like a jewel-encrusted turban placed upon the head of a beggar wrapped in dirty rags.

Finally, navigating past the floodwaters of chaos and clamor, Kumu reached this room at night. She was brought in by Motir Ma, who was arranged to sleep in the room with her tonight. A flock of other women had followed them in. Their curiosity and thirst for amusement seemed insatiable, but Motir Ma firmly sent them away. As soon as they were alone in the room, she threw one arm around Kumu's neck and said, "I'm going to the next room for a little while—have a good cry, sister. I know the tears are swelling up, heavy in your chest." Saying this, she left.

Kumu sat down on a chair. The crying would have to wait; right now, she desperately needed to compose herself. The pain that pierced her most deeply inside was the humiliation she felt before herself. Everything she had resolved and prepared for over the years—her rebellious mind had swung in the exact opposite direction. She was finding no time at all to discipline this mind. Lord, give me

strength, give me strength. Do not let my life be blackened. I am your servant, grant me victory, for that victory is Yours.

A mature, well-built, dark-skinned, beautiful widow entered the room and said, "Motir Ma gave you a little break, so I slipped in during the gap. She won't let anyone near you, guarding you like a fence—it's as if I'm walking around with a burglar's tool, ready to cut the fence and steal you away! I am your sister-in-law, Shyama Sundari; your husband is my younger brother-in-law. We thought that, in the end, his account ledger would be his only bride. But there is magic in that ledger, sister; catching such a beautiful bride at his age is purely the power of that book. Now, if only he can digest it. The spells of the ledger won't work here. Tell me truly, sister, did you like our old brother-in-law?"

Kumu was stunned, entirely at a loss for how to reply. Shyama continued, "I understand. But what does it matter if you don't like him? Now that you've walked the seven circles around the fire, even walking backwards twenty-one times won't untie the knot."

Kumu said, "What kind of words are these, sister?"

Shyama replied, "Is it a crime to speak plainly, sister? Can't I read it on your face? But I won't blame you. Just because he is our own blood, does that mean we are blind? You've fallen into very harsh hands, bride; tread carefully."

Just then, seeing Motir Ma enter the room, she exclaimed, "Don't worry, don't worry, Bakul-flower, I am leaving. I thought I'd take advantage of your absence to come and get a look at our new bride. But it's true, this is a miser's treasure; it must be guarded carefully. I was just telling my friend, for our brother-in-law, this is like a half-forehead migraine; the bride has caught him on his left, 'power-seeking' forehead. Now, if only she can catch him on his right, 'keeping' forehead, then the headache will be complete."

Saying this, she walked out, only to step back in a moment later. Opening a betel-leaf box in front of Kumu, she said, "Take a pan. Are you in the habit of chewing tobacco?"

Kumu said, "No." Taking a pinch of tobacco and popping it into her own mouth, Shyama departed with a slow, swaying gait.

"I will just go feed the elderly aunt and see her off; I won't be long," Motir Ma said and left again.

Shyama Sundari had awakened a heavy, bitter taste in Kumu's mind. Today, more than anything, Kumu needed a veil of illusion, which she had sat down to weave in her own mind; she was even trying to enlist the help of the Creator, who plays with forms and colors across heaven and earth—and just then, Shyama arrived and smashed her delicate, dream-woven web. Closing her eyes, Kumu forcefully told herself, "It is absolutely untrue that I do not love my husband because he is older—shame, shame! These are the words of vulgar women!" Did she not remember the story of Sati's marriage to Shiva? The detractors of Shiva had mocked him for his age, but Sati had paid no heed to their words.

Until now, Kumu had never given a single thought to her husband's age or looks. The idea that there was a necessity for the kind of love that usually validates a marriage between a man and a woman—a love where beauty, virtue, body, and mind all perfectly align—had never even occurred to her. She wanted to paint over the very concept of "personal choice" and bury it.

Just then, a boy of about seven, wearing an embroidered shirt and a gold-bordered dhoti, entered the room and came to stand right pressed against Kumu. Looking up at her face with large, affectionate eyes, he asked timidly, softly, and sweetly, "Aunt?" Kumu pulled him onto her lap and asked, "What is your name, my child?" The boy replied with great formality, not omitting the honorific 'Sri': "Sri Motilal Ghoshal." To everyone else, he was known as Hablu. That was precisely why he felt the need to state his father-given name so fully and properly in the right context, to maintain his dignity. At that moment, Kumu's chest was aching—holding this boy to her breast felt like a lifesaver. Suddenly, it felt as though the child-god 'Gopal' to whom she had offered flowers in the prayer room for so many days had descended into this boy and come to sit in her lap. He had arrived exactly when she called for him, in her hour of deepest sorrow, and said, "Here I am, your solace." Pinching Motilal's round cheeks, Kumu said, "Gopal, will you take some flowers?"

No other name but Gopal came out of Kumu's mouth. At first, Hablu was slightly surprised by his sudden renaming—but the tone that reached his ears was such that no objection could form in his mind.

Just then, hearing her son's voice from the next room, Motir Ma rushed in and said, "Oh, I see the monkey-boy has arrived." Sri Motilal Ghoshal's dignity was instantly shattered. Raising eyes full of silent complaint, he stared at his mother's face, clutching his aunt's sari tightly with his right hand. Wrapping her left arm protectively around Hablu, Kumu said, "Oh, let him stay."

"No, sister, it is very late. Let him go to sleep now—you will find him very easily in this house; there is no child cheaper than him." Saying this, Motir Ma took the reluctant boy away to put him to bed. This tiny interaction was enough to lighten the heavy burden on Kumu's mind. She felt she had received an answer to her prayers; the complex problems of life would reveal themselves to be as simple and innocent as this little boy.

CHAPTER 23

Late into the night, Motir Ma woke up and saw Kumu sitting upright in bed. Her hands were folded in her lap, and her meditative eyes seemed to be gazing at someone right in front of her. The more resistance she faced in accepting Madhusudan into her heart, the more desperately she tried to cloak her husband with her deity. Using her husband as the medium, she was offering herself entirely to her Lord. The deity had made His worship exceedingly difficult; this idol was not transparent, but this was exactly the test of devotion. The Shaligram Shila (a black stone representing Vishnu) reveals no physical form; devotion alone manifests the beauty of the Lord of Vaikuntha from within that formlessness, purely through its own strength. Where He cannot be seen, there I shall see Him—let this be my spiritual practice. Wherever the Lord hides, I shall go there and surrender myself at His feet; He will not be able to avoid me.

"Mere Giridhar Gopal, aur nahi kahi" (Mine is Giridhar Gopal, and no one else)—she silently repeated this song of Mirabai, which she had learned from her brother, over and over again in her mind.

The exceedingly harsh introduction she had received of Madhusudan—she wanted to dismiss it as nothing, as a mere bubble on the surface of the water. He who is eternally true encompasses everything—"Aur nahi kahi, aur nahi kahi" (And no one else, no one else). There was another torment she also wanted to dismiss as an illusion (Maya)—the sudden emptiness of her life. The separation from those around whom her entire existence had been built, those without whom her life held no meaning—she told herself that even this emptiness was fullness—

"Bap chhare, ma chhare, chhare sakha sahi, Mira Prabhu lagan lagi, jo na hoye hoyi." (Father may leave, mother may leave, friends and companions may leave, Mira is devoted to her Lord, whatever happens, let it happen.)

My father has left, my mother has left, but the Eternal One within them has not left. Whatever else the Lord forces me to part with, He has done so only to fill the emptiness Himself. I will hold fast; whatever happens, let it happen. She didn't even realize when the song of her mind slipped out of her throat—tears began to stream from her eyes.

Motir Ma did not say a word; she watched and listened in silence. Later, when Kumu finally bowed deeply in a long prayer, let out a deep sigh, and lay down to sleep, a thought arose in Motir Ma's mind that she had never considered before.

She thought: When we got married, we were tiny little girls; we didn't have the burden of something called a "mind." Just as a small child pops a raw fruit into its mouth without any preparation, our husbands' households swallowed us without a second thought, and nothing snagged. We didn't have to meditate to accept it; counting the days was unnecessary for us. The day they said "Phulshajya" (the flower-bed night), it became the Phulshajya, because the Phulshajya had no real meaning to us; it was just a game. Tomorrow is her Phulshajya, but what a colossal tragedy it is for this girl! The elder brother-in-law is still a total stranger to her; it takes a long time for someone to become your own. How will he even touch her? How will this girl bear that violation? It took the elder brother-in-law ages to acquire his wealth, yet he can't wait two days to acquire her heart? He had to pace back and forth endlessly at the doors of the Goddess of Wealth; will he not have to hold his hands out even once at the doors of this Goddess?

Such thoughts did not usually come to Motir Ma. They came now because, the moment she saw Kumu, she loved her with all her heart and soul. The prelude to this love had been set at the station when she saw Bipradas. It was as if Bhishma himself had stepped down from the Mahabharata. A commanding figure like a warrior, a serene face like a sage, coupled with the gentle humility of deep sorrow. Motir Ma had thought then, If no one objects, let me just go and touch his feet once. She still couldn't forget that image. Later, when she saw Kumu, she said to herself, She is truly that brother's sister.

There is a kind of caste system that belongs not to society, but to the blood—and that caste can never be broken. This incompatibility of intrinsic blood-caste tortures a woman to death in a way it never does a man. Because she was married off at a very young age, Motir Ma never had the time to understand this mystery within herself—but observing Kumu, she felt it with absolute certainty. A chill ran down her spine. It was as if she were looking at a horrifying picture: Kumu standing at the mouth of a dark cave, calling out to her deity, where an unknown beast sat crouched with a slaver's tongue.

Rising up in anger, Motir Ma said in her mind: "Ashes in the mouth of that deity! The very god who has brought this danger upon her is the one supposed to rescue her! Alas!"

CHAPTER 24

The very next morning, Kumu received a telegram from her brother: "May God bless you." She kept the slip of paper tucked inside her blouse, close to her chest. This telegram felt like the touch of her brother's right hand. But why hadn't her brother written anything about his own health? Had the illness worsened? All news of her brother, which used to be directly before her eyes every moment of the day, was now completely sealed off from her.

Today was the Phulshajya; the house was swarming with people. The female relatives spent the entire day fussing over Kumu. They wouldn't let her be alone for a single moment. And today, she desperately needed to be alone.

Right next to her bedroom was her bathroom, fitted with a water tap and a showerhead. Seizing a brief moment, she took the framed portrait of the Divine Couple from her trunk, went into the bathroom, and locked the door. Placing the portrait on the white marble stool, she sat on the floor before it and repeated to herself over and over: "I am Yours, take me today. He is no one else, he is You, he is You, he is You. Let Your Divine Couple-form manifest in my life."

The doctors had declared that Bipradas's influenza had developed into pneumonia. Nabagopal came to Calcutta alone to arrange the delivery of the Phulshajya gifts. The gifts were sent with great pomp and fanfare. Had Bipradas been there himself, he would not have displayed such extravagance.

Messengers had been sent to bring all four of Kumu's older sisters for the wedding. But the rumor had spread: the Ghoshals were not pure, high-caste Brahmins. Their in-laws absolutely refused to let them attend. When Kumu's third sister fought bitterly with her husband and managed to arrive in Calcutta the day after the wedding, Nabagopal told her, "If you go to that house, our honor will be ruined." He still hadn't forgotten the insults of the wedding night. So, they sent a few young, distantly related girls with an old maid to represent them at the invitation. Kumu understood: the truce had not yet been made, and perhaps it never would be.

Kumu was dressed and adorned. The teasing from the relatives whose customary right it was to joke had ended—the feeding of the guests was about to begin. Madhusudan had already given strict instructions: the event must not run late into the night, as he had work the next day. The moment the clock struck nine, as

ordered, a loud bell rang out from the courtyard below. Not a moment later. No one had the courage to overstep the time limit. The gathering dispersed. Just as a dove trembles seeing the shadow of a hawk falling from the sky, Kumu's heart began to pound. Her cold hands were sweating, her face drained of color.

Stepping out of the room, she grabbed Motir Ma's hand and pleaded, "Take me somewhere secluded for just a moment. Please let me be alone for ten minutes."

Motir Ma quickly took her to her own bedroom and locked the door. Standing outside, wiping her eyes, she whispered, "What a terrible fate you were born with."

Ten minutes passed, then fifteen. Messengers arrived—the groom had gone to the bedroom, where was the bride? Motir Ma replied, "Why such a rush? Shouldn't the bride take off her heavy jewelry and clothes?" Motir Ma wanted to buy her as much time as she possibly could. Finally, when she realized it couldn't be delayed any longer, she opened the door to find the bride lying unconscious on the floor.

Chaos erupted. Lifting her onto the bed, some sprinkled water on her face, others fanned her. When consciousness returned a little while later, Kumu could not comprehend where she was—she cried out, "Dada!"

Motir Ma quickly leaned over her face and said, "Do not fear, sister, I am right here." Pulling Kumu's face to her chest, she held her tight. She told the others, "Don't crowd around her, I am taking her right now." She whispered into Kumu's ear, "Do not be afraid, sister, do not be afraid."

Kumu slowly sat up. She silently chanted her Lord's name and bowed. On a wooden cot on the other side of the room, Hablu was in a deep sleep—she went over and kissed his forehead. Motir Ma walked her up to the bedroom door and asked, "Are you still afraid, sister?"

Kumu clenched her fists tight, smiled slightly, and said, "No, I am not afraid of anything at all." In her mind, she told herself: "This is my tryst; darkness without, light within."

Mere Giridhar Gopal, aur nahi kahi.

CHAPTER 25

Meanwhile, Shyama Sundari ran to Madhu, panting, and informed him, "The bride has fainted."

Madhusudan's temper flared instantly; he demanded, "Why? What is wrong with her?"

"I couldn't say, she just kept wailing 'Dada, Dada' and passed out. Aren't you going to go see her?"

"What's the point! I am not her 'Dada'."

"You're getting angry for nothing, brother-in-law. They are girls from high-aristocratic families; it will take time to tame them."

"Did I marry her so she could faint every single day while I massage Ayurvedic oil into her scalp?"

"Brother-in-law, your words make me laugh. What's the harm? In our days, we used to have to soothe a proud woman's anger at every little thing; nowadays, I suppose you just have to soothe her fainting spells."

Madhusudan sat in sullen silence. Melting with feigned sympathy, Shyama came closer, took his hand, and said, "Brother-in-law, don't be so upset, I can't bear to see you like this."

Never before had Shyama possessed the courage to get this close and offer him consolation. The normally talkative Shyama used to remain very quiet around him; she knew Madhusudan couldn't tolerate too much chatter. Through her natural female intuition, Shyama realized that today's Madhusudan was not the usual Madhusudan. Today he was weak; he lacked his usual vigilance over his own dignity. Feeling her hand on his, he realized he didn't dislike it. The blow the new bride had struck to his pride found a bit of inner soothing through this unexpected attention. At least Shyama doesn't disregard me—this was not a completely trivial realization to him right now. Was Shyama any less beautiful than Kumu? Perhaps her complexion was a bit darker—but her eyes, her hair, her luscious lips!

Shyama suddenly announced, "Here comes the bride. I'm leaving, brother. But look, don't get angry with her, poor thing, she's just a child!"

As Kumu entered the room, Madhusudan could hold back no longer and burst out, "I suppose you practiced fainting at your father's house? But we don't have that custom here. You will have to abandon those Nurnagari ways."

Kumu stood completely silent, her eyes unblinking; she did not say a single word.

Her silence only enraged Madhusudan further. His intense, futile anger stemmed precisely from the fact that, deep down, a burning desire to win this girl's heart had awakened within him. He snapped, "I am a busy man, my time is short. I am telling you plainly, I don't have the leisure to play nursemaid to a hysterical girl."

Kumu said slowly, "You want to humiliate me? You will have to admit defeat. I will not take your insults to heart."

Who was Kumu speaking to? Who was standing before her wide, unblinking eyes? Madhusudan was astounded. Why isn't this girl fighting back? What is her game?

With a sarcastic sneer, Madhusudan said, "You are your brother's disciple. But know this: I am your brother's moneylender. I can buy him at one market and sell him at another."

In his desperate attempt to burn the fact that he was superior to her brother into Kumu's mind, he could find no words more foolish than these.

Kumu said, "Look, be cruel if you must, but do not be petty." Saying this, she sat down on the sofa.

In a harsh voice, Madhusudan yelled, "What! I am petty! And your brother is greater than me?"

Kumu replied, "I came to your house precisely because I knew you to be great."

Mockingly, Madhusudan retorted, "Did you come because you knew I was great, or because you were greedy for my money?"

At that, Kumu stood up from the sofa, walked out of the room, and sat down on the floor of the open terrace outside.

It was a miserly winter night in Calcutta, murky with smoke and fog. The sky was sullen, the starlight like words spoken in a broken voice. Kumu's mind was completely numb; she felt no thoughts, no pain. It was as if she had dissolved into a dense fog.

Madhusudan could never have imagined that Kumu would leave the room so silently. For this humiliating defeat, he felt the greatest anger toward Kumu's brother. Slumping into a chair in the bedroom, he threw a punch at the empty air. He sat there for a while, but could hold his patience no longer. He jumped up, walked out to the terrace behind her, and called, "Barobou!" (Elder Bride!)

Startled, Kumu stood up and turned around.

"What are you doing standing out here in the cold and dew? Come inside."

Kumu stared unhesitatingly into Madhusudan's face. Whatever remnants of dominating authority Madhusudan had possessed simply vanished. Gently taking Kumu's left hand, he said softly, "Come inside."

In her right hand was her brother's telegram of blessing; she pressed it to her chest. She did not pull her hand away from her husband's, and in silence, she slowly returned to the bedroom.

CHAPTER 26

Early the next morning, when Kumu sat up in bed, her husband was still asleep. She did not look at his face, lest her mind be unsettled. Rising very carefully, she bowed at his feet and then went to the bathroom. After finishing her bath, she opened the back door and sat on the terrace; a pale streak of gold had just appeared in the eastern sky through the fog.

As the day advanced and the sun rose, Kumu slowly returned to the bedroom to find that her husband had already left. Her beaded purse lay on the mirrored chest of drawers. Opening it to store her brother's telegram, she discovered the sapphire ring was missing.

The aura of peace that had settled on her face after her morning's silent worship vanished, and her eyes blazed with fire! Motir Ma came to call her, offering her some sweets and milk. Kumu had no answer; she stood like a statue of hard stone!

Frightened, Motir Ma sat beside her and asked, "What has happened, sister?"

Words failed Kumu; her lips trembled.

"Tell me, sister, tell me, where does it hurt?"

In a choked voice, Kumu said, "He has stolen it!"

"Stolen what, sister?"

"My ring—my brother's blessing-ring."

"Who took it?"

Standing up, Kumu pointed toward the outer wing without naming anyone.

"Calm down, sister, he was just teasing you; he will give it back."

"I will not take it back—I want to see how much tyranny he can inflict!"

"Alright, that will be for later; come, have something to eat now."

"No, I cannot; the food of this house will not go down my throat."

"Be a dear, sister, eat for my sake."

"Let me ask you one thing: from today, do I have nothing to call my own?"

"No, you don't. Whatever you have is entirely at your husband's mercy. Don't you know, you will have to sign your letters as a 'maidservant'?"

A maidservant! She remembered the words about Indumati in the Raghuvamsha—
Wife, counselor, intimate friend, And beloved disciple in the fine arts—

The word 'maidservant' was nowhere in that list. Was Satyavan's Savitri a maidservant? Or Sita in the Uttararamacharita?

Kumu asked, "What kind of men have wives who are their maidservants?"

"You do not know that man yet. It's not just that he enslaves others; he is a slave to himself. The day he cannot go to the office, he deducts that day's pay from his own allowance. Once, he fell ill and suspended his allowance for a month; for the next two or three months, he made up for the loss by cutting down even his food expenses. I have been running this household for so long, and my monthly allowance is fixed accordingly. He acknowledges no one as family. In this house, everyone from the master down to the servants is a slave."

Kumu remained silent for a moment and said, "Then I shall do exactly that slavery. I will pay off my daily keep with my daily labor! I will not remain in this house as an unpaid bondwoman. Come, enlist me in the work. The household is under your charge—put me to work under you. Let no one mock me by calling me a Queen."

Smiling and lifting Kumu's chin, Motir Ma said, "In that case, you must obey my orders. I command you: come and eat now."

As they stepped out of the room, Kumu said, "Look, sister, I came prepared to give myself entirely, but he absolutely refused to let me give it. Now let him keep a maidservant. He shall not have me."

Motir Ma replied, "A woodcutter only knows how to chop down a tree; he doesn't get the tree, he gets timber. A gardener knows how to nurture a tree; he gets the flowers and the fruits. You have fallen into the hands of a woodcutter; he is a businessman. He has no compassion anywhere in his heart."

Sometime later, upon returning to the bedroom, Kumu saw a jar of lozenges on her side table. Hablu had secretly offered his sacrifice of devotion and hidden himself away. Even here, through the cracks in the stone, a flower had bloomed. The boy's

silent language of lozenges made her both laugh and cry at the same time. Stepping out to look for him, she found him standing quietly behind the door. His mother had forbidden him from coming to this room. She feared that on some pretext or another, it might incur the master's wrath. Overall, everyone in the house knew it was safest to stay completely away from Madhusudan in all matters except his own business.

Kumu caught Hablu, brought him into the room, and sat him on her lap. Together, they began examining whatever doll-like trinkets were among her furnishings. Kumu noticed that Hablu was particularly fascinated by a glass paperweight—he was utterly mesmerized, unable to understand how colorful flowers could be seen inside the solid glass.

Kumu asked, "Will you take this, Gopal?"

He had never heard such an unimaginably generous offer in his young life. Could he ever even hope for such a thing? He stared at Kumu's face in silent, timid astonishment.

Kumu said, "Take it with you."

Hablu could not contain his joy—grabbing it in his hands, he bounded away, skipping with delight.

That afternoon, Hablu's mother arrived and said, "What have you done, sister? Seeing the glass paperweight in Hablu's hands, the elder brother-in-law raised a massive uproar. He snatched it away, of course—and then beat the boy, calling him a thief. And the boy is so stubborn, he didn't even mention your name. Soon enough, rumors will spread that I am the one teaching Hablu to steal things."

Kumu sat rigid, like a wooden statue.

Just then, the squeak of shoes announced Madhusudan's approach from outside. Motir Ma quickly fled. Holding the glass paperweight, Madhusudan slowly and deliberately placed it back in its proper spot. Then, in a calm, grave voice laced with absolute certainty, he said, "Hablu stole this from your room. Learn to keep your belongings safe."

Kumu said in a sharp voice, "He did not steal it."

"Oh, very well, he pilfered it then."

"No, I gave it to him myself."

"I suppose you've set out to ruin the boy? Remember one thing: nothing is to be given to anyone without my permission. I do not tolerate disorder."

Standing up, Kumu demanded, "Did you not take my sapphire ring?"

Madhusudan replied, "Yes, I took it."

"Did that still not pay the price for this lump of glass?"

"I told you, you would not be allowed to keep it."

"You can keep your belongings, and I cannot keep mine?"

"In this house, there is nothing that you can independently call your own."

"Nothing? Then keep this room of yours to yourself."

As soon as Kumu left, Shyama rushed into the room and asked, "Where did the bride go?"

"Why?"

"I've been sitting with her food since morning; is she going to stop eating now that she's come to this house?"

"What if she does? So what if the Princess of Nurnagar refuses to eat? Are you all her bondwomen or what?"

"Shame, brother-in-law, you shouldn't be so angry with a young girl. We simply cannot bear to watch her starve herself day after day like this. Do you think she fainted the other day for no reason?"

Madhusudan roared, "You don't have to do anything, get out! When she's hungry, she'll eat on her own."

Feigning deep dejection, Shyama walked away.

Blood rushed to Madhusudan's head. He hurried into the bathroom, turned on the showerhead, and thrust his head under the cold water.

CHAPTER 27

Evening descended; Kumu was nowhere to be found that day. Finally, she was discovered sitting on a mat spread out on the floor of a small, grimy corner room next to the pantry, where old lamps, lamp-stands, and oil lanterns were hoarded.

Motir Ma came and asked, "What is this madness, sister?"

Kumu replied, "I will clean the lamps in this house, and this is my place."

Motir Ma said, "You've taken up a fitting task, sister; you have indeed come to light up this house. But you don't need to tend the oil lamps to do it. Now come along."

Kumu absolutely refused to move.

Motir Ma said, "Then I shall sleep here beside you."

In a firm voice, Kumu said, "No." Motir Ma realized that this seemingly gentle girl possessed the iron will to command. She had no choice but to leave.

Coming to bed at night, Madhusudan inquired about Kumu. When he heard the news, his first thought was, "Fine, let her stay in that room; we'll see how long she can last. Pleading with her will only fuel her stubbornness."

Telling himself this, he turned off the light and went to sleep. But sleep completely eluded him. With every sound, he thought she was coming. Once, he even thought she was standing right outside the door. He got out of bed and checked, but no one was there. The later it grew, the more restless his mind became. He simply could not summon the strength to disregard Kumu. Yet, stepping forward to admit defeat to her was entirely against his policy. He washed his face with cold water and lay back down, but still could not sleep. Tossing and turning, he finally got up, entirely unable to curb his curiosity. Taking a lantern in hand, he silently crossed the corridor of sleeping chambers, stopped in front of the lamp room in the inner quarters, and listened carefully for a moment; there was no sound inside. Opening the door cautiously, he saw Kumu lying on a mat on the floor, having rolled up one edge of it to serve as a pillow. Just as Madhusudan was sleepless, Kumu too should have been sleepless; but he saw her sleeping peacefully. She did not even wake when the lantern light fell across her face. Just then, Kumu stirred slightly and turned on her side. Like a thief fleeing at the first sign of a householder waking,

Madhusudan fled in haste. He was terrified lest Kumu witness his defeat, lest she laugh at him in her mind.

Emerging from the lamp room and walking a short distance along the veranda, Madhusudan found Shyama standing before him, a small clay lamp in her hand.

"What is this, brother-in-law? Where are you coming from?"

Without answering her, Madhusudan asked, "Where are you going, Bou?"

"Tomorrow I have a religious vow; I must feed the Brahmins, so I am going to make the preparations. You are invited, too. But I lack the means to offer you a proper priest's fee, brother."

A sharp retort came to Madhusudan's lips, but he suppressed it.

In the darkness of the late night, bathed in the glow of the lamp, Shyama looked beautiful. With a slight smile, Shyama said, "Today, the very first face I saw upon waking was that of a fortunate man like you; my day will go well. My vow will be fruitful."

She placed a slight emphasis on the word fortunate—to Madhusudan's ears, it sounded like mockery. Shyama did not dare ask any direct questions about Kumu. "But you must come eat in my room tomorrow, promise me upon my life," she said, and walked away.

Returning to his room, Madhusudan lay down on the bed. He left the lantern outside, just in case Kumu came. He simply could not shake the image of Kumudini's sleeping face from his mind; and he kept remembering that incomparable hand of hers, resting loosely outside her shawl. During the wedding, when he had taken that hand in his own, he hadn't fully looked at it—today, his eyes could not drink their fill. When would he finally earn the right to that hand? He could no longer stay in bed; he got up. Turning on the light, he opened the drawer of Kumu's desk. He saw the beaded purse. The first thing he pulled out was Bipradas's telegram—"May God bless you"—then a photograph of her two brothers, and finally a scrap of paper bearing a verse from the Gita, handwritten by Bipradas:

Yat karoshi yadashnasi yajjuhoshi dadasi yat, Yat tapasyasi, Kaunteya, tat kurushva madarpanam. (Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer as sacrifice,

whatever you give away, / Whatever austerities you perform, O Son of Kunti, offer it all to Me.)

Madhusudan's mind was torn apart by jealousy. Gritting his teeth, he mentally obliterated Bipradas. That day of obliteration would inevitably come, he knew for sure—he would have to tighten the screws little by little. But those nineteen years of Kumudini's life that remained outside Madhusudan's grasp—if he could snatch them from Bipradas's hands this very instant, only then would he find peace. He knew no other way but sheer, brute force. He lacked the courage to throw the beaded purse away today—on the day he had confiscated the ring, his courage had been greater. Back then, he still believed Kumudini was like any ordinary girl, easily subjected to dominance, perhaps even preferring it. Today, he realized there was no telling what Kumudini could or could not do.

There was only one way to bind Kumudini to his life with unbreakable chains: the path of making her the mother of his children. In that fantasy alone lay his solace.

In this way, the clock struck five. But the darkness of the winter night had not yet lifted. In a short while, the light would break, and tonight would be rendered a failure. Madhusudan hurriedly left the room—stepping loudly in front of the lamp room to clearly announce his presence—and opened the door with a deliberate creak. Kumu was not inside. Where was she?

The sound of running water from the courtyard tap reached his ears. Standing on the veranda, he saw Kumu scrubbing all the old, rusted, discarded brass lamp-stands in the house with tamarind paste. This was merely a deliberate attempt to burden herself with work, to stretch out the sleepless sorrow of the winter dawn.

Madhusudan stood on the upper veranda, watching in utter astonishment. How does one conquer the strength of the powerless?—this was his dilemma. When the household woke up in the morning and saw Kumu scrubbing lamp-stands, what would they think? What would the servant whose actual job it was to clean them think? There was no surer way to make him a laughingstock before the entire world.

For a moment, Madhusudan considered going down to the tap to settle the score with Kumu. But imagining the farce of the two of them bickering in the middle of the courtyard early in the morning, while the entire household tumbled out of bed

to watch the spectacle, he backed away. Calling for his middle brother, Nabin, he said, "Do you keep an eye on what is happening in this house?"

Nabin was the manager of the household. Frightened, he asked, "Why, Dada, what has happened?"

Nabin knew that whenever his elder brother had a reason to be angry, he needed someone to punish. If the actual culprit slipped away, an innocent person would do—otherwise, discipline would break down, and the prestige of his dictatorial regime over the household would be compromised.

Madhusudan said, "Do you think I don't know the reason behind the sheer madness the elder bride is committing right now?"

Nabin did not dare ask what madness the elder bride was committing, lest his ignorance be deemed a crime.

Madhusudan said, "There is no doubt that the middle bride has set out to poison her mind."

With deep hesitation, Nabin tried to say, "No, the middle bride wouldn't—"

Madhusudan snapped, "I have seen it with my own eyes."

There was no arguing against that. Hidden within that "seen it with my own eyes" was the history of the glass paperweight.

CHAPTER 28

The moment Motir Ma had begun showering Kumu with genuine love and care, Nabin knew it would not be tolerated; the women of the house would inevitably start petty squabbles over it. Nabin figured something of that sort had occurred. But there was no use protesting Madhusudan's speculative accusations; it would only make him more stubborn.

Madhusudan did not clearly state what had happened—perhaps he was too ashamed to say it. What needed to be done also remained vague. The only thing clear was that the entire responsibility lay with the middle bride, and therefore, according to the relative hierarchy of matrimony, the heavy end of the accountability fell squarely onto Nabin's shoulders.

Nabin went to Motir Ma and said, "We've hit a snag."

"Why, what has happened?"

"Only the Inner Knower knows, and Dada, and probably you; but the scolding has started on me."

"Why, tell me?"

"So that you might be rectified through me, and through you, the new import of his new enterprise might be rectified."

"Well then, begin your rectifying work on me—let's see if your hand is luckier than Dada's."

Pleadingly, Nabin said, "Dada's Odia servant broke a saucer from his expensive dinner set, and the bulk of the fine fell on me, you know—because the goods are under my charge. But is this new item that just entered the house also under my charge? Yet the fine must be split between you and me. So do whatever needs to be done, don't cause me any more grief, Mejobou."

"And what exactly does this fine entail, pray tell?"

"He will ship us off to Rajabpur. He makes that threat from time to time."

"He threatens you because you show fear. He sent us once, didn't he have to pay the train fare to bring us back? Even when your brother is angry, he doesn't make

miscalculations. He knows perfectly well that firing me from the household duties will not be cheap. And if there is a loss of even a single penny anywhere, he won't be able to stomach being cheated."

"I understand, now tell me what needs to be done."

"Tell your brother that no matter how great a Raja he might be, he cannot appease the Queen's hurt pride by hiring salaried servants—he must bear the burden of that pride on his own head. Tell him to stop calling for porters when it comes to matters of the bridal chamber."

"Mejobou, he won't need me to give him advice; he'll come to his senses on his own in a couple of days. Meanwhile, play the part of the messenger, whether it yields results or not. I just need to show that I am not quietly digesting the salt I eat here without doing my job."

Motir Ma went looking for Kumu. She knew she would be found on the roof in the morning. It was a high-walled terrace with occasional ventilation holes. A few scattered pots held no plants. In one corner stood a large, broken, square cage made of iron mesh; its wooden floor was almost entirely rotted out. At some point, rabbits or pigeons were kept in it; now it served to protect drying pickles and mango leather from the thieving beaks of crows. From this roof, one could see the sky overhead, but not the horizon. In the western sky loomed the chimney of an iron factory. For the past two days Kumu had sat on this roof, the coiled smoke erupting from that chimney was the only thing she had to look at—amidst the vast expanse of the sky, it seemed like the only living entity, rising and swelling in spiraling bursts of some intense emotion.

Having finished scrubbing the lamp-stands, Kumu had bathed while it was still dark and come to sit on the roof, facing the east. Her wet hair was splayed over her back—there was not the slightest trace of adornment on her. She wore a simple, coarse white cotton sari with a narrow black border, and a thick wild-silk shawl to ward off the cold.

For some time now, keeping the idealized vision of her awaited beloved at the center of her heart, this young woman had sat down to satisfy the hunger of her soul. All her prayers, her vows, her mythological tales—everything had breathed

life into this imaginary figure. She had been the romantic wanderer traversing the Vrindavan of her mind. Waking at dawn, she had sung in the Ramkeli raga:

Hamare tumare sampriti lagi hai Gun manamohan pyare— (A deep love is forged between you and me, Oh my beloved, enchanter of my mind—)

The offering of her self-surrender, rising toward that unarrived man, seemed to have sent its cup to her every day even before he appeared before her. On rainy nights, when the relentless downpour lashed the leaves of the trees in the backyard garden into a frenzy, she would remember that song in the Kanada raga:

Baje jhanan-nan mere payeriyā Kais karo jau gharaoyare. (My anklets ring out jhanan-nan How can I possibly return home?)

Anklets chimed jhanan-nan on the feet of her own restless, wandering mind—having set out on a path with no destination, how could she ever return home! The one she would eventually see in physical form, she had been perceiving through melodies for so long. If, on the day her profound joy and sorrow reached their fullness, she had miraculously found someone close to her heart, all the humming songs within her soul would have instantly taken physical form. But no traveler ever came to stand at her door. She had been entirely alone in the secluded bower of her imagination. She didn't even have any female companions her own age. Thus, all these days, her pent-up love had searched for its elusive beloved in the form of worship-flowers laid at the feet of her dark Lord, Krishna. That was why, when the matchmaker brought the marriage proposal, Kumu had sought her Lord's command—she had asked, "It is You I shall receive this time, isn't it?" And the Aparajita flower had answered, "You have already received Me."

All the deep preparations of her heart over all these days had failed—the stone had struck with a harsh clatter, and the ship had sunk in an instant. Her anguished youth had set out searching once again: where would she offer her flowers? What was meant to be the offering on her tray had today become a crushing burden! That is why she sang with such desperate fervor today, "Mere Giridhar Gopal, aur nahi kahi."

But today, this song wandered in the void; it reached nowhere. In this emptiness, Kumu's heart filled with terror. From today until the last day of her life, would the

deepest desires of her heart merely rise up in lonely sighs, just like those coils of smoke?

Motir Ma sat at a distance behind her. The majestic presence of this unadorned beauty on the desolate roof in the pure morning light left her astounded. She thought, How will she ever fit into this house? Compared to her, what breed are the other women here? They had naturally distanced themselves from her; they were angry with her, yet lacked the courage to befriend her.

As she sat there, Motir Ma suddenly saw Kumu press the edge of her shawl to her mouth with both hands and burst into tears. She could hold back no longer; coming close and embracing her, she cried out, "My sister, my precious dear, tell me what has happened."

Kumu could not speak for a long time. Recovering slightly, she said, "I still haven't received a letter from Dada today; I cannot understand what has happened to him."

"Is it time to receive a letter yet, sister?"

"It surely is. I left him while he was sick. He knows how frantic my mind must be to get news of him."

Motir Ma said, "Don't worry, I will figure out some way to get news."

Kumu had thought of sending a telegram many times, but who would she ask to do it? Since the day Madhusudan had boasted of being her brother's moneylender, the very mention of her brother to Madhusudan stuck in her throat. Today she said to Motir Ma, "If you could send a telegram to Dada in my name, you would save my life."

Motir Ma said, "I will do just that, what is there to fear?"

Kumu said, "You know I don't have a single penny on me."

"What are you saying, sister, that's nonsense. The money for the household expenses that stays with me is your money. From today, it is your salt that I am eating."

Kumu protested forcefully, "No, no, no, nothing in this house is mine, not even a quarter of a penny."

"Alright, sister, then I will spend a little of my own money for you. Why are you silent? What is the harm in that? If I gave the money out of pride, you could refuse it out of pride. But if I give it out of love, why won't you accept it with love?"

Kumu said, "I will accept it."

Motir Ma asked, "Sister, will your bedroom remain empty today too?"

Kumu replied, "I have no place there."

Motir Ma did not press the matter. Her mindset was: the burden of pressing the issue is not mine; let him whose job it is do it. She simply asked gently, "Shall I bring you a little milk?"

Kumu said, "Not right now, a little later." She still had some reckoning to do with her Lord. She was still receiving no answer in her heart.

Returning to her own room, Motir Ma called Nabin and said, "Listen to me. Go to the elder brother-in-law's outer sitting room and check his desk to see if any letter has arrived for sister—open the drawers and look."

Nabin gasped, "Disaster!"

"If you won't go, then I will."

"This is like being sent into a bush to catch a bear cub!"

"The master has gone to the office; he won't finish his work and return until one o'clock—in the meantime—"

"Look, Mejobou, I absolutely cannot do this during the day, there are people everywhere now. I can give you the news tonight."

Motir Ma said, "Alright, so be it. But we must send a wire to Nurnagar right now to find out how Bipradas Babu is doing."

"Fair enough, but that must be done by informing Dada, surely?"

"No."

"Mejobou, I see you have become completely reckless! In this house, not even a lizard can catch a fly without the master's orders, and I—"

"The wire will go in sister's name, what does it matter to you?"

"But it will go through my hands."

"Plenty of wires from the elder brother-in-law's office are sent via the guards every day; just slip this one in with them. Here is the money, sister has given it."

Had Nabin's own heart not ached with pity for Kumu, he would never have been able to shoulder the burden of such a dangerously audacious task.

CHAPTER 29

As per routine, Madhusudan came to the inner quarters to eat after one o'clock. As usual, the female relatives sat surrounding him; some fanned away the flies, others served the food. As mentioned earlier, there was no display of opulence in the arrangements of Madhusudan's inner quarters. His meals were prepared according to his old habits. Without coarse parboiled rice, neither his palate nor his stomach was satisfied. The utensils, however, were expensive. Silver plates, silver bowls, silver glasses. Typically, the menu consisted of simple kalai lentil soup, fish curry, a sour tamarind dish, and a mishmash of vegetables and fish bones. At the very end, he would finish off a large bowl of milk with sugar down to the last drop. Then, popping a betel leaf laced with a thick drop of lime into his mouth and stowing two more in his box, he would rest for exactly fifteen minutes while smoking his hookah, and then immediately depart for the office. From his days of comparative poverty until today, this routine had remained unbroken for a very long time. In eating, Madhusudan possessed an appetite, but no gluttony.

Shyama Sundari was stirring sugar into the bowl of milk. Her complexion was a dull, dark shade; she wasn't exactly fat, but her full, well-nourished figure certainly announced its presence. She wore nothing more than a single white sari over her body, yet she always appeared immaculately clean. Her youth was nearing its end, but like the late afternoon of early summer, the sun was setting, yet the shadows of twilight had not yet fallen. Beneath her thick eyebrows, her sharp, dark eyes never seemed to look at anyone directly; with just a brief glance, she took in everything. There was an expression around her luscious lips as if she were holding back many words. Life had not offered her much sweetness, yet she was full of vitality. She knew herself to be valuable, and she wasn't miserly, but because her preciousness had found no use, she harbored an arrogant disdain for her surroundings.

Shyama had entered this household precisely at the onset of the high tide of Madhusudan's wealth. She had even resolved to secure a place at the pinnacle of this family through the magic of her youth. It could not be said that Madhusudan's mind had never wavered. But Madhusudan absolutely refused to admit defeat; the reason being, Madhusudan's business acumen was not mere intelligence—it was genius. By the power of this genius, he had created wealth, and he was deeply

immersed in the supreme joy of that creation. By this very genius, he knew for certain that the King of Gods, Indra, had sent a formidable obstacle to break the intense asceticism of wealth-creation he was engaged in—his meditation had suffered shocks from time to time, but he had repeatedly steadied himself. His advantage was that, in the blazing high noon of his business, he had absolutely no leisure time. In the midst of this grueling labor, the brief, isolated companionship he received from Shyama through visual glimpses and overheard words seemed to alleviate Madhusudan's fatigue. During festivals and ceremonies, the weight of his favoritism visibly tilted a little heavier toward Shyama Sundari. But never once did he give Shyama enough leeway in the inner quarters to let her audacity grow. Shyama had correctly gauged Madhusudan's inclinations, yet her fear of him never vanished.

Shyama Sundari was present every day during Madhusudan's meal; she was there today as well. She had just bathed—her extraordinarily thick, long, dark hair was spread out over her back, with her pristine white sari drawn over her head. A faint fragrance of hair-washing spices emanated from her damp hair.

Without lifting her face from the bowl of milk, she asked softly, "Brother-in-law, shall I call the bride for you?"

Without a word, Madhusudan looked gravely at his sister-in-law's face. Taken aback by fear, Shyama Sundari scrambled to explain her question: "It would be nice if she sat near you while you eat, to serve you a little—"

Unable to decipher the expression on Madhusudan's face, Shyama Sundari stopped mid-sentence and fell silent. Madhusudan lowered his head again and resumed eating.

A little later, without lifting his face from the plate, he asked, "Where is the elder bride now?"

Rushing to answer, Shyama Sundari said, "I will go and see."

Frowning, Madhusudan waved a finger to forbid her. Whatever answer he hoped to get to that question, he would not be able to tolerate hearing it from her lips—yet, his mind was brimming with curiosity.

When he went to his bedroom on the third floor after his meal, a faint hope lingered in the corner of his mind. He took a stroll onto the roof. He stepped into the adjacent bathroom and stood perfectly still for a moment. Then he lay on the bed and began pulling on his hookah. His allotted fifteen minutes passed—when twenty minutes had ticked by and it was nearing a full half-hour, he pulled his watch from his breast pocket and checked the time. Year after year had passed, and he had never been even five minutes late leaving for the office. There was a registry book at the office; an account of exactly when someone arrived and left was kept in that book—and the trajectory of their salaries rose and fell with that account. Among all the employees in the office, Madhusudan's fines were the lowest in number. Yet, he held no bias toward himself in this regard. In fact, he extracted fines from himself at double the rate of his employees. In his mind, he made a vow today that when the office hours were over in the afternoon, he would work overtime to compensate for the loss.

But as the day wore on, he could no longer concentrate on his work. In fact, with a full half-hour still left on the clock, he abandoned his work and returned home. He felt an overwhelming urge to step into the bedroom at an unusual hour. Perhaps he might even see someone. He never came to the bedroom while it was still daylight. Today, he entered the inner quarters still wearing his office attire.

At this exact moment, Motir Ma was gathering the sun-dried mango leather from the roof into a basket. Seeing Madhusudan enter the bedroom at such an odd hour, she pulled her veil down with one hand and smiled broadly behind it. Being caught in this breach of routine by the middle bride made Madhusudan feel both ashamed and annoyed. His plan had been to enter the room with extremely silent steps—lest the timid doe be startled and flee. That was no longer possible. To escape the sting of her amused gaze, he hurriedly entered the room himself. He saw that his flight from the office had been completely in vain. Not only was there no one in the room, but there was also no sign that anyone had been there for even a moment at any time during the day. In an instant, his impatience felt unbearable. Even though he was the elder brother-in-law and had never spoken a single word to the middle bride in his life, his mind was frantic to call her in and say something, anything, about Kumu. He even stepped outside once, but Motir Ma had already gone downstairs.

To escape the indignity of spending time alone, without reason, at an unusual hour, in a bedroom abandoned by his new bride, he stormed out toward the outer wing with rapid steps. Feigning a highly urgent task, he hunched over his desk. Before him lay a ledger book. Normally, he rarely looked at it; his head clerk examined it. Today, he opened it with the intent of deceiving the eyes of the public. This ledger contained the dates and times of all letters and telegrams dispatched from his house. Opening the book, the very first thing he saw on the list of telegrams for today's date was Bipradas's name and address. The sender was the Mistress of the House herself.

"Call the guard."

The guard arrived.

"Who gave you this telegram to send?"

"The younger master."

"Call the younger master."

Nabin arrived with an ashen face.

"Who told you to send a telegram without my permission?" It was no easy task to speak the name of the person who had ordered it in front of the supreme ruler; unable to think of what to say, Nabin grew frantic and broke into a sweat despite the winter chill.

Seeing Nabin silent, Madhusudan asked himself, "The middle bride, I suppose?" By keeping his head bowed in silence, Nabin made the answer perfectly clear. Blood rushed instantly to Madhusudan's head, his face turned bright red—he was so enraged that words failed to come out of his throat. With a forceful wave of his hand, he motioned for Nabin to leave the room and began pacing from one end of the room to the other.

CHAPTER 30

Nabin returned to his room with a dry face and said to Motir Ma, "Mejobou, why delay any further?"

"What has happened?"

"Start packing your belongings into the boxes now."

"If I pack them on your advice, I'll only have to unpack them again tomorrow. Why? Is your brother not in a good mood?"

"I know him well. I suspect this time our residence here will be struck."

"So let's go. Why are you worrying so much? You won't be thrown into the sea there, will you?"

"Why are you telling me to go? This time the order will be to send the middle bride back to the village."

"I know you won't be able to obey that order."

"How do you know?"

"Do you think I am the only one who knows? The entire household knows you are henpecked! Until now, your brother couldn't fathom how a man could possibly be henpecked. Now it is his turn to understand."

"What are you saying?"

"I see that this disease runs in your family. The elder brother's symptoms just hadn't been detected until now. Because it has been accumulating for so long, its sting will be exceedingly fierce, just you wait and see; mark my words. The sheer force with which he forgot the entire world to clutch his moneybags—that exact same force will now fall upon his bride."

"Let it fall. The elder henpecked husband may take the center stage, but who will the middle henpecked husband survive with?"

"The burden of that worry is on me. For now, do exactly as I tell you. You must search his drawers."

Folding his hands, Nabin said, "Have mercy, Mejobou—if you asked me to stick my hand into a snake's hole, I would, but not in that drawer."

"If a hand had to be stuck into a snake's hole, I would do it myself; but the drawer must be searched by you. You know that there are strict orders not to hand any letter in this house to anyone without showing it to him first. My mind tells me a letter has arrived in his hands."

"My mind tells me the same, but it also tells me that if I lay a finger on that letter, Dada won't be able to find a punishment severe enough. The sentence will probably be seven years of rigorous hanging."

"You don't have to do anything, don't touch the letter, just go and see if there is a letter addressed to sister."

Nabin's devotion to his wife was profoundly deep; he even considered himself unworthy of her. That was why, whenever an opportunity arose to perform a difficult task for her sake, the more it frightened him, the more it also made him happy.

That very night, Motir Ma received the news from Nabin that a letter and a telegram addressed to Kumu were indeed in the drawer.

The initial surge of agitation that had driven Kumu to abandon her bedroom and take up servitude had subsided. As the irritation of the insult faded, her mind was now shadowed by the pallor of melancholy. She realized this was not a permanent arrangement. Yet, without such an arrangement, how would Kumu survive? It was impossible to force herself to live in such a disjointed manner, day and night, for the rest of her life in this household.

She was pondering exactly this, locked inside her room. The room was in one corner of the veranda, enclosed by wooden partitions. Apart from the entrance, the entire cubicle was sealed off. Wooden shelves were built into the walls, reaching all the way to the top. Those shelves housed a bizarre assortment of lighting equipment. The room was filthy from top to bottom with greasy grime. On the wall where the door was, a servant had satisfied his aesthetic senses by sticking cut-out pictures from candle wrappers. In one corner sat a tin box containing powdered chalk; beside it was a basket of dried tamarind and several dirty rags; and there were rows of kerosene tins, mostly empty, with only two or three full.

Since morning, Kumu had set about her tasks with clumsy hands. Having finished her duties in the pantry, Motir Ma peeked in and stood watching the agonizing crisis of Kumu's laborious penance. She realized that the violent demise of a few fragile items was imminent. In this house, even the slightest damage to property escaped neither the eye nor the ledger.

Motir Ma could hold back no longer; she said, "I have no work on my hands, so I came. I thought I'd lend a hand with sister's chores, it will earn me some spiritual merit." With that, she pulled the basket of glass globes and chimneys onto her lap and began scrubbing and wiping them.

Kumu no longer had the energy to object, for by then, the self-discovery of her own incompetence was nearly complete. She was saved by Motir Ma's assistance. But even Motir Ma's untutored skills had their limits. Measuring and fitting the wicks into the kerosene lamps was beyond her capability. The task was usually done under her supervision, and the measuring of the allotted oil was done by her own hands, but to this day, she had never practically cut the wicks herself. Consequently, having no other choice, she proposed calling the old lamp-servant, Banku, for assistance.

She had to concede defeat. Banku the lamp-servant arrived and, with deft hands, completed the work in a short time. Before evening, the lamps had to be distributed to every room. Banku asked if he should return at the proper time to do that task, as per his usual routine. The man was indeed simple-natured, but even so, there was perhaps a hint of sarcasm in his question. The tips of Kumu's ears turned red.

Before she could answer, Motir Ma said, "Of course you will come, what else?" It was abundantly clear to Kumu that by trying to do the work, she was merely hindering it.

CHAPTER 31

After her midday meal, Kumu locked her door and sat down, vowing not to let the fire of anger ignite within her soul. She told herself, "Today I must steady my mind; tomorrow morning, with the Lord's blessings, I shall embark on the true path of housewifery." Locked inside her wooden room, she began a reckoning with herself. Her greatest anchor in this endeavor was the memory of her elder brother. She had witnessed the astonishing depth of his patience; the melancholy on his face was but the shadow of his inner nobility. Her brother, whose faith was the positivism prevalent among the educated society of their time, was not in the habit of offering external obeisance to a deity, yet the Divine had manifested itself, entirely filling his life.

In the afternoon, when Banku the lamp-servant knocked on the door, Kumu unlocked it and stepped out. She informed Motir Ma that she would not eat that night. This fast was intended solely to purify her mind. Motir Ma was astonished to look at Kumu's face. The flush of inner torment was gone. Her forehead and eyes radiated a serene, gentle luster, as though she had just completed her prayers or returned from a holy pilgrimage. It was as if the Inner Knower had swept away all her hurt pride; she seemed to carry the sacred flowers of an offering within her heart, enveloping her in their sweet fragrance. Seeing her face, Motir Ma understood that this fast was not the self-inflicted torture of wounded pride. Therefore, she raised no objection whatsoever.

Seating her deity firmly within her heart, Kumu took her place in a corner of the roof. Today she realized with absolute clarity that had sorrow not struck her so violently, she would never have drawn so close to her Lord. Gazing at the glow of the setting sun, Kumu folded her hands and prayed, "Lord, let there be no further separation between us; keep me as Your own, even if it must be through tears."

The winter day faded into dusk in the blink of an eye. A colorless shroud of dust, fog, and factory smoke obscured the transparent, majestic solemnity of the evening. Just as the sky descended toward the earth under the heavy burden of a pervasive grime, an unbearable weight of anxiety for her brother dragged Kumu's mind downward.

Thus, carrying both the joy of liberation from the shackles of pride and a heart heavy with worry for her brother, Kumu re-entered her little cubicle. She desperately wished to surrender this helpless burden of anxiety entirely to God with absolute faith. Yet, despite repeatedly rebuking herself, she could not find that absolute reliance. The telegram has been sent, why is there no reply? This question relentlessly haunted her mind.

Madhusudan found himself entirely unable to breach the subtle barriers of a woman's self-surrender. His wedded wife, over whose body and mind he held absolute claim, remained utterly unapproachable. He was at a loss as to how or from which direction to assault this unimaginable conspiracy of fate. Never before, for any reason, had Madhusudan shown the slightest inattention toward his business; now, that ominous sign manifested itself. Everyone knew that even during his own mother's illness and death, Madhusudan's work had not suffered in the least. At that time, many had revered him for his unyielding fortitude. Today, Madhusudan was stunned by a sudden self-discovery; he could not fathom where this force, pulling him away from his beaten track, was leading him.

After his evening meal, Madhusudan came to the bedroom to sleep. Though he had not truly believed it, he had hoped he might find Kumu there tonight. It was for this reason that he arrived much later than usual. In good health, it was his lifelong habit to fall asleep precisely by the clock, without a moment's delay. Fearing that Kumu might enter and leave while he was asleep, he refrained from going to bed. He sat on the sofa for a while, then paced back and forth on the roof. Madhusudan's usual bedtime was nine o'clock—suddenly, to his surprise, the courtyard gong struck eleven. He felt a wave of shame. Yet, approaching the bed two or three times, he stood there in silence, entirely unable to bring himself to lie down. He then resolved to go to the outer sitting-room and settle scores with Nabin that very night.

Reaching the veranda in front of the outer room, he saw the light was still burning inside. As he was about to enter, Nabin emerged from the room with a lantern in hand. Had it been daylight, one would have seen Nabin's face turn instantly pale.

Madhusudan demanded, "What are you doing here so late at night?"

Nabin's wits did not fail him; he replied, "Before going to sleep, I always wind the clocks and set the calendar cards right."

"Very well, come inside and listen."

Terrified, Nabin stood as silent as an accused man in a witness box.

Madhusudan said, "I do not tolerate anyone whispering advice into the elder bride's ears. The bride of my house shall act according to my wishes, and no one else's counsel—that is the rule."

Gravely, Nabin replied, "That is perfectly true."

"Therefore, I am saying, the middle bride must be sent back to the village."

As if thoroughly relieved, Nabin said, "That is wonderful, Dada. I was worried you might not agree."

Surprised, Madhusudan asked, "What do you mean by that?"

Nabin replied, "For the past few days, the middle bride has been frantic to return to the village. Her things are already packed; she will leave as soon as an auspicious day is found."

Needless to say, this was entirely fabricated. That anyone in his household would choose to leave on their own accord, rather than being dismissed by Madhusudan himself, was utterly unconstitutional. In an annoyed tone, he snapped, "Why? What is her great hurry to leave?"

Nabin answered, "The mistress of the house has arrived, and she must now take full charge of this household. The middle bride says that if she remains in between, there's no telling what complications might arise."

Madhusudan demanded, "Is the judgment of such matters left to her?"

With feigned innocence, Nabin said, "What can I do, it is a woman's stubbornness. Somehow, she fears that you might suddenly dismiss her one day over some issue, and she won't be able to bear that humiliation—so she has made a firm vow that she must leave. An auspicious date has been found on the upcoming thirteenth day of the lunar fortnight. She wishes to organize all her chores and settle the accounts before she departs."

Madhusudan countered, "Look, Nabin, it is your over-indulgence that has spoiled the middle bride. Tell her firmly that she cannot leave under any circumstances."

You are a man; I cannot bear to see that you have no authority within your own home."

Scratching his head, Nabin murmured, "I shall try, Dada, but—"

"Listen, tell her in my name that her departure is out of the question for now. When the time is right, I shall decide the day of her departure myself."

Nabin said, "But you just said the middle bride must be sent to the village, so I thought—"

Agitated, Madhusudan yelled, "Did I say she must be sent this very instant?"

Nabin quietly withdrew. Madhusudan lit a gas jet and sat leaning back in a long lounge chair. The night watchman occasionally patrolled past the rooms of the mansion. Madhusudan had drifted into a light doze when he suddenly startled awake to find the watchman standing inside the room, holding up a lantern and staring at his face. Perhaps he was wondering whether the Maharaja had fainted or passed away. Embarrassed, Madhusudan scrambled out of the chair. The realization that the watchman had witnessed the newly married Raja Bahadur spending the night in his office room—a pathetic and dishonorable sight—struck him like a physical blow. Rising, he snapped at the watchman in an angry tone, "Lock the doors." As if the unlocked doors were the watchman's crime alone. The courtyard gong struck two.

Before leaving the office, Madhusudan opened his drawer. After a moment's hesitation, he slipped the telegram addressed to Kumu into his pocket and walked toward the inner quarters. He stood for a while before the staircase leading up to the third floor.

Waking from their first deep sleep in the dead of night, humans do not immediately possess their full strength. Therefore, there is a vast difference between one's daytime character and nighttime character. At two o'clock in the morning, when the eyes of the world were absent, and he was accountable to no one in the universe but his own soul, it became entirely possible for him to silently admit defeat before Kumu.

CHAPTER 32

Madhusudan turned back from the foot of the stairs, the blood churning violently in his chest. A kerosene lantern was burning in front of a closed room. Lifting it, he quietly came to stand outside the lamp room. Pushing the door gently, he found it unlatched; the door swung open. Wrapped in a sheet upon her mat, Kumu was in a deep sleep—her left hand resting lightly on her chest. Placing the lantern in a corner of the wall, Madhusudan sat on her left, facing her. The reason this face exerted such a powerful pull on his mind was its ineffable, absolute completeness. Within Kumu, there had never been an internal conflict. She had suffered from the hardships of poverty in her brother's household, but that was an external circumstance; it had not wounded her intrinsic nature. The environment she grew up in was entirely favorable to her disposition. This was why her face bore such an uninterrupted innocence, and her movements and behavior radiated an untarnished dignity. To Madhusudan, who had spent his life in a relentless struggle for survival, constantly on guard against looming doubts, the supreme gravity of Kumu's absolute refinement was a matter of profound wonder. He was not natural or at ease in the slightest, whereas Kumu was as naturally at ease as a deity. It was this stark contrast between them that pulled him with such overwhelming force. When he reviewed the entire sequence of events that had transpired since the bride's arrival, he saw on his own side the angry impotence of failed dominance, and on the bride's side, the effortless expression of an unyielding self-respect. Unlike ordinary women, there was not the slightest trace of unseemly forwardness in her behavior. Had it been otherwise, Madhusudan would not have hesitated for a moment to exercise his marital authority to humiliate her. Yet, he could not comprehend what had happened; by some strange mystery, Kumu remained entirely beyond his grasp.

Madhusudan resolved to spend the entire night awake by her side without waking her. After sitting there for a while, he could restrain himself no longer—gently, he lifted her hand from her chest into his own. Stirring in her sleep, Kumu pulled her hand back and turned her side, sleeping with her back to Madhusudan.

Madhusudan could bear it no longer. Bringing his lips close to her ear, he whispered, "Barobou, a telegram has arrived from your brother."

Instantly shattered from her sleep, Kumu sat up, staring at Madhusudan's face with wide, astonished eyes. Holding the telegram before her, Madhusudan said, "It has come from your brother." He brought the lantern closer from the corner of the room.

Kumu read the telegram; it was written in English: "Do not be anxious for me; recovering steadily; my blessings to you." Reading these words of solace in the midst of her crushing anxiety, Kumu's eyes instantly filled with tears. Wiping her eyes, she carefully tied the telegram to the corner of her sari. That single act felt like a twist to Madhusudan's heart. He was at a complete loss for what to say next. Kumu herself spoke up, "Has no letter arrived from Dada?"

After this, Madhusudan could not bring himself to admit that a letter had arrived. He blurted out on impulse, "No, there is no letter."

Sitting together like this in the dead of night inside this cramped room made Kumu feel uncomfortable. As she made a motion to rise, Madhusudan suddenly pleaded, "Barobou, do not be angry with me."

This was not the command of a master; it was the entreaty of a lover, tinged with the self-reproach of a culprit. Kumu was astonished; it felt to her like the play of divine destiny. For during the day, she had repeatedly told herself, Do not be angry. And tonight, in the middle of the night, someone had unexpectedly made Madhusudan utter those very words.

Madhusudan asked her again, "Are you still angry with me?"

Kumu replied, "No, I am not angry, not in the least."

Gazing at her face, Madhusudan was struck with wonder. She seemed to be speaking inwardly, as if addressing some unseen.

Madhusudan said, "Then come from this room into your own."

Kumu was not prepared tonight. Waking suddenly from sleep, it is difficult to instantly steel one's mind. She had resolved that tomorrow morning, after her bath and her daily prayers to her deity, she would begin her spiritual practice within this household. Now she thought, The Lord did not grant me time; He has summoned me in the depth of this night. How can I say 'no' to Him? She feared the massive reluctance rising within her soul, viewing it as a sin. Because the barrier of this

reluctance was holding her back, Kumu forced herself to stand up resolutely and said, "Let us go."

Going upstairs, she paused for a moment outside her bedroom door and said, "I shall be right back, I won't be long."

Saying this, she went to a corner of the roof and sat down. The crescent moon of the waning fortnight hung in the mid-sky.

In her heart, Kumu repeated over and over, "Lord, You have summoned me, You have summoned me. You have called me because You have not forgotten me. You will lead me over a path of thorns—it is You, it is You, it is none other than You."

Kumu wanted to obliterate everything else. Everything else was an illusion; even if everything else was a thorn, it was the thorn of the path, and it was His path's thorn. She carried her provisions for the journey—her brother's blessing, which she had tied to her sari. She repeatedly touched that tied blessing to her head. Then, resting her forehead against the floor, she bowed in prolonged prayer. Suddenly, she startled; behind her, Madhusudan spoke, "Barobou, you will catch a chill, come inside." The tone of this voice did not match the divine words Kumu yearned to hear within her soul! This was her trial—today, the Lord would not summon her with His flute. He would remain in disguise tonight.

CHAPTER 33

Where Kumu the individual was filled with revulsion, disgust, and aversion, and where her immediate world humiliated her with its brute, forceful claims of ownership, she began constructing a veil around herself. It was a shroud meant to obliterate the reality of her own likes and dislikes—a way of numbing her own self-consciousness. It was the law of chloroform. Yet this was no temporary measure for two or three hours; she had to banish her feelings of pain and disgust day and night. In such a state, if a woman could find a guru, the treatment for her self-oblivion would be simple; but that was not possible. Therefore, she tried to keep the mantras of worship constantly ringing within her mind. Her mantra for day and night was:

Tasmaat pranamya pranidhaya kaayan Prasadaye tvaam ahameesham eedyam
Piteva putrasya sakheva sakhyuh Priyah priyaaarhasi deva sodhum.

(Therefore, bowing down and prostrating my body, I crave Your grace, O adorable Lord! As a father forgives his son, a friend his friend, a lover his beloved, so should You, O Lord, bear with me.)

Oh Adorable One, prostrating my entire body before You, I beg for this grace—just as a father bears with his son, a friend with his friend, a lover with his beloved, so may You, O Lord, bear with me. And the only proof that You can endure me through Your love is that through Your love, I too can forgive everything. Closing her eyes, Kumu silently called upon Him, You have said that the man who sees Me everywhere, and sees everything within Me, is never forsaken by Me, nor does he ever forsake Me. Let there be not the slightest lapse in this spiritual practice of mine.

This morning, after her bath, she anointed her body for a long time with water mixed with sandalwood paste. Having purified and fragranced her body, she offered it to Him—meditating with intense concentration that His hand was clasped in hers at every single instant, and His all-pervading touch continuously enveloped her entire being. This body has truly and completely been received by Him; the physical form that exists outside His possession is but a falsehood, a mere illusion, mere clay that will turn to dust in the blink of an eye. As long as I feel His touch, this body can never become unholy. As she thought of this, her eyelids grew moist with

joy—her body felt liberated from the gross shackles of the flesh. She felt a sudden reverence for her own body, viewing it as the eternal altar of a sacred union. Had a garland of jasmine flowers been at hand, she would have worn it around her neck and woven it into her hair this very instant. After her bath, she wore a pristine white sari with a thick red border. When she sat on the roof, it felt as though a supreme touch, filling the sky in the form of sunlight, welcomed her body.

Approaching Motir Ma, Kumu said, "Put me to work with you."

Smiling, Motir Ma replied, "Come then, chop the vegetables."

Massive wooden platters, large brass bowls, baskets of greens and vegetables, and ten or fifteen cutting blades were laid out; the female relatives and dependents spun tales while working their hands rapidly, as mounds of sliced and chopped vegetables piled high. Kumu sat down among them. Through the iron grilles in front of her, an old tamarind tree in the neighboring settlement could be seen, shattering the sunlight with its ever-restless leaves and scattering it about.

From time to time, Motir Ma glanced at Kumu's face and wondered: Is she merely working, or is her mind journeying toward some sacred pilgrimage, guided by the movement of her fingers? Looking at her, she seemed like a sailboat whose hoisted canvas had caught the wind—the boat was entirely absorbed in that touch, oblivious to the water parting along both sides of its hull. The other women working in the room could find no easy way to strike up a conversation with Kumu. Shyama Sundari remarked once, "Bride, if you must bathe so early in the morning, why don't you ask for warm water? You might catch a chill."

Kumu replied, "I am used to it."

The conversation advanced no further. A silent torrent of chanting was running within Kumu's mind:

Piteva putrasya sakheva sakhyuh Priyah priyaaarhasi deva sodhum.

The chopping of vegetables and the pantry duties came to an end; the women gathered by the water tap in the inner courtyard, raising a clamor as they prepared to bathe.

Finding Motir Ma alone, Kumu said, "I have received a reply to the telegram from Dada."

Somewhat surprised, Motir Ma asked, "When did you get it?"

Kumu replied, "Last night."

"At night!"

"Yes, very late at night. He came personally and placed it in my hand."

Motir Ma remarked, "In that case, you must have surely received the letter as well."

"Which letter?"

"The letter from your brother."

Anxious, Kumu cried out, "No, I haven't received it! Has a letter from Dada arrived?"

Motir Ma remained silent.

Clasping her hand, Kumu pleaded in distress, "Where is Dada's letter? Please bring it to me."

Motir Ma whispered, "I cannot bring that letter; it is inside the drawer in the elder brother-in-law's outer sitting room."

"Why can't you bring me my own letter?"

"If he finds out that his drawer was opened, a disaster will break loose."

Frantic, Kumu asked, "Will I not be allowed to read Dada's letter then?"

"When the elder brother-in-law leaves for the office, read the letter and place it back in the drawer."

Anger cannot be entirely suppressed; her mind flared up. She said, "Must I steal to read my own letter?"

"The master of this house decides what belongs to you and what does not."

Kumu was on the verge of forgetting her vow, when suddenly an inner voice wagged a finger and warned, Do not be angry. For a brief moment, Kumu closed her eyes. Her lips trembled with unspoken words: Priyah priyayaarhasi deva sodhum.

Kumu declared, "If someone wishes to steal my letter, let them; but I do not wish to repay theft with theft."

The moment she spoke, Kumu felt her words were too harsh. She realized that the hidden anger within her managed to express itself unawares. It had to be uprooted. If one tried to fight it, it was not always within reach. It had built its fortress within a cave—where was the entrance to breach it from the outside? Therefore, a flood of love had to be unleashed, one that would unlock the closed and wash away the bound. She held one means to distract her mind—music. But she felt too shy to play the esraj in this house. Nor had she brought her instrument with her. Kumu could sing, but her voice lacked power. She wished to flood the sky with a song—a song of wounded pride. A song in which she could say, I came at your bidding alone, so why have you hidden yourself? I did not hesitate for a single instant, so why have you plunged me into such doubt today? She wished to voice these thoughts loudly in song. It felt to her that only through melody would she receive her answer.

CHAPTER 34

Kumu had only one refuge—the roof of the house. She retreated there. The day had advanced, and the roof was flooded with sharp sunlight, save for a narrow strip of shade along the wall. She sat there. A song came to her mind, its melody set to the Asavari raga. The song began with the words, "Baansari hamari re" (Oh my flute)—but the rest consisted of lyrics distorted by the ustads, making their meaning incomprehensible. Kumu filled this incomplete section with new improvisations according to her own fancy, singing it over and over. That fragment of text became laden with meaning. The phrase seemed to say, Oh my flute, why does melody not fill you? Why does it not pierce the darkness to reach where the doors are locked, where the sleep remains unbroken? Baansari hamari re, baansari hamari re!

When Motir Ma arrived and said, "Come, sister, it is time to eat," the narrow strip of shade in the corner of the roof had vanished. Yet, Kumu's mind was brimming with melody; whatever injustice anyone had inflicted upon her in the household had dwindled into insignificance. The pettiness Madhusudan had displayed regarding her letter—a pettiness that had initially provoked a sharp disdain within her mind—seemed to dissolve like an insect in this sunlit sky, its angry buzzing merging into the infinite expanse. Yet, the longing of her heart to receive her brother's affectionate words within that letter did not fade.

That intense longing clung to her mind. Once she finished eating, she could restrain herself no longer. She told Motir Ma, "I am going to the outer room to read the letter."

Motir Ma advised, "Wait a little longer. Go when all the servants take their break to eat."

Kumu countered, "No, no, that would be too much like going like a thief. I want to walk in front of everyone; let them think what they will."

Motir Ma offered, "In that case, let me come with you."

Kumu cried out, "No, that is out of the question. Just tell me which way to go."

Motir Ma pointed out the room through the slatted veranda of the inner wing. Kumu stepped out. The servants started in surprise and bowed to her. Kumu

entered the room, opened the desk drawer, and found her letter. Lifting it, she saw the envelope was open. Her chest began to heave; it became utterly unbearable. In the household where Kumu had been raised, such an indignity was completely beyond imagination. The sheer intensity of her own emotion jolted her into awareness. She cried out, "Priyah priyaaarhasi deva sodhum"—yet the storm would not subside—so she repeated it over and over. The orderly standing outside was astonished to hear their Bou-Rani chanting mantras to herself inside the office room. After chanting for a long time, Kumu's mind grew calm. Placing the letter before her, she sat on the chair, folded her hands, and remained perfectly still. She had vowed she would not read her letter like a thief.

Just then, Madhusudan entered the room and stopped in his tracks, startled—Kumu did not even look at him. Approaching, he saw the letter on the desk. He demanded, "What are you doing here!"

Kumu gazed at Madhusudan's face with a calm, silent expression. There was no accusation in her eyes. Madhusudan asked again, "Why are you in this room?"

At this redundant question, Kumu replied in an impatient tone, "I came to see if a letter from Dada had arrived in my name."

Why did you not ask me?—the path to such a question had been closed by Madhusudan himself last night. Therefore, he lied, "I was just bringing this letter to you myself; there was no need for you to come here for it."

Kumu remained silent for a moment. Having calmed her mind, she said, "You did not wish to let me read this letter, therefore I shall not read it. Here, I tear it to pieces. But never inflict such pain upon me again. No greater sorrow than this can ever be mine."

Saying this, she covered her face with her sari and ran out of the room.

Earlier that day, after his midday meal, Madhusudan's mind had been severely agitated. He could not quell the turmoil. He had resolved to send for Kumu the moment she finished eating. Today, he had taken special care in combing his hair. Just this morning, he had purchased scented, spirit-infused hair oil and expensive perfume from an English barber shop. This was the first time in his life he had ever used such things. Fragrant and well-dressed, he was fully prepared. He had already overstepped his office time by at least forty-five minutes.

Hearing footsteps on the stairs, Madhusudan sat up, startled. Finding nothing else at hand, he picked up the advertisement page of an old newspaper and began examining it intently, as though it were part of his office duties. He even pulled a thick blue pencil from his pocket and scribbled a couple of marks on it.

It was Shyama Sundari who entered the room. Frowning, Madhusudan looked at her face. Shyama Sundari said, "You are sitting here, while the bride is looking all over for you."

"Looking for me! Where?"

"I just saw her enter your office room outside. Why are you so surprised, brother-in-law—she probably thought you were—"

Madhusudan rushed outside immediately. And then followed the incident of the letter.

What happens to a sailboat when its canvas suddenly rips—that was exactly what happened to Madhusudan. There was not a moment left to delay. He departed for the office. Yet, beneath all his tasks, the sharp edges of his incomplete, broken thoughts continuously prodded and pierced him. Concentrating on his work in the midst of this mental earthquake was completely impossible for him that day. He informed the office that he had a severe headache and returned home long before the close of business.

CHAPTER 35

Meanwhile, Nabin and Motir Ma realized that their foundations had shattered; they had no refuge left to flee to. Motir Ma remarked, "The kind of hard labor I perform here, I can find a place to do that anywhere in the world. My only sorrow is that once I am gone, there will be no one left in this house to look after sister."

Nabin said, "Look, Mejobou, I have suffered many humiliations in this household; many times have I lost my appetite for the food and water of this house. But what is unbearable now is that despite receiving such a bride into his home, Dada could not understand how to welcome her or keep her—he has ruined everything. Misfortune builds its nest from the broken shards of good things."

Motir Ma countered, "It won't be long before your brother realizes that. But by then, what is broken can no longer be mended."

Nabin lamented, "It pricks my heart that I did not have the fortune to be her Lakshmana-brother. At any rate, pack your belongings immediately; when the time comes in this house, there is no room for delay."

Motir Ma left. Nabin could restrain himself no longer; quietly approaching his sister-in-law's room, he saw Kumu lying on a mattress on the floor of her bedroom. The agony of having torn the letter refused to leave her mind.

Seeing Nabin, she quickly sat up. Nabin said, "Boudidid, I have come to offer my obeisance; please grant me the dust of your feet."

This was Nabin's very first conversation with his sister-in-law.

Kumu said, "Come in, sit down."

Sitting on the floor, Nabin said, "My heart was full of joy at the thought that I would be able to serve you. But why would Nabin's destiny tolerate such great fortune? I have had you here for only a few days, and I could do nothing for you—this regret will remain in my mind forever."

Kumu asked, "Where are you going?"

Nabin replied, "Dada will send us back to the village. I likely won't have the opportunity to see you again after this, which is why I came to bow and take my

leave." As he bowed, Motir Ma surged in and said, "Come quickly. The master is looking for you."

Nabin rose in haste and left. Motir Ma went with him.

In the outer room, his elder brother sat by his desk; Nabin came and stood before him. On other days, his face would have borne an expression of fear in such a situation; today, there was none.

Madhusudan demanded, "Who told the elder bride about the letter in the desk?"

Nabin replied, "I told her."

"Where did you suddenly find the audacity for this?"

"The elder Bou-Rani asked me if a letter from her brother had arrived. The letters of this house are first collected at that desk before they reach you, so I came to check."

"Could you not wait to ask me?"

"She had become frantic, therefore—"

"Therefore my orders must be flouted?"

"She is the mistress of this house; how was I to know her commands hold no ground here? I do not possess the sheer insolence to disobey whatever she speaks. I tell you to your face: she is not merely my master, she is my elder; my obedience to her stems not from the salt I eat here, but from my own devotion."

"Nabin, I have known you since you were a child; these thoughts are not yours. I know who supplies you with these wits. At any rate, there is no time left today; you must leave for the village by tomorrow morning's train."

"As you command," Nabin replied, and without a second word, walked rapidly away.

Such a brief "As you command" did not please Madhusudan in the least. Nabin ought to have wept and pleaded; though it would not have altered Madhusudan's resolve. Calling Nabin back again, he said, "Take your settled wages and go, but from now on, I shall not provide for your expenses."

Nabin replied, "I know that. I shall cultivate the portion of land that belongs to my share in the village and live off it."

Saying this, and without waiting for any further words, he departed.

Human nature is composed of a mixture of diverse, conflicting elements; one proof of this was that Madhusudan loved Nabin deeply. His other two brothers were stationed in the village, managing the property in Rajabpur, and Madhusudan rarely inquired about them. After their father's death, Madhusudan had brought Nabin to Calcutta, educated him, and kept him by his side constantly. Nabin possessed a natural aptitude for household management. The reason was that he was thoroughly genuine. Furthermore, everyone loved him for his speech and manners. Whenever a quarrel broke out in the house, Nabin could easily settle it. Nabin knew how to smile through everything; he didn't merely mete out justice to people, he behaved in a way that made everyone feel he harbored a special favoritism toward them.

One proof that Madhusudan loved Nabin from his heart was that he detested Motir Ma. Wherever his affection lay, he demanded absolute monopoly. For this reason, Madhusudan continuously imagined that Motir Ma was merely turning Nabin's mind against him. A strange woman had arrived from the outside to continuously obstruct the paternal right he held over his younger brother. Had Madhusudan not loved Nabin specially, Motir Ma's sentence of banishment would have been finalized long ago.

Madhusudan had intended to return to the office after finishing this brief business. But he could find no strength within his mind. The image of Kumu tearing the letter and walking away had become deeply etched in his heart. It was an extraordinary image, something he could never have conceived before. Once, out of his habitual nature of suspicion, Madhusudan had thought that Kumu must have surely read the letter beforehand; but Kumu's face radiated such a luster of pure truth that it was impossible even for Madhusudan to disbelieve her for long.

Madhusudan had rapidly lost the power to discipline Kumu harshly; now, his own inadequacies had begun to torment him. Today, he could not forget that he was advanced in years. In fact, he wished he could somehow conceal the grey hair at his temples. He was dark-skinned; that injustice of the Creator was stinging him sharply after all these years. Kumu's mind was continuously slipping from his grasp,

and he had no doubt it was due to his own lack of beauty and youth. Here, he was weaponless; he was weak. He had wanted to marry a daughter from the Chatterjee household, but he had never imagined he would get a girl before whom the Creator had ordained his defeat in advance. Yet, he lacked the mental strength to state that he would have been better off with an ordinary girl over whom his dominance would have worked.

There was only one area where Madhusudan could triumph—his wealth. Therefore, a jeweler had visited his room this morning. He had taken three rings from him, wishing to see which one Kumu would prefer. Placing those three ring boxes in his pocket, he went to his bedroom. A ruby, an emerald, and a diamond ring. In his mind, Madhusudan was visualizing a scene. First, he would open the box of the ruby ring very slowly; Kumu's greedy eyes would light up. Then the emerald would emerge, widening her eyes further. Then the diamond, leaving the woman's wonder boundless at its precious brilliance. Madhusudan would declare with royal gravity, "Choose whichever you wish." When Kumu selected the diamond, Madhusudan, smiling slightly at the timid courage of her greed, would slip all three rings onto three of her fingers. And then, at night, the curtains of the bridal couch would rise.

Madhusudan had intended for this affair to take place after the evening meal. But after the disaster of the afternoon, he could wait no longer. He went to the inner quarters to perform the afternoon's prelude.

Entering, he found Kumu sitting on the floor of the bedroom, packing a tin trunk. Clothes and belongings were scattered around her.

"What is this madness! Are you going somewhere?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"To Rajabpur."

"What is the meaning of this?"

"You have punished my brothers over the opening of the drawer. That punishment belongs to me alone."

To sit and plead "Do not go" was completely contrary to Madhusudan's nature. His mind immediately flared—let her go, let's see how long she can last. Without delaying for a single instant, he stormed out of the room.

CHAPTER 36

Stepping outside, Madhusudan summoned Nabin and said, "You two have provoked the elder bride to madness."

"Dada, we are leaving tomorrow anyway, so I will no longer swallow my words out of fear of you. Let me tell you this plainly today: it won't take anyone else in this house to drive the elder Bou-rani crazy—you are perfectly capable of doing it all by yourself. While we were here, we could at least keep things somewhat calm, but you couldn't tolerate even that."

Madhusudan roared, "Don't be impudent! You are the ones who put the idea of going to Rajabpur into her head."

"I couldn't even imagine such a thing, so how could I teach her that?"

"Listen to me, if you keep dancing around with her on this, it won't end well for you. I'm telling you plainly."

"Dada, who are you saying all this to? Go say it where it might actually do some good."

"So you didn't say anything to her?"

"I swear upon your body, I didn't even imagine it."

"If the elder bride stubbornly insists on going, what will you two do?"

"We will call for you. You have your guards, footmen, and musclemen; you can stop her. And later, when your enemies leak the news of this battle to the newspapers, don't go suspecting my wife."

Madhusudan scolded him again, "Shut up! If the elder bride wants to go to Rajabpur, let her go. I won't stop her."

"How will we feed her?"

"By selling your wife's jewelry! Go, get out! Leave the room when I tell you."

Nabin walked out. Tying a bandage soaked in eau-de-Cologne around his forehead, Madhusudan began steeling his resolve to go to the office once more.

Hearing everything from Nabin, Motir Ma ran to Kumu's bedroom. She found her still folding and packing her clothes. "What are you doing, Bou-rani?" she asked.

"I am going with you."

"Do I have the power to take you with us!"

"Why not?"

"The elder brother-in-law will never look at our faces again."

"Then he won't look at mine either."

"That may be, but we are very poor."

"I am no less poor; I will manage just fine."

"People will mock the elder brother-in-law over this."

"Even so, I will not let you be punished for my sake."

"But sister, this punishment isn't for your sake; it is for our own sins."

"What sins of yours?"

"We were the ones who gave you the news."

"If I wanted to know the news, is giving it a crime?"

"Giving it without informing the master is a crime."

"Then it is settled. You have committed a crime, and so have I. We will suffer the consequences together."

"Very well, then I will order a palanquin for you. The elder brother-in-law has ordered that you are not to be stopped. Let me help you pack your things now. Look at you, sweating over all this!"

The two of them began packing.

Just then, the squeak of shoes was heard approaching from outside. Motir Ma dashed away.

Entering the room, Madhusudan declared, "Barobou, you cannot go."

"Why can I not go?"

"Because I command it."

"Very well, then I won't go. Tell me, what is your next command?"

"Stop packing your things."

"There, I have stopped." Saying this, Kumu stood up and walked out of the room. Madhusudan called out, "Listen, listen to me."

Kumu returned immediately and said, "What is it?"

He had nothing particular to say. Yet, thinking for a moment, he said, "I have brought rings for you."

"The ring I needed, you forbade me to wear. I have no need for any other rings."

"Just take a look at them."

One by one, Madhusudan opened the boxes and showed them to her. Kumu did not say a single word.

"You may wear whichever of these you prefer."

"I will wear whichever one you command me to."

"I think all three would look beautiful on three of your fingers."

"Command it, and I will wear all three."

"Let me put them on you."

"Put them on."

Madhusudan slipped them onto her fingers. Kumu asked, "Are there any other commands?"

"Barobou, why are you so angry?"

"I am not angry in the slightest," Kumu said, and once again left the room.

Restless, Madhusudan called out, "Ah, where are you going? Listen to me, listen."

Kumu returned instantly. "What is it?"

He couldn't think of what to say. Madhusudan's face turned red. Overwhelmed by frustration, he blurted out, "Fine, go!" Then, angrily, he added, "Give them back, give the rings back."

Without a moment's hesitation, Kumu took off the three rings and placed them on the side table.

"Get out!" Madhusudan snapped.

Kumu left immediately.

This time, Madhusudan made a firm vow that he would indeed go to the office. By then, the working hours were nearly over. The English employees had all left to play tennis. The senior clerks were getting ready to leave. Arriving at the office at such an hour, Madhusudan plunged into his work with fierce intensity. Six o'clock struck, then seven, then eight; only then did he close his ledgers and stand up.

CHAPTER 37

Until today, not a single thread in the fabric of Madhusudan's routine had ever snapped. Every moment of his everyday life was bound by rigid rules. Today, an element of uncertainty had suddenly thrown everything into chaos. As he headed home from the office, exactly how the night would unfold remained entirely uncertain. Madhusudan entered the house with apprehension and ate his dinner in silence. After eating, he couldn't muster the courage to go straight to the bedroom. First, he paced the southern veranda outside for a while. When the clock struck nine—his bedtime—he finally went to the inner quarters. Today he had made a firm resolve: he would get into bed at the proper time, and nothing would alter that. Entering the empty bedroom, he lifted the mosquito net and threw himself onto the bed. But sleep refused to come. The deeper the night grew, the more the starving beast inside him slowly crept out into the darkness. Now there was no one to chase it away; the guards of his mind were all exhausted.

The clock struck one, and there was not a trace of sleep in his eyes. Unable to bear it any longer, he got out of bed and began wondering where Kumu might be. There were strict orders for Banku the lamp-servant; the lamp room was securely locked with a padlock. He checked the roof; no one was there. Slipping off his shoes, he walked softly along the ground-floor veranda. Pausing in front of Motir Ma's room, he thought he heard the murmur of conversation. Perhaps, since they are leaving tomorrow, the husband and wife are consulting each other. He stood silently outside, pressing his ear to the door. Two voices were humming in quiet conversation. The words were indistinct, but he could clearly tell both voices belonged to women. So, on the eve of separation, Kumu is sharing her deepest thoughts with Motir Ma. Filled with rage and frustration, he wanted to kick the door open and create a scene. But where was Nabin? Surely outside somewhere.

On the slatted pathway leading from the inner quarters to the outer wing, a dim lantern was burning. As Madhusudan reached the spot, he saw Shyama standing there, wrapped in a red shawl. Feeling embarrassed at being caught by her, Madhusudan grew angry. He snapped, "What are you doing here so late at night?"

Shyama replied, "I was sleeping. I heard footsteps outside and got scared. I thought perhaps—"

Madhusudan scolded her, "I see your audacity is growing. Don't try to play games with me, I'm warning you. Go to sleep."

For the past few days, Shyama Sundari had been gradually expanding the boundaries of her boldness. Today she realized she had stepped out of line at the wrong time and the wrong place. Putting on an extremely pitiful expression, she looked at Madhusudan once, then turned her face away, pulling her sari over her eyes to wipe them. Making as if to leave, she turned back and said, "I won't play games, Thakurpo. But from what I can see, sleep refuses to come to my eyes either. We didn't just arrive today; ours is a relationship of so many years—how can we bear to see this?" With that, Shyama walked briskly away.

Madhusudan stood silently for a moment, then headed toward the outer rooms. He ran straight into the night watchman, who had just set out on his patrol. The web of rules he had spun was so rigid that he couldn't even roam his own house in secret. The perimeter of vigilant eyes was everywhere. The Raja Bahadur leaving his bed late at night, walking barefoot in the dark along the outer veranda like a ghost—this was absolutely unprecedented! At first, unable to recognize him from a distance, the watchman had called out, "Kaun hai?" (Who goes there?). Coming closer, he bit his tongue, bowed deeply, and said, "Raja Bahadur, do you have any orders?"

Madhusudan said, "I just came to see if everything is running properly." For Madhusudan, such an explanation was not entirely implausible.

Then, entering the outer sitting room, Madhusudan saw exactly what he had expected: Nabin was fast asleep on the mattress, hugging a bolster. Madhusudan lit a gas lamp in the room, but even that didn't wake Nabin. He had to shove him before Nabin started and sat up in a panic. Without demanding any explanation, Madhusudan ordered, "Go at once. Tell the elder bride I have summoned her to the bedroom." Saying this, he immediately returned to the inner quarters.

A short while later, Kumu entered the bedroom. Madhusudan gazed at her face. She was wearing a simple white sari with a red border. The edge of the sari was drawn over her head. In the dim light of this secluded room, what a wondrous apparition she was! Kumu went and sat on the sofa at the far end of the room.

Madhusudan immediately went and sat on the floor, right at her feet. Shrinking back, Kumu tried to stand up hurriedly, but Madhusudan caught her hand and pulled her back down. "Do not get up," he said. "Listen to me. Forgive me, I have been at fault."

Seeing this unexpected humility from Madhusudan, Kumu was left astounded. Madhusudan continued, "I will tell Nabin and the middle bride not to go to Rajabpur. They will remain here to serve you."

Kumu couldn't think of what to say. Madhusudan thought, By lowering my own pride, I will soothe the elder bride's hurt pride. Holding her hand, he pleaded, "I will be right back. Promise me you won't leave."

Kumu said, "No, I won't go."

Madhusudan went downstairs. When Madhusudan was petty and harsh, it wasn't so difficult for Kumudini to deal with him. But today, this humility, this self-abasement—Kumu had no idea how to respond to it. The gift of her heart that she had brought with her had all slipped and fallen away; she could not simply pick it up from the dust and make do. Once again, she began praying to her deity, "Priyah priyaaarhasi deva sodhum" (As a lover bears with his beloved, so should You, O Lord, bear with me).

A little later, Madhusudan returned, bringing Nabin and Motir Ma before Kumu. Addressing them, he said, "I told you yesterday to go to Rajabpur, but there is no need for that. From tomorrow, I am appointing you both to serve the elder bride."

Hearing this, both of them were stunned. Firstly, they had never expected such a reversal of orders; secondly, what was the urgent need to drag them out of bed so late at night just to say this?

Madhusudan's patience could wait no longer. Tonight, he could afford no stinginess or hesitation in employing whatever means necessary to turn Kumu's heart. Never in his life had he compromised his own dignity like this. To get what he wanted, he paid the most painfully exorbitant price possible for him. In his own language, he made Kumu understand: I admit defeat before you without hesitation.

Now a deep apprehension gripped Kumu's mind. She began wondering, How am I to accept this? What do I have to give in return? When obstacles arise in life from

the outside, one finds the strength to fight, and the deity Himself becomes an ally. But when that external opposition suddenly ceases, the war stops, yet peace refuses to come. That is when one's own internal resistance emerges. Kumu suddenly realized that when Madhusudan was arrogant, dealing with him, though unpleasant, was simple; but now that Madhusudan had become humble, interacting with him became incredibly difficult for Kumu. Now she could no longer hide behind her aggrieved pride, her refuge in the lamp room was gone; now there was no meaning in folding her hands in prayer to her deity.

If Kumu could have somehow kept Motir Ma back on some pretext, she would have been saved. But Nabin left, and the bewildered Motir Ma slowly followed him. Pausing at the door, Motir Ma cast a sidelong, anxious glance at Kumudini's face. Who will save this girl from her husband's favors now?

Madhusudan asked, "Barobou, won't you change your clothes and come to bed?"

Kumu slowly got up, went into the adjacent bathroom, and locked the door—she wanted to stretch her brief reprieve for as long as she could. There was a stool near the wall in that room; she sat on it. Her anxious body seemed to be searching for a hiding place within itself. Madhusudan periodically glanced at the wall clock, calculating how much time was needed to change clothes. In the meantime, he looked at his face in the mirror; he took a brush and vainly flattened the coarse hair that stood up awkwardly at the crown of his head, and poured a generous amount of lavender water onto his clothes.

Fifteen minutes passed; that was ample time to change. Madhusudan quietly stood near the bathroom door and listened—there was no sound of movement inside. He thought Kumu might be arranging her hair, busy making a bun. Madhusudan had a rough idea that women loved to dress up, so he had to be patient. Half an hour passed. Madhusudan pressed his ear to the door again—still no sound. Returning to his armchair, he sat down and stared at the English painting hanging on the wall opposite the bed. Suddenly, jumping up, he stood at the locked door and called out, "Barobou, are you still not done?"

A moment later, the door slowly opened. Kumudini emerged as if walking in a dream. She was wearing the exact same clothes she had gone in with; this was not nightwear. She wore a brown serge jacket with nearly full sleeves, and the edge of a red-bordered, almond-colored shawl was pulled over her head. Resting her left

hand on a door panel, she stood there, seemingly hesitant—a breathtaking portrait! On her flawless, fair wrist was a plain gold bangle with crocodile-head clasps—an antique design—perhaps it had once belonged to her mother. The way this thick, heavy bangle bestowed the dignity of wealth upon her delicate arm felt so natural to her that the ornament added not a single note of ostentation to her body. Madhusudan seemed to look at her with fresh eyes. He was once again struck with wonder by her majesty. He couldn't help but feel that all the wealth he had amassed over his life had finally found its true grace. Compared to most people he interacted with daily, Madhusudan was accustomed to feeling vastly superior in the glory of his wealth. Yet today, seeing this girl standing quietly by the bedroom door in the gaslight, Madhusudan felt that he did not have enough wealth—he felt that only if he were an Emperor, a supreme ruler of the world, would she truly belong in this room. He could almost visibly perceive her intrinsic nature, nurtured from birth within a pure, aristocratic lineage—it was as if she stood there claiming the vast, ancient eras that preceded her birth. Not just anyone from the outside could enter there—that was where Bipradas resided with his natural, inherent right; he too was always enveloped in the same self-forgetful, effortless glory as Kumu.

This was the one thing Madhusudan could never tolerate. There was not a trace of arrogance in Bipradas, only a distance. It seemed impossible that even the closest relative could suddenly come up, pat him on the back, and say, "Hey there, how are you?" The way Madhusudan felt mentally diminished before Bipradas infuriated him. For that exact same subtle reason, Madhusudan could not assert his force over Kumu—in his own household, where his right to rule was supreme, it was here that he felt most utterly defeated. Yet here, he felt no anger—his attraction to Kumu only intensified with an irresistible force. Seeing Kumu today, Madhusudan clearly understood that she had not come prepared—she was standing behind an invisible barrier. But how beautiful! What a radiant purity, what whiteness! It was like a pristine dawn breaking over an isolated, snow-capped peak.

Taking a step closer, Madhusudan said softly, "Aren't you coming to bed, Barobou?"

Kumu was surprised. She had been certain Madhusudan would be angry, that he would hurl insults at her. Suddenly, a deeply familiar tone echoed in her memory—the tender voice her father used when calling her mother "Barobou." And with it,

she remembered how her mother would block her father from approaching and walk away. In an instant, her eyes brimmed with tears. Sinking to the floor at Madhusudan's feet, she cried out, "Please forgive me."

Madhusudan quickly took her hands, lifted her up, sat her on the chair, and said, "What fault have you committed that I should forgive you?"

Kumu said, "My mind is not yet ready. Please give me a little time."

Madhusudan's mind hardened. He said, "Explain to me, what do you need time for?"

"I cannot say it exactly; it is hard to explain to anyone—"

The softness drained from Madhusudan's voice. He said, "It is not hard at all. You mean to say you do not like me."

Kumu was in a bind. The statement was true, yet not true. She had vowed to offer the devotion of her heart, but that offering had not yet arrived. Her mind told her that if he just waited a little, if he didn't obstruct the path, it would arrive; it wouldn't even take that long. Yet, she had to admit that the offering tray was still empty.

Kumu said, "I am telling you this because I do not want to deceive you. Just give me a little time."

Madhusudan was growing increasingly impatient. He snapped, "What good will giving you time do! You want to consult your Dada before you live as a wife!"

This was Madhusudan's firm belief. He thought everything Kumu did was pending Bipradas's instructions. Whatever her Dada dictated, she would do. In a mocking tone, he said, "Your Dada is your Guru!"

Kumudini instantly stood up from the floor and said, "Yes, my Dada is my Guru."

"And without his orders, you won't change your clothes today or come to bed! Is that it?"

Clenching her fists, Kumudini stood stiff as a board.

"Then let me send a telegram and get his orders—it is getting late."

Without replying, Kumu walked toward the door leading to the roof.

Madhusudan roared and scolded her, "I'm telling you, do not go."

Kumu immediately stopped, turned around, and said, "Tell me what you want."

"Change your clothes and come here immediately." Checking his watch, he added, "I am giving you five minutes."

Kumu immediately went into the bathroom, changed her clothes, wrapped a thick shawl over her sari, and returned. Now she awaited his second command. Looking at her, Madhusudan understood perfectly well that this, too, was battle armor. His anger flared, but he couldn't think of what to do. Even in the face of intense rage, Madhusudan retained his calculating pragmatism; so he checked himself. He asked, "Tell me, what do you want to do now?"

"I will do whatever you say."

Frustrated, Madhusudan slumped into the chair. Looking at the girl wrapped in the shawl, she seemed to him the very image of a widow—as if a silent ocean of death lay between him and her husband. One could not cross this ocean by roaring at it. What wind must catch the sails for the boat to float? Will it ever float?

He sat in silence. Apart from the ticking of the clock, there was not a sound in the room. Kumudini did not leave the room—turning back toward the darkness of the open roof, she stood motionless like a painting. The slurred, singing voice of a drunkard could be heard from the street corner, and in a neighbor's stable, a puppy had been tied up—its relentless whining was muddying the peace of the night.

Time seemed to gape open like a bottomless, empty pit. The wheels of Madhusudan's worldly machinery seemed to have ground to a halt. Tomorrow he had a mountain of work at the office, a directors' meeting—he had to cleverly push through several difficult proposals despite much opposition. All those urgent matters felt like mere shadows to him today. In the past, he would have jotted down tomorrow's itinerary in his notebook tonight. All other thoughts vanished; the only hard, certain truth in the universe was that girl covered in a shawl, standing silently at the threshold, ready to leave the room. After a long while, Madhusudan let out a deep sigh, and the room seemed to jolt out of its meditation. Rising quickly from the chair, he approached Kumu and said, "Barobou, is your heart made of stone?"

That word, Barobou, worked like a magic spell on Kumu's mind. The resonance of her mother's life suddenly flared brightly within her. How often and how easily her mother had answered to this call; that habit seemed to run in Kumu's own blood. Thus, she turned around in a flash. With deep anguish, Madhusudan said, "I am unworthy of you, but will you not show me mercy?"

Kumu hastily cried out, "Shame! Do not say such things." Kneeling to touch the dust of Madhusudan's feet, she said, "I am your servant. Command me."

Taking her by the hands, Madhusudan lifted her and pressed her to his chest. "No, I will not command you. Come to me of your own free will."

Kumudini gasped in Madhusudan's embrace. But she made no effort to free herself. In a choked voice, Madhusudan repeated, "No, I will not command you, yet you must come to me." With that, he let Kumudini go.

Kumudini's fair face had turned flushed. Lowering her eyes, she said, "If you command me, my duty becomes easier. I cannot think and act on my own."

"Alright, then take off that shawl you are wearing—I cannot bear to look at it."

Hesitantly, Kumudini took off the shawl. She was wearing a striped sari with a narrow border. The black stripes cascading around Kumudini's slender figure looked like streams of flowing lines—they didn't seem stationary, but perpetually moving—as if a dark, restless gaze were circling her body, leaving traces of its ceaseless motion, unable to find an end. Madhusudan was mesmerized; yet, in that very moment, he couldn't help but notice that this sari was not given by his house. No matter how beautiful it looked on Kumudini, its monetary value was trivial, and it belonged to her father's house. In the dressing room attached to the bathroom stood a massive mahogany wardrobe with mirrored doors—stuffed with various expensive clothes even before the wedding. She had no greed for them—such was the girl's pride! He remembered those three rings; Kumu had rejected them with unbearable indifference, yet how fiercely she clung to that wretched sapphire ring! What a difference in value Kumu placed on the affection of Bipradas compared to Madhusudan! The moment she took off the shawl, all these thoughts hit Madhusudan with the force of a sudden gale. But alas, how beautiful, how astonishingly beautiful she was! And this haughty disdain, it too seemed like an ornament on her. Only a girl like this could truly despise wealth. Born magnificent

in her natural grace—she didn't have to calculate the price of wealth, didn't have to keep accounts—with what could Madhusudan ever tempt her!

Madhusudan said, "Go, go to bed."

Kumu looked at his face—her silent question was, Will you not go to bed first?

In a firm voice, Madhusudan repeated, "Go, do not delay." When Kumu got into the bed, Madhusudan sat on the sofa and said, "I will remain sitting right here. I will only come if you call me. I am willing to wait year after year."

Kumu's entire body went numb—what a trial this was for her! At whose door could she beat her head today? The deity had not answered her. The path by which she had arrived here was entirely the wrong path. Sitting on the bed, she silently told herself, "Lord, You can never deceive me; I will still place my faith in You. It was You who brought Dhruva to the forest, just so You could reveal Yourself to him there."

There was no other sound in that silent room; the drunkard at the street corner could no longer be heard; only that captive dog, though exhausted, let out occasional howls.

A short time felt like an eternity; the heavy, silent hours seemed unable to move. Was this the picture of her conjugal life for all eternity? Two people sitting silently on opposite shores—a night with no end—and an insurmountable silence between them! Finally, mustering all her strength, Kumu got out of bed and said, "Do not make me the guilty one."

In a deep voice, Madhusudan said, "Tell me what you want. What must be done?" He wanted to wring the final word out of her.

Kumu said, "Come to bed."

But could this truly be called a victory?

CHAPTER 38

The next morning, when Motir Ma brought a bowl of milk for Kumu, she found Kumu's eyes red and swollen, her face the color of ash. In the morning, she had expected to find Kumu sitting in her usual corner of the roof, facing east for her mental worship. But today she was not there; she was sitting on the floor of the small, covered terrace at the top of the stairs, leaning exhaustedly against the wall. It seemed today she was angry with her Lord. When a cruel father beats an innocent child for no reason, the child cannot comprehend it; hurt, they absorb the blows, their pride sealing their lips from even attempting a protest. Today, Kumu felt exactly like that toward her deity. The call she had accepted as divine destiny—was it to end in this impurity, this internal loss of chastity? Did the Lord lure His prey here simply because He demanded a female sacrifice? Would He accept as His offering this mere lump of flesh devoid of a soul? Today, no devotion awakened within her. All these days, Kumu had repeatedly prayed, Bear with me—today, her rebellious mind asked, How am I to bear with You? With what face can I offer You worship? Instead of accepting Your devotee Yourself, You sold her in a slave market—a market where girls are sold at the price of meat and fish, where no one waits with reverence to receive the sacred offering, where goats are let loose to graze upon the flower garden.

When Motir Ma urged her to drink the milk, Kumu said, "Leave it."

Motir Ma asked, "Why? Why should I leave it? What crime has my bowl of milk committed?"

Kumu said, "I haven't bathed yet; I haven't done my puja."

Motir Ma replied, "You go and bathe. I will wait."

Kumu returned after her bath. Motir Ma thought she would now go and sit in the corner of the open roof. Out of habit, Kumu took a step toward the roof for a moment, but stopped. She returned and sat back down on the floor. Her mind was not ready.

Kumu asked Motir Ma, "Has no letter arrived from Dada?"

Thinking it highly likely that a letter had arrived, Motir Ma had secretly gone to the office room very early that morning. But when she tried to pull the letter drawer,

she found it locked with a key. Thus, from now on, the path of committing robbery on top of theft was blocked.

Motir Ma said, "I can't say for sure. I will inquire and see."

Just then, Shyama suddenly appeared and said, "Bou, you look so withered; you're not ill, are you?"

Kumu said, "No."

"You must be missing your home. Ah, that is only natural. Well, your brother is coming, you will see him."

Kumu startled and looked at Shyama's face with eager, anxious eyes.

Motir Ma asked, "Where did you get this news, Bakul-flower?"

"Just listen to her! Everyone knows this. Parvati from our kitchen said that a clerk from her father's house came to see the Raja Bahadur to inquire about the bride. She heard from him that the bride's brother is coming to Calcutta within a day or two for medical treatment."

Anxious, Kumu asked, "Has his illness worsened?"

"I couldn't say. But it must not be anything too worrying, or I would have heard."

Shyama had realized that Madhusudan had not given Kumu the news about her brother, fearing that the bride, whose heart he hadn't yet won, might become even more distracted and home-bound. Poking at Kumu's emotions, she added, "I hear from everyone that there is no man quite like your brother. Come, Bakul-flower, it's getting late; we have to issue the pantry supplies. If the cooking for the office meals is delayed, there will be trouble."

Pushing the bowl of milk toward Kumu once more, Motir Ma said, "Sister, the milk is getting cold. Please drink it, be a dear."

This time, Kumu did not object to drinking the milk.

Motir Ma whispered in her ear, "Will you go to the pantry today?"

Kumu said, "Let it be for today—just send Gopal to me for a while."

A dark, harsh, ravenous senility was devouring Kumu from the outside like the eclipse-demon Rahu. A mature age that is calm, soothing, pure, and deeply grave is one thing; but an age that is salivating, whose power of restraint has slackened, whose concept of love is akin to material greed—it was the sweaty touch of that age that filled Kumu with such intense revulsion. Kumu had no regrets that her husband was older, but that his age had forgotten its own dignity is what tormented her so much. Total self-surrender is like a fruit; it ripens in the freedom of light and air. You cannot ripen a raw fruit by crushing it in a mill. Because it found no time, their relationship was crushing Kumu today, humiliating her. Where could she run! When she told Motir Ma to send Gopal to her, she was searching for that escape route—from polluted senility to pure, fresh innocence; from toxic fumes to the breeze of a flower garden.

Wearing a thin, cotton-stuffed printed shirt, Hablu came and stood timidly near the door by the stairs. He had large, dark eyes just like his mother's, the same rich, dusky complexion like a rain-filled cloud, chubby cheeks, and a nearly shaven head.

Kumu got up, pulled the hesitant Hablu to her, and hugged him to her chest. "Naughty boy, why didn't you come these past two days?" she asked.

Wrapping his arms around Kumu's neck, Hablu whispered in her ear, "Aunt, guess what I brought for you?"

Kissing his cheek, Kumu said, "You have brought a jewel, Gopal."

"It's in my pocket."

"Alright, take it out then."

"You couldn't guess."

"I have no brains. I can't even understand what I see with my own eyes, and what I don't see, I misunderstand even more."

Very slowly, Hablu pulled a small brown-paper packet from his pocket, placed it on Kumu's lap, and prepared to run away.

"No, I won't let you run away."

Pressing his hand over the packet, Hablu said anxiously, "Then don't look at it now."

"No, don't worry. I will open it after you leave."

"Say, Aunt, have you ever seen the Jataiburi (the old witch with matted hair)?"

"Who knows, perhaps I have, but it takes time to recognize her."

"She comes riding on the back of a bat in the evening, near the coal room by the ground-floor courtyard."

"Riding on the back of a bat, does she!"

"If she wants, she can become very, very tiny, almost invisible to the eye."

"I must learn that spell from her."

"Why, Aunt?"

"So that if I ever try to hide in the coal room to escape, they won't be able to see me."

Hablu couldn't understand the meaning behind this. He said, "She's hidden a box of vermilion (sindoor) inside the coal. Do you know where she got that vermilion from?"

"I think I might."

"Alright, tell me."

"From inside the early morning clouds."

Hablu paused. That made him think. His special informant had told him it was from a demon's fortress across the ocean. But his aunt's version sounded plausible, so without arguing, he said, "The girl who finds that box and puts a dot of that vermilion on her forehead will become a Queen."

"Heavens! Has some unfortunate girl found out about this?"

"Sejo-pisima's (third aunt's) daughter, Khudi, knows. When Chhannu goes to fetch coal with his basket in the morning, Khudi goes with him every day—she isn't scared at all."

"She is just a child, so she has no fear of becoming a Queen either."

A cold north wind was blowing outside, so Kumu took Motilal into her room and sat him on her lap on the sofa. On the adjacent side table, a small silver tray held winter flowers—marigolds, jasmine, balsams, hibiscus. The gardener picked these

flowers daily for the daily supply. They were waiting for Kumu to sit in the corner of the roof, facing the sunrise, to offer them to her deity. Today, picking up the tray with its unoffered flowers, she held it out to Hablu and asked, "Will you take the flowers?"

"Yes, I will."

"What will you do with them?"

"I'll play puja-puja."

Kumu had a silk handkerchief tucked into her waist; she tied the flowers in it, kissed him, and said, "Here, take it." In her mind, she thought, My puja-puja play is also over. She asked, "Gopal, tell me, which of these flowers do you like the most?"

Hablu said, "The hibiscus."

"Shall I tell you why you like the hibiscus?"

"Tell me."

"Because before dawn broke, it stole the color from Jataiburi's vermilion box."

Hablu sat looking grave for a moment, thinking. Suddenly, he blurted out, "Aunt, the color of the hibiscus is exactly like the red border of your sari." With that, everything on his mind had been said.

Just then, Madhusudan suddenly appeared behind them. No footsteps had been heard. This was not the time for him to be in the inner quarters. This was the time when all the leftover, secondary tasks of his business gathered in the outer office; brokers came, job-seekers came, the secretary arrived with all sorts of miscellaneous news and paperwork. The rush of these peripheral tasks was no less than his actual work.

CHAPTER 39

Like a beggar whose sack has gathered only chaff and no rice, Madhusudan had gone out this morning in a very foul mood. But the pull of dissatisfaction is fiercely potent. It draws one back precisely to the source of the obstruction.

The moment he saw him, Hablu's face went dry; his heart trembled, and he tried to run away. Kumu held him tight, refusing to let him get up.

Madhusudan noticed this. Scolding Hablu harshly, he said, "What are you doing here? Aren't you going to study?"

Hablu didn't have the courage to say that it wasn't time for the tutor to arrive yet—accepting the scolding in silence, he lowered his head, slowly got up, and began to walk away.

Kumu, about to try and stop him, paused. She said, "You left your flowers behind, won't you take them?" She held out the knotted handkerchief to him. Hablu didn't take it; he stared fearfully at his uncle's face.

Madhusudan quickly snatched the bundle from Kumu's hand and asked, "Whose handkerchief is this?"

In an instant, Kumu's face flushed red. She said, "Mine."

There was no doubt that the handkerchief belonged entirely to Kumu—it was property from before her marriage. The silk embroidery on its border was Kumu's own handiwork.

Taking the flowers out and throwing them on the floor, Madhusudan shoved the handkerchief into his pocket. He said, "I'll take this—what will a child do with it? Go on, get out."

Kumu was utterly stunned by Madhusudan's rudeness. With a pained face, Hablu left; Kumu said nothing.

Observing the expression on her face, Madhusudan remarked, "You've opened a charity house, but do you only withhold your gifts when it comes to me? This handkerchief is mine; it will remind me that I received something from you."

The very nature of Madhusudan's character created obstacles to getting what he wanted.

Lowering her eyes, Kumu sat silently at the edge of the sofa. The red border of her sari framed her head and cascaded down around her face, along with her damp, loose hair. A single gold necklace encircled the flawless softness of her neck. This necklace belonged to her mother, so she wore it constantly. She hadn't put on her blouse yet; she wore only a chemise beneath. Her arms were bare, resting still on her lap. Those exceedingly delicate, fair arms seemed to exude the silent eloquence of her entire body. With downcast eyes, Madhusudan gazed at the proud girl, unable to tear his eyes away from those two arms adorned with thick gold bangles. Sitting beside her on the sofa, he tried to pull one of her hands toward him—and felt a distinct resistance. Kumu didn't want to move her hand—beneath it lay a paper packet.

Madhusudan asked, "What is wrapped in that paper?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know? What does that mean?"

"It means I don't know."

Madhusudan did not believe her. He said, "Give it to me, let me see."

Kumu said, "It is my secret thing; I cannot show it."

A sharp, arrow-like anger shot to Madhusudan's head in an instant. He said, "What! Such audacity!" With that, he forcefully snatched the paper packet and tore it open—only to see it was nothing but a few cardamom drops. From the cheap snacks allotted for Hablu by his mother, this was probably the most tempting treat for him—which is why he had so proudly wrapped it and brought it to her.

Madhusudan was astonished! What was the meaning of this? He assumed that Kumu was accustomed to such cheap snacks at her father's house—so she had them secretly brought to her, too ashamed to admit it. He laughed inwardly, thinking: It takes time to learn to accept the gifts of the Goddess of Wealth. A sudden plan flashed in his mind. He got up quickly and went outside.

Kumu then opened her drawer, took out a small, square sandalwood box, placed the cardamom drops inside it, and sat down to write a letter to her brother. She had barely written two or four lines when Madhusudan entered the room. Quickly covering the letter, Kumu sat rigidly. In Madhusudan's hands was a fruit bowl with a handle, adorned with intricate enamel work in silver and gold, covered with an embroidered, fragrant silk handkerchief. Smiling, he placed it on the desk in front of Kumu and said, "Open it and look."

Lifting the handkerchief, Kumu saw that the expensive fruit bowl was filled to the brim with cardamom drops. Had she been alone, she would have burst out laughing. Without a word, Kumu remained grave and silent. Laughing would have been better than this.

Madhusudan said, "What is the need to eat cardamom drops in secret? What is there to be ashamed of! I will have them brought for you every day—how much do you want? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

Kumu said, "You will not be able to get what I want."

"I won't be able to! You astound me."

"No, you will not be able to."

"Is its price impossibly high?"

"Yes, it cannot be bought with money."

Hearing this, a suspicion immediately sprang into Madhu's mind. He asked, "Did your brother send it to you via parcel?"

Kumu felt no desire to answer this question. Pushing the fruit bowl aside, she stood up to leave. Madhusudan grabbed her hand and forced her to sit back down.

Without letting Madhusudan speak, Kumu asked him, "Did someone from Dada's house come to you for news of him?"

Realizing that Kumu had already heard about this, Madhu felt intensely annoyed. He said, "That is exactly the news I came to give you this morning." Needless to say, this was a lie.

"When is Dada coming?"

"Within a week or so."

Madhu knew for a fact that Bipradas was arriving tomorrow; by using the phrase "a week or so," he deliberately kept the news vague.

"Has Dada's health worsened?"

"No, I haven't heard anything like that."

There was a slight evasion in this statement too. Bipradas was coming to Calcutta specifically for medical treatment—which meant his health was, at the very least, not good.

"Has a letter from Dada arrived?"

"I haven't opened the letterbox yet. If there is one, I will send it to you."

Kumu had not yet begun to completely distrust Madhusudan, so she accepted this statement too.

"Will you please check if Dada's letter has arrived?"

"If it has, I will bring it to you myself at noon, after lunch."

Suppressing her impatience, Kumu silently agreed. Then, just as Madhusudan was about to pull Kumu's hand toward him again, Shyama suddenly entered the room and exclaimed, "Oh my, Brother-in-law is here!" She immediately prepared to leave.

Madhusudan demanded, "Why, what do you want?"

"I came to call the bride to the pantry. She may be a Queen, but she is still the Goddess of the Household; but never mind for today." Madhusudan got up from the sofa and, without a word, quickly left the room.

After lunch, reclining against the bolster on the bed as usual, chewing on a betel leaf, Madhusudan sent for Kumu. Kumu came quickly. She knew she would receive her brother's letter today. Entering the bedroom, she stood beside the bed.

Putting down the hookah pipe and gesturing beside him, Madhusudan said, "Sit."

Kumu sat. The letter Madhusudan handed her contained only these few words:

To the Idol of my Life,

May countless blessings be upon you.

I am coming to Calcutta soon for medical treatment. Once I recover, I will come to see you. If you send me news of your well-being occasionally, whenever your household duties permit, I shall remain free from anxiety.

Receiving only this tiny, brief letter, Kumu initially felt a shock. She told herself, "I have become a stranger to him." But before the hurt pride could take hold, another thought arose: "Perhaps Dada is truly unwell. What a petty mind I have! I think of myself first and foremost."

Madhusudan sensed that Kumu was about to get up. He said, "Where are you going, sit for a while."

He had asked Kumu to sit, but couldn't think of anything to say. He had to say something immediately, so the thought that had been bothering him since morning slipped out of his mouth. He asked, "Why did you make such a fuss over that cardamom drop business? What was there to be secretive about?"

"It is my secret."

"A secret! One you cannot even tell me?"

"No."

Madhusudan's voice hardened. He said, "This is your Nurnagari arrogance, learned in your Dada's school."

Kumu made no reply. Madhusudan left the bolster and sat upright. "If I cannot rid you of that arrogance, my name is not Madhusudan."

"What are your orders, tell me."

"Tell me who gave you that packet."

"Hablu."

"Hablu! Then why all the hiding?"

"I cannot say exactly."

"Did someone else send it through him?"

"No."

"Then?"

"That is all; there is nothing more to it."

"Then why the secrecy?"

"You would not understand."

Grabbing Kumu's arm and giving it a shake, Madhu said, "Your exaggerations are unbearable."

Kumu's face turned red. In a calm voice, she said, "Tell me clearly what it is you want. I admit I am not used to your ways."

The veins on Madhusudan's forehead swelled. Unable to think of a reply, he felt the urge to strike her. Just then, a throat cleared outside, followed by a voice: "The office 'sahib' has arrived and is waiting." He remembered the directors' meeting today. He felt ashamed that he had not prepared for it—the entire morning had been almost completely wasted. Such a gross dereliction of duty was so contrary to his nature and habits that he was astounded it had even occurred.

CHAPTER 40

As soon as Madhusudan left, Kumu got off the bed and sat on the floor. Would she have to spend her entire life swimming in an ocean that had no shore? Madhusudan was right; her ways were different from theirs. And of all the differences, this was the most unbearable. What was the way out?

Suddenly remembering something, Kumu headed downstairs toward Motir Ma's room. As she was descending the stairs, she saw Shyama Sundari coming up.

"Where to, Bou? I was just heading to your room."

"Is there something you need?"

"Nothing in particular. I noticed Thakurpo's temper was running a bit high, so I thought I'd ask you to find out where the snag hit in this new romance. Remember, Bou, we are the only ones who can advise you on how to get along with him. Heading to Bakul-flower's room, are you? Go on then, pour your heart out to her."

Today, it suddenly struck Kumu that Shyama Sundari and Madhusudan were fashioned from the same clay, on the same potter's wheel. It was hard to say why this thought entered her head. It wasn't that she had profoundly analyzed their characters, nor was there any striking physical resemblance; yet there was a rhyme to their attitudes, as if the same wind blew through Shyama Sundari's world as in Madhusudan's. Even when Shyama Sundari tried to act friendly, it pushed Kumu away; it made her skin crawl.

Entering Motir Ma's bedroom, Kumu saw Nabin and her playfully wrestling over something. She was about to turn back when Nabin called out, "Bou-didi, don't go, don't go! I was just coming to you with a complaint."

"A complaint about what?"

"Sit for a moment, let me tell you my tale of sorrow."

Kumu sat on the wooden cot.

Nabin said, "It is a great tyranny! This gentlewoman has hidden my book."

"Why such strict discipline?"

"Jealousy—because she herself cannot read English. I am in favor of female education, but she is opposed to the education of the husband-caste. As my intellect improves, it increasingly clashes with hers, hence her resentment. I have tried hard to explain to her: 'Even the great Sita walked behind Lord Ramachandra; do not obstruct me as I march far ahead of you in knowledge and wisdom.'"

"Goddess Saraswati knows all about your knowledge, but I'm warning you, don't come boasting about your wisdom," Motir Ma retorted.

Seeing Nabin's exaggerated expression of extreme peril, Kumu burst into a ringing laugh. Since arriving in this house, this was her first open, heartfelt laugh. This laugh sounded incredibly sweet to Nabin. In his mind, he told himself, "This is my task; I will make Bou-rani laugh."

Still laughing, Kumu asked, "Why, sister, why have you hidden Thakurpo's book?"

"Look at this, sister—is her schoolmaster sitting in the bedroom? After working hard all day, I come to the room at night to find an oil lamp burning, and alongside it a lantern with a shade, and the great scholar has sat down to study. The food gets cold, I call him over and over, but he pays no heed."

"Is this true, Thakurpo?"

"Bou-rani, I am not such a great ascetic that I don't love food, but I love her sweet, nagging calls even more. That is precisely why I deliberately delay eating; reading the book is just an excuse."

"I admit defeat to him in words."

"And I admit defeat when she stops talking altogether."

"Does that ever happen, Thakurpo?"

"Shall I give a couple of very fresh examples then? They are written in my memory in bright letters of tears."

"Alright, alright, you don't need to give examples. Now tell me where my keys are. Look, sister, he has hidden my keys."

"I can't exactly file a police case against my own family member, so I have to discipline a thief with theft. Give me my book first."

"I won't give it to you, I'm giving it to sister." From a basket in the corner of the room containing tangled silk, wool, fabric scraps, and torn socks, Motir Ma pulled out the second volume of a concise English Encyclopedia, placed it on Kumu's lap, and said, "Take it to your room, sister, don't give it to him; let's see how angry he gets with you."

Nabin retrieved the keys from atop the mosquito net frame, handed them to Kumu, and said, "Don't give them to anyone else, Bou-didi; let's see how anyone else behaves with you."

Flipping through the pages of the book, Kumu asked, "Is Thakurpo fond of this kind of book?"

"There is no book he isn't fond of. The other day, I saw him manage to get his hands on a book about cow-rearing and sit down to read it."

"I don't read that to protect my own health, so there is no reason to be ashamed of it."

"Sister, you have something to say. If you want, I will dismiss this chatterbox right now."

"No, there is no need for that. I heard my Dada is arriving in a day or two."

Nabin said, "Yes, he is arriving tomorrow."

"Tomorrow!" Astounded, Kumu sat in silence for a moment. Sighing, she said, "How will I be able to see him."

Motir Ma asked, "Did you not say anything to the elder brother-in-law?"

Kumu shook her head, indicating 'no'.

Nabin asked, "Won't you try asking him once?"

Kumu remained silent. Speaking to Madhusudan about her brother was incredibly difficult. The insults directed at her brother hung poised to strike within her own room; she felt an unbearable reluctance to stir them up even slightly.

Seeing the expression on Kumu's face, Nabin's heart ached. He said, "Don't worry, Bou-didi, we will arrange everything. You won't have to say a word to anyone."

Since childhood, Nabin had harbored a deep terror of his elder brother. But today, the arrival of his Bou-didi seemed to shatter that fear from his mind!

After Kumu left, Motir Ma said to Nabin, "Tell me, how will you manage this? That night when your brother called us in and humiliated himself before the bride, I knew right then that it wouldn't end well. Ever since, he turns his face away whenever he sees you."

"Dada has realized he was cheated; in a fit of impulse, he emptied his purse and paid the price in advance, but the goods didn't match the weight. We were witnesses to his foolishness, which is why he cannot bear the sight of us."

Motir Ma said, "Be that as it may, but his anger toward Bipradas Babu seems to have gripped him like a madness, growing day by day. What kind of unnatural disaster is this!"

Nabin explained, "That is precisely how that man expresses his reverence. People of his breed outwardly attack the very person they inwardly acknowledge as superior. Some say Ravana had an extraordinary devotion to Rama, which is why he offered his worship with twenty hands. I am telling you, arranging a meeting between Dada and Bou-rani will not be easy."

"Saying that won't do; we must find a way."

"A way has come to my mind."

"Tell me what it is."

"I cannot say."

"Why not?"

"I feel ashamed."

"Ashamed, even before me?"

"Ashamed precisely before you."

"May I hear the reason?"

"I will have to trick Dada. There's no need for you to hear it."

"For the sake of the one I love, I don't feel the slightest hesitation in tricking someone."

"I suppose you've sharpened your tricking skills by practicing on me?"

"Where else would I find someone so perfectly suited to easily apply those skills on?"

"Madam, I hereby give you a signed contract: trick me whenever you please."

"Why so cheerful about it, may I ask?"

"Shall I tell you? The Creator has poured pure honey into all the methods He has given you women to trick men. That honey-filled trickery is what we call Maya (Illusion/Enchantment)."

"It's better to break free from that."

"Heavens! If Maya vanishes, what is left in the world? If you strip the paint off an idol, all that remains is straw and clay. O Goddess, enchant the fool, trick him, cast a spell over his eyes, intoxicate his mind—do whatever you please."

The conversation that followed had absolutely nothing to do with practical matters, and bears no connection to this story.

Chapter 41

This marked Madhusudan's first defeat at the meeting. Until now, no one had ever managed to overturn any of his proposals or arrangements. His colleagues had as much faith in him as he had in himself. Riding on this confidence, he would usually advance the groundwork for any crucial proposal long before it was formally finalized at the meeting. This time, he was arranging to purchase a leased estate belonging to an old indigo planter, intending to merge it with their own indigo business. Expenses had already been incurred. Almost everything was settled; all that remained was affixing the stamps to the deed, registering it, and paying the price. The men required for the operation had already been promised employment. And then, this sudden obstacle.

Recently, the position of treasurer had opened up in their company. A relative had been intensely lobbying for his son-in-law to get the job, but Madhusudan, having no interest in uplifting the incompetent, had turned a deaf ear. That buried grievance had now suddenly sprouted from the soil in the form of fierce opposition. There was a slight vulnerability in Madhusudan's plan, too. The owner of the estate was the nephew of Madhusudan's distant aunt. When the aunt practically fell at his feet, Madhusudan calculated that the property could be acquired at a bargain, yielding a good profit, while simultaneously allowing him the glory of playing the benevolent patron to his relatives.

The very man whose unworthy son-in-law was denied the treasurer position had, after much digging, unearthed this "proof" of Madhusudan's nepotism and broadcasted it in all the right places. Furthermore, he took it upon himself to whisper the false suspicion that Madhusudan secretly took commissions on all the company's transactions. Most people do not demand proof for such slander, for the greed lurking within their own hearts serves as the deepest and strongest witness. Poisoning people's minds was easy for one primary reason: Madhusudan's extraordinary prosperity and the unbearably flawless reputation of his character. Those hypocrites—whose minds longed to dive into the deep waters of vice like cormorants, but who lacked a pond of their own to do so—found immense solace in the accusation that Madhusudan, too, drank water on the sly.

Madhusudan had given the owner his final word. He was not a man to go back on his promise out of the fear of a loss. Therefore, he resolved to buy the estate himself, vowing to prove to the company that they were the ones who had lost out by not purchasing it.

Madhusudan returned home late. He had developed a blind faith in his own luck, but today, a sudden fear gripped him—was the carriage of his life being shunted from one track of destiny to another? At the very first jolt, his heart hammered against his ribs. Returning from the meeting, he leaned back in the chair in his office room, his dark thoughts spiraling upwards along with the smoke rings from his hookah.

Nobin came in and announced that a messenger from Bipradas's house had arrived to see him.

Madhusudan jolted up and snapped, "Tell him to go away, I don't have time now."

Observing Madhusudan's demeanor, Nobin realized a disaster had occurred at the meeting. He understood his elder brother's mind was vulnerable right now. Weakness is inherently ungenerous; the wounded pride of the weak takes the form of unforgiving cruelty. Nobin had no doubt that his brother's bruised ego would seek to ruthlessly strike out at his sister-in-law, the Boro-bou. He had to prevent this blow, no matter what. Any hesitation he had harbored until now completely vanished.

After pacing about for a while, Nobin returned to the room to find his brother flipping through the pages of an address ledger. As soon as Nobin stood there, Madhusudan looked up and asked in a harsh voice, "What do you need now? Have you come to act as the lawyer for your Bipradas Babu?"

"No, Dada, there is no fear of that," Nobin replied. "Their man was chased away so fiercely that even if you send for him yourself, he won't step foot in this house again."

Even this was intolerable to Madhusudan. He flared up, "If I but wiggle my little finger, he'll have to fall at my feet! What did the man come for?"

"To inform you that Bipradas Babu's arrival in Kolkata has been delayed by two days. He will come once he recovers a bit more."

"Fine, fine, I'm in no rush for that."

Nobin said, "Dada, I need two hours of leave tomorrow morning."

"Why?"

"You'll be angry if you hear it."

"I'll be angrier if I don't."

"An astrologer has come from Kumbakonam. I want to get my fortune read by him."

Madhusudan's heart leaped; he felt a sudden urge to run to the astrologer immediately. But outwardly, he scolded, "You believe in that?"

"Not when things are normal, only when I'm scared."

"And what exactly are you scared of, pray tell?"

Nobin scratched his head, offering no reply.

“Tell me, who are you afraid of?”

“In this world, I fear no one but you. For the past few days, seeing your mood, my mind hasn't been at ease.”

The fact that the people of his household feared him like a tiger brought Madhusudan great satisfaction. Looking at Nobin's face, he silently and gravely puffed on his hookah, basking in his own majesty.

Nobin continued, “That is why I want to know clearly what the planets intend to do with me. And until when they might grant me a reprieve.”

“An atheist like you, who believes in nothing, suddenly at the end—”

“If I had faith in the gods, I wouldn't believe in the planets, Dada. He who does not respect the doctor has no qualms about respecting the quack.”

With an eagerness to have his own stars checked, matching the sharpness in his voice, Madhusudan retorted, “An educated monkey, that's what your learning amounts to? You believe whatever anyone says?”

“The man possesses the Bhrigu Samhita—whoever is born, in whatever era, past or future, their entire horoscope is already prepared, written in Sanskrit. There's no arguing with that. Come see it tested firsthand.”

“To feed the charlatans who prey on fools, the Creator makes sure to create plenty of fools like you.”

“And to save those fools, He creates intelligent men like you. His mercy falls equally on the one who strikes and the one who is struck. Why don't you apply your sharp intellect to the Bhrigu Samhita and see for yourself?”

“Alright, fine. Take me with you tomorrow morning. I'll see through your Kumbakonam trickery.”

“With your strong disbelief, Dada, the calculations might get muddled. In this world, we see that if you trust people, they become trustworthy. The planets are exactly the same. Look at the Englishmen—they don't believe in astrology, so the planets don't affect them. The other day, despite all the inauspicious omens, your Junior Sahib went to the races and won a bet. If it were me, winning the bet would be a distant dream; the horse would have bolted and kicked me in the stomach.

Dada, please don't apply your logic to the calculations of the stars and planets; keep a little faith in your heart."

Pleased, Madhusudan smiled faintly and returned his attention to his hookah.

By seven o'clock the next morning, Madhusudan and Nobin navigated through the filth of a narrow alley and arrived at Venkat Shastri's lodgings. It was a dark, stuffy ground-floor room; the damp walls were scarred and peeling, as if afflicted by a terrible skin disease. A torn, dirty rug lay over a wooden cot, a haphazard pile of ancient manuscripts sat in one corner, and a picture of Shiva and Parvati hung on the wall.

Nobin called out, "Shastri-ji!"

A short, dark, painfully thin man with a shaved forehead, a tuft of hair at the back, and wearing a soiled, printed quilted jacket entered the room. Nobin offered him a highly exaggerated, reverential bow. Looking at his appearance, Madhusudan felt not a shred of devotion—but knowing that the diviner had some intimate connection with the divine, he hastily and fearfully offered a half-hearted salute.

When Nobin placed Madhusudan's horoscope in front of the astrologer, he ignored it and asked to see Madhusudan's palm. Taking a pen and paper from a wooden box, he drew a celestial chart himself. Looking at Madhusudan's face, he uttered, "Pancham Barga [Fifth consonant group]."

Madhusudan understood nothing. The astrologer, counting on the joints of his fingers, recited the Sanskrit consonant groups: Ka-barga, Cha-barga, Ta-barga, Ta-barga, Pa-barga. This still did not clear Madhusudan's confusion.

The astrologer then said, "Pancham Barna [Fifth letter]." Madhusudan waited patiently in silence. The astrologer recited: Pa, Pha, Ba, Bha, Ma. From this, Madhusudan deduced only that the sage Bhrigu must have begun his treatise from the first chapter of a grammar book.

Just then, Venkat Shastri announced, "Panchaksharakam [Five letters]."

Nobin, looking startled, whispered to Madhusudan, "I understand, Dada."

"What did you understand?"

“The fifth letter of the fifth consonant group is Ma, followed by five letters: M-a-d-h-u-s-u-d-a-n. By the wondrous grace of your birth stars, three fives have aligned perfectly.”

Madhusudan was utterly astounded. Thousands of years before his parents even named him, his name was recorded in Sage Bhrigu’s ledger! What incredible machinations of the stars! Dumbfounded, he then listened to a brief past history of his life composed in Sanskrit. The less he understood the language, the more his devotion grew. His entire life was the very embodiment of the sage’s words. He rubbed his hand over his chest, feeling as though his physical body was merely a manuscript penned in some ancient hermitage, constructed from the grammar of Sanskrit suffixes and vowels.

Finally, the diviner’s concluding revelation was this: Goddess Lakshmi herself was about to manifest in Madhusudan’s house, marking the beginning of unimaginable fortune. She had recently arrived, taking refuge in the form of his new bride. But he must be careful from now on. For if she were to suffer heartache, fortune would be angered.

Venkat Shastri warned that signs of this anger had already appeared. If the subject did not become careful immediately, the danger would escalate.

Madhusudan sat completely paralyzed. He remembered the news of the massive profit on the very day of his wedding; and just days later, this current defeat. That Lakshmi herself had arrived was great fortune, but the responsibility of it was terrifying.

On the carriage ride back, Madhusudan sat in stunned silence. After a while, Nobin spoke up, “I don't believe a word that Venkat Shastri says; he surely got all your information beforehand from someone.”

“What a genius you are! So he gathers information in advance about every single person who exists; sounds so simple, doesn't it!”

“It’s a lot simpler than writing billions of horoscopes before people are even born! Where would Sage Bhrigu get all that paper, and how would it all fit in Venkat Swami’s little room?”

“They knew how to write a thousand words in a single stroke.”

“Impossible.”

“Whatever your brain can’t comprehend is impossible to you. Look at your grand science! Put your arguments aside for now. That clerk who came from their house the other day—go and fetch him yourself. Today. Do not delay.”

Having thoroughly deceived his elder brother, Nobin felt extremely uneasy inside. The trick had been so simple, and its success so absurd for someone like his brother, that disrespecting him in this way brought Nobin shame and distress. He had told his brother many small lies on the spot before without a second thought; but the guilt of fabricating such an elaborate, colossal deception left his conscience feeling profoundly unclean.

CHAPTER 42

A massive weight lifted from Madhusudan's mind—the weight of his own pride, the rigid ego that had constantly suppressed his blossoming affection. Even as his heart was captivated by Kumu, a battle waged within him against that very bewilderment. The more he found himself helplessly surrendering to Kumu, the more a subconscious anger toward her built up inside him. But now, with a direct mandate from the stars themselves declaring that Lakshmi had entered his home and must be pleased, all conflicts evaporated. His body and mind thrilled with a sudden ecstasy. He repeatedly recited to himself: Lakshmi, Lakshmi in my very home, the supreme gift of my destiny. He felt an overwhelming urge to immediately cast aside all hesitation, go to Kumu, and sing her praises. He wanted to tell her, "If I have made any mistakes, please do not hold onto the offense." But there was no time today; he had to rush to the office immediately to repair the fractures in his business. He couldn't even find a moment to eat at home before leaving.

Meanwhile, a storm raged within Kumu's mind all day. She knew her brother was supposed to arrive tomorrow, and that he was ill. Her heart was plagued with anxiety, desperate for certainty on whether seeing him would be easy. Where had Nobin gone for work? He still hadn't returned. She knew without a doubt that Madhusudan himself would come today to appease her in every possible way; she didn't want to ruin the mood by giving any premature hints of discord.

Sitting on the terrace wasn't an option today. It had been cloudy since last evening, and a steady, drizzling rain had begun around noon. A gloomy winter rain, like an unwanted guest. There was no color in the clouds, no sound in the rain; the damp wind felt depressed, and the earth seemed to shrink beneath the poverty of a sunless sky.

Kumu sat on the floor of the covered balcony just at the top of the stairs, leading into the bedroom. Occasional gusts of rain sprayed against her. Today, on this shadow-dimmed, damp, monotonous day, Kumu felt as if her own life had swallowed her whole like a python; trapped within the suffocating darkness of its slimy belly, there was not a single crack of escape. The deity who had deceived her and brought her into this helpless despair—the silent, smoldering resentment she held against Him flared into a blazing anger today.

She stood up abruptly. Opening her desk, she pulled out the portrait of the divine couple. It was wrapped in a piece of colorful silk.

Today, she wanted to destroy that portrait. She wanted to scream at it, I don't believe in you one bit. Her hands were shaking, making it difficult to untie the knot; her tugging only pulled it tighter. Losing patience, she tore it open with her teeth.

But the moment that deeply familiar image was unveiled, she could hold back no longer. Pressing it tightly to her chest, she broke down sobbing. The harder the wooden frame dug into her breast, the tighter she held it.

At that moment, Muruli the bearer entered the bedroom to make the bed. His hands shook in the cold. He wore a ragged, filthy shawl over his shoulders. Balding, with sunken temples and hollow cheeks, his face was covered in the rough stubble of a greying beard that hadn't been shaved in a while. He had recently suffered from malaria and had practically no blood left in his body. The doctor had told him to quit working and return to his village, but cruel fate dictated otherwise.

Kumu asked, "Are you feeling cold, Muruli?"

"Yes, Mother. The rain has brought a chill."

"Do you not have any warm clothes?"

"The Maharaja gave me one on the day he received his title. But when my grandson caught a terrible cough, the doctor told me to give it to him, Mother."

Kumu retrieved an old, ash-colored shawl from the almirah in the next room and brought it out. "I am giving you this shawl of mine."

Muruli bowed low to the ground and pleaded, "Forgive me, Mother, the Maharaja will be angry."

Kumu was sharply reminded that the path of compassion was severely narrow in this house. Yet, she too needed mercy from God for herself, and virtuous acts were the pathway to it. With a pang of sorrow, Kumu dropped the shawl on the floor.

Muruli joined his hands and said, "Queen Mother, you are Mother Lakshmi, please do not be angry. I don't need warm clothes. I stay in the hookah-bearer's room, where there is a pot of burning coals. I stay quite warm."

Kumu said, "Muruli, if brother Nobin has returned home, please call him for me."

As Nobin entered the room, Kumu said, "Brother, you must do a task for me. Tell me, will you do it?"

"If it brings harm to me, I will do it instantly. But if it brings harm to you, I will not do it under any circumstances."

"How much more harm can come to me? I am not afraid." Saying this, she slipped the thick gold bangles off her wrists and said, "You must sell these bangles and arrange a special prayer (Swastyayan) for my Dada's health."

"There is no need for anything, Boro-bou. The very devotion you hold for him acts as a constant prayer for his well-being at every moment."

"Brother, I can do nothing else for my Dada. The least I can do is offer my service for him at the doors of the deity."

"You do not need to do anything, Boro-bou. What are we servants here for?"

"What can you possibly do, tell me?"

"We are sinners, we can commit sins. If by doing so I can be of any use to you, I shall consider myself blessed."

"Brother, do not joke about this."

"It is not a joke at all. Committing a sin is much harder work than performing a virtue. If the gods understand that, they will reward me."

From Nobin's tone, one might assume a disregard for the gods, which would naturally hurt Kumu; but knowing that her own brother also secretly harbored little reverence for the deities, she could not bring herself to be angry at this lack of devotion. It evoked the same amused affection a mother feels for her young child's mischief.

Kumu offered a sad, faint smile and said, "Brother, in the outside world, you men can act on your own strength; we women have no opportunity to exercise our strength. How are we to serve those we love when they are completely out of reach? The days refuse to pass, and I can find no path anywhere. Is there truly no one anywhere to show us mercy?"

Nobin's eyes welled up with tears.

“I must do something in my brother’s name, Nobin, I must offer something. These bangles belonged to my mother. In my mother’s name, I will offer these bangles to my God.”

“You do not have to hand them to the deity yourself, Boro-bou, He has already accepted them. Wait two days. If you see He is still displeased, then I will do whatever you ask. I will even offer sacrifices to the very god who refuses to show you mercy.”

Night darkened. Outside on the stairs—the familiar sound of those footsteps. Nobin startled, realizing his elder brother was approaching. He did not flee; mustering his courage, he waited for his brother. Meanwhile, in a single moment, Kumu’s mind shrank in utter dread. When the shock of this invisible conflict struck her with such force, jolting every nerve in her body, she became terribly afraid. Why had this sin of aversion taken hold of her so fiercely?

Suddenly Kumu asked Nobin, “Brother, do you know anyone who can give me spiritual counsel like a Guru?”

“What for, Boro-bou?”

“I cannot cope with my own mind anymore.”

“That is not the fault of your mind.”

“The danger is external, the fault lies in the mind—I have heard this from my Dada time and again.”

“Your Dada himself will counsel you—do not fear.”

“That day will never come for me again.”

As Madhusudan’s pragmatic business sense compromised with his love, that affection seemed to overflow across all his work. Kumu’s beautiful face was the divine assurance of his good fortune. Today, he received a hint that his defeat would soon be reversed. Some of the very men who had voted against him yesterday had changed their tune today and written to him. The moment Madhusudan proposed buying the estate in his own name, several of them began to wonder: Have we made a mistake? Some even expressed that the matter ought to be reconsidered.

For the crime of absence, an office guard had been docked half a month's pay. Today, during tiffin time, the moment the guard fell at Madhusudan's feet, he was pardoned. Pardoning him meant Madhusudan compensated the guard out of his own pocket; the fine remained on the official ledgers. The rules could not be broken.

Today was a day of great wonder for Madhusudan. Outside, the sky was muddy with clouds, a light drizzle falling, but this only intensified the joy within him. Before, from the time he returned from the office until dinner, Madhusudan would spend his evenings in the outer parlor. After his marriage, whenever he had broken the rules to visit the inner quarters at odd hours, he had tried to avoid the gaze of the household. Today, with heavy, deliberate footsteps, he wanted to announce to the entire house that he was going to see Kumu. Today he understood that the world had every reason to envy his immense fortune.

The rain had stopped for a while. Not all the rooms were lit yet. And the maid was wandering about with an incense burner, a lone bat circling endlessly from the sky above the courtyard to the lantern-lit path of the inner house. The maids were sitting on the veranda with their legs outstretched, rolling lamp wicks on their thighs; hearing footsteps, they hurriedly stood up, pulled their veils down, and scurried away.

Hearing his footsteps, Shyamasundari emerged from her room, holding a silver betel-leaf box (paner bata). It was customary for her to send this pan out to him when Madhusudan returned from the office. Everyone knew that only Shyamasundari could prepare a pan exactly to Madhusudan's liking; embedded in this knowledge was the hint of a deeper intimacy. Emboldened by this, Shyamasundari opened the box right in his path and said, "Thakurpo [Brother-in-law], your pan is ready. Take it."

In the past, this would have sparked a few words of conversation, tinged with a slight, sweet flirtation. Who knows what happened today—fearing that even from a distance the taint of Shyamasundari might touch him, Madhusudan briskly walked past without taking the pan. Shyamasundari's large eyes blazed with wounded pride, then flooded with heavy, thick tears. Only the omniscient Lord knows that Shyamasundari truly loves Madhusudan.

As Madhusudan entered the room, Nobin touched Kumu's feet in a gesture of respect, stood up, and said, "I will remember the matter of the Guru, I will look into it." To his brother, he explained, "Boro-bou wishes to hear spiritual scriptures from a Guru. We have our family priest, but—"

Madhusudan interrupted in an excited tone, "Spiritual scriptures! Alright, I will see to it. You don't need to do anything."

Nobin left.

All the way there, Madhusudan had been mentally rehearsing a line: Boro-bou, your arrival has brought light to my home. He was completely unaccustomed to speaking words of such sentiment. Thus, he had resolved to say it in a single rush, without hesitation, the moment he walked in. But seeing Nobin halted the words in his throat. On top of that, the sudden talk of religious instruction completely shut his mouth. The internal preparation that had been building was derailed by this minor interruption. Then, he noticed a look of fear on Kumu's face, a physical and mental shrinking. On any other day, this would have gone unnoticed. But today, the new light ignited within him had sharpened his perception; his emotional sensitivity towards Kumu had become acute. That even today Kumu's heart held such aversion felt like a cruel injustice to him. Still, he silently vowed not to be moved to anger, but what could have been easy was no longer so.

After a brief silence, Madhusudan asked, "Boro-bou, do you wish to leave? Won't you stay a little while?"

Hearing his words and the tone of his voice, Kumu was astonished. She replied, "No, why would I leave?"

"I have brought something for you. Open it and see." He placed a small gold box in her hands.

Opening the box, Kumu saw the sapphire ring given to her by her brother. Her heart leaped in her chest; she didn't know what to do.

"Will you let me put this ring on your finger?"

Kumu extended her hand. Madhusudan held her hand in his lap and very slowly slipped the ring onto her finger. He deliberately took a little extra time. Then, lifting

her hand, he kissed it and said, "I made a mistake taking the ring off your hand. On your hand, no jewel can bear a flaw."

Had someone struck her, Kumu would have been less surprised. Seeing Kumu's childlike bewilderment pleased Madhusudan immensely. It was evident from her expression that the gift was no trivial matter to her. But Madhusudan had something more up his sleeve, and he revealed it: "Kalu Mukherjee from your household has arrived. Do you wish to see him?"

Kumu's face lit up brilliantly. "Kalu-da!"

"I will send for him. You two converse while I go and have my dinner."

Tears of gratitude welled up in Kumu's eyes.

CHAPTER 43

Kalu's relationship with the Chatterjee landlords spanned generations. Every matter of absolute trust was executed through his hands. One of his ancestors had even served jail time for the Chatterjees. Kalu had come to Madhusudan's office today on behalf of Bipradas to pay an installment of interest and collect the receipt. He was short, fair-skinned, and plump, with slightly light-brown, prominent eyes beneath bushy, drooping eyebrows of mixed black and grey. He had a thick, magnificent white mustache, yet the hair on his head was mostly black. He wore a carefully pleated, fine Shantipur dhoti and an expensive, antique shawl fitting for someone upholding the dignity of his masters' family. On his finger rested a ring—the stone of which was no cheap trinket.

As Kalu entered the room, Kumu bowed to touch his feet. The two sat down on the carpet. Kalu said, "Little girl, you only just left the other day, sister, but it feels as though I haven't seen you for years."

"Tell me first, how is Dada?"

"We've been terribly worried about the eldest master. The day after you left, his condition worsened drastically. But because his body is impossibly strong, he recovered before our very eyes. The doctors were astounded."

"Is Dada coming tomorrow?"

"That was the plan. But it will be delayed by another two days. It is the full moon, and everyone forbade him to travel, fearing the fever might return. So that is that, but how are you, sister?"

"I am quite well."

Kalu did not wish to say anything more, but where had Kumu's radiance gone? Why were there dark circles under her eyes? Why had her smooth, glowing complexion turned so pale? A question was rising in Kumu's mind, one she couldn't quite bring herself to voice out loud: Did Dada remember me and send any message? As if answering her unspoken question, Kalu said, "The eldest master has sent something for you through me."

Kumu asked eagerly, "What did he send? Where is it?"

"I left it outside."

"Why didn't you bring it in?"

"Don't be anxious, sister. The Maharaja said he would bring it to you himself."

"Tell me what it is."

"He forbade me from telling you." Looking around the room, Kalu added, "They have kept you with such great care and affection—I will tell the eldest master, he will be so pleased. He was so restless the first two days when your news was delayed. There was a mix-up with the post; he finally received three letters all at once."

Kumu could well guess exactly where the "mix-up with the post" had occurred.

Kumu wanted to ask Kalu-da to eat but couldn't muster the courage. With slight hesitation, she asked, "Kalu-da, have you not eaten yet?"

"You see, sister, eating in Kolkata after dusk doesn't agree with me. That's why I've been having Makaradhwaj sent over from our Ramdas Kabiraj. It hasn't done much good, though."

Kalu understood that as the new bride of the house, authority hadn't yet passed into her hands; she wouldn't be able to explicitly order food to be served and would only suffer if she tried.

Just then, Moti's mother gestured from behind the door, called Kumu over, and whispered, "Mr. Mukherjee from your family has arrived; food has been prepared for him. Bring him to the downstairs room and feed him."

Kumu returned immediately and said, "Kalu-da, put your Kabiraj's medicine aside; you must eat before you go."

"What a disaster! This is tyranny! Let it be for today, perhaps another time."

"No, that won't do—come."

In the end, it was discovered that the Makaradhwaj had been highly effective; there was not the slightest lack of appetite on display.

Once she had finished feeding Kalu-da, Kumu returned to her bedroom. Her mind was brimming with memories of her father's house. By now, the mango trees in the

backyard orchard of Nurnagar would be heavy with blossoms. How many secluded afternoons Kumu had spent lying on the paved platform by the pond under the blossoming rose-apple tree, resting her head on her arm, her unbound hair spread out—the buzzing of bees filling the air, the afternoon dappled with light and shadow. An inexplicable ache used to rise in her chest; she hadn't known what it meant. In that ache, the dust raised by the cows' hooves on the evening paths of Braja painted her dreams red. She hadn't realized then that the unobtained soulmate of her youth was casting an illusion over land and water, playing hide-and-seek through her devotion to the divine couple, drawing that very love into the unseen chambers of her heart through the gliding notes and melodies of the Multan raga played on her Esraj.

How many glimpses of that elusive soulmate of her early youth had lingered in so many corners of their house there. In the attic room, from where she could see the mustard fields ablaze with yellow flowers along the winding village road. On that mound by the backyard wall, where the mossy green and black stains traced ambiguous pictures of some ancient, forgotten tale. In the morning, right after waking up, looking out the window of her second-floor bedroom toward the distant red sky, where white sails glided along the horizon like the untethered desires of her own mind. That mirage of early youth had followed her to Kolkata—into her prayers, into her songs. It was that very mirage, masquerading as destiny's call, that had blindly dragged her into the noose of this marriage. And yet, in the harsh glare of reality, it had vanished completely.

Meanwhile, Madhusudan had silently stepped up behind her and was staring at the reflection of Kumu's face in the wall mirror. He understood that he could never compete with the invisible, unknown realm where Kumu's mind was currently lost. On any other day, seeing Kumu in such a distracted state would have angered him. Today, he sat beside her with a quiet melancholy and asked, "What are you thinking, Boro-bou?"

Kumu startled. Her face went pale. Madhusudan grasped her hand, gave it a gentle shake, and said, "Will you never surrender to me?"

Kumu could find no answer to this. Why can I not surrender? was a question she asked herself. When Madhusudan was behaving cruelly, the answer was simple; but when he yielded, she found no answer other than to blame herself. Not being

able to surrender one's heart and soul to one's husband was a grave sin; Kumu had no doubts about this, yet why was she in such a state? A woman's sole purpose was to become a devoted, flawless wife like Sati or Savitri. She wanted to save herself from the ultimate degradation of falling from that ideal—so today, with a desperate heart, Kumu told Madhusudan, "Please, have mercy on me."

"Why should I have to show you mercy?"

"Make me yours—command me, punish me. I feel I am not worthy of you."

Hearing this, Madhusudan felt a smile of deep sorrow rise within him. Kumu wanted to perform the duties of a chaste wife. If Kumu were merely an ordinary housewife, this would have been enough. But to him, Kumu was far more than just a wife bound by wedding mantras; the higher the price he offered to obtain that 'something more,' the more he failed. His own inadequacies were being laid bare. The insurmountable disparity between him and Kumu only heightened his desperation.

Letting out a deep sigh, Madhusudan said, "If I give you something, tell me, what will you give me in return?"

Kumu realized it must be the object given by her brother; she looked eagerly at Madhusudan's face.

"But I will exact a price truly worthy of the gift," he said. He pulled out an Esraj wrapped in a silk case from beneath the bed and removed its cover. It was Kumu's intimately familiar Esraj, inlaid with ivory. She had left it behind when leaving home.

Madhusudan said, "You are pleased, aren't you? Now, pay the price."

Kumu couldn't understand what price Madhusudan wanted; she just stared at him. Madhusudan said, "Play it for me."

It wasn't a massive request, yet it was an incredibly difficult demand. Kumu had grasped by now that Madhusudan possessed no ear for the nuances of music. Overcoming her hesitation to play in front of him would be hard. Looking down, Kumu began nervously turning the bow of the Esraj in her hands. Madhusudan said, "Play it, Boro-bou, don't be shy in front of me."

Kumu said, "It is out of tune."

“Why don't you admit that it is your own mind that is out of tune?”

The truth of his words immediately struck Kumu's heart. “I will tune the instrument and keep it ready; I will play for you another day.”

“Tell me exactly when you will play. Tomorrow?”

“Alright, tomorrow.”

“In the evening, when I return from the office?”

“Yes, that will be fine.”

“Are you very happy to have the Esraj back?”

“Very happy.”

Pulling a leather case out from beneath his shawl, Madhusudan said, “Will you not be just as happy to receive this pearl necklace I bought for you?”

Why ask such an impossible question? Kumu remained silent, fiddling with the Esraj's bow.

“I understand, the petition is denied.”

Kumu didn't quite understand his words.

Madhusudan explained, “I had hoped to pin this petition of my heart to your breast—but it has been dismissed before I could even submit it.”

The jewelry lay open on the floor in front of Kumu. Neither spoke a single word. Kumu entered that dreamlike trance she often slipped into, remaining perfectly still. A little later, as if regaining consciousness, she picked up the necklace, put it around her neck, and bowed to touch Madhusudan's feet. She asked, “Will you listen to my music?”

Madhusudan replied, “Yes, I will listen.”

“I will play for you right now,” she said, and began to tune the Esraj. Sitting in her chair, she began the preliminary alap; she forgot there was anyone else in the room. From the chair, she ascended into the raga Chhayanat. She began the song she loved so dearly: “Thari raho mere aakhanke aage” (Stand still before my eyes). Casting a colorful shadow across the sky of melodies, that wondrous apparition

arrived—the one Kumu had found in song, found in her soul, for whom her eternal plea remained, carrying only the thirst to capture Him in her vision: “Thari raho mere aakhanke aage.”

Madhusudan did not understand the intricacies of music, but the melody playing upon Kumu’s world-forgetting face, the rhythm dancing with every touch of her fingers on the frets of the Esraj—it sent a tremor through his chest. He felt as though someone were granting him a divine boon. Playing lost in her own world, Kumu suddenly noticed at one point that Madhusudan was staring fixedly at her face. Instantly, her hands stopped; embarrassment washed over her, and she stopped playing.

Madhusudan’s heart swelled with generosity. He asked, “Boro-bou, tell me, what is it that you want?” If Kumu had said, I want to go serve my brother for a few days, Madhusudan might even have agreed; for today, gazing endlessly at Kumu’s music-entranced face, he kept telling himself, She has come to my home; what an astonishing truth this is!

Kumu placed the Esraj on the floor, set the bow aside, and remained silent.

Madhusudan pleaded once more, “Boro-bou, ask me for something. Whatever you want, you shall have.”

Kumu said, “I want to give Muruli the bearer a winter shawl.”

If Kumu had said she wanted nothing, even that would have been better. But a winter blanket for Muruli the bearer! To a man who could offer a royal crown, she was asking for shoelaces!

Madhusudan was astounded. He felt a surge of anger toward the bearer. He snapped, “Has that wretched Muruli been bothering you?”

“No, I went to give him a shawl of my own accord, and he refused to take it. If you order him to, he will find the courage to accept it.”

Madhusudan fell dead silent. After a while, he said, “You want to give charity! Alright, let’s see it. Where is your shawl?”

Kumu brought out her old brown shawl that she had worn for years. Madhusudan took it and wrapped it around his own shoulders. Ringing the small bell on the teapoy, he summoned an old maid. He instructed her, "Call Muruli the bearer."

Muruli arrived and stood with folded hands; his joined hands trembled from cold and sheer terror.

"Your mistress has given you a reward," Madhusudan declared. Taking a hundred-rupee note from his pocketbook, he unfolded it and placed it in Kumu's hand. Such unprovoked, unasked-for charity had never occurred by Madhusudan's hands in his entire life. At this impossible turn of events, Muruli's terror deepened. In a voice trembling with hesitation, he stammered, "Huzoor—"

"What 'Huzoor', you fool! Take it from your mother's hand. Buy as many warm clothes as you want with this money."

The matter ended there—and with it, it seemed, everything else that evening came to an end. The current upon which Kumu's mind had been floating suddenly dried up. The wave of self-sacrifice that had surged in Madhusudan's heart, overflowing the narrow banks of his ego, also drained away, wasted over a lowly bearer. After this, ordinary conversation became impossible for both of them. Today, the fact that men were waiting in the outer parlor regarding the purchase of the estate had completely slipped Madhusudan's mind. Remembering it so late, he was disgusted with himself. Standing up, he said, "I have work. I am leaving." He walked out briskly.

On the way, Shyamasundari stepped out in front of her room and, in a fairly loud voice, asked, "Are you in your room?"

Shyamasundari had not eaten today; wrapped in a shawl, she had been lying despondently on a mat on the floor. Hearing Madhusudan's voice, she hurried to the door and asked, "What is it, Thakurpo?"

"Didn't you bring me my pan?"

CHAPTER 44

Outside, hidden in the darkness by the door, stood a person—Hablū. He was no stranger to fear; he dreaded Madhusudan like Death itself, yet he remained as still as a wooden doll. Ever since he had been reprimanded by Madhusudan that day, he hadn't found the opportunity to visit his aunt, and his heart had been fluttering with restlessness. Coming here this evening was hardly safe. But just as his mother had left him to lie in bed and went about her household chores, he had heard the strains of an Esraj. He didn't know what was being played, nor could he fathom who was playing it; but he was certain it was coming from his aunt's room. He was convinced his uncle wasn't there, for he couldn't even imagine anyone daring to play music in his presence. When he reached the door on the upper floor and saw his uncle's shoes, he prepared to flee, but seeing his aunt playing herself, his feet refused to move. He began to listen, hiding behind the door. He had always known his aunt to be wondrous, but today his astonishment knew no bounds. After Madhusudan left, he could no longer contain his excitement—he rushed into the room, climbed into Kumu's lap, wrapped his arms around her neck, and whispered, "Auntie."

Kumu pressed him to her chest and said, "What is this? Your hands are so cold! Have you been catching the damp breeze?"

Hablū gave no answer; he grew afraid. He thought his aunt might send him to bed right away. Kumu wrapped him in her shawl, warming him with her own body heat, and asked, "Haven't you gone to sleep yet, Gopal?"

"I came to listen to your music. How could you play like that, Auntie?"

"When you learn, you will be able to as well."

"Will you teach me?"

Just then, Moti's mother burst into the room like a storm. "So, this is where the little rascal is hiding! I've been scouring the seven kingdoms for him. He's terrified to walk two steps outside the room in the evening, yet he has no fear when coming to his aunt's room! Come, let's go to sleep."

Hablū clung to Kumu.

Kumu said, "Oh, let him stay a little longer."

"If his courage grows like this, he'll get into trouble eventually. I'll put him to sleep and be right back."

Kumu longed to give Hablū something—some food or a toy. But having nothing to give, she kissed him and said, "Go to sleep now, you sweet boy. Tomorrow afternoon, I shall play for you."

With a sorrowful face, Hablū got up and left with his mother.

Shortly after, Moti's mother returned. She was restless to know the result of Nobin's conspiracy. Sitting next to Kumu, she noticed the sapphire ring on her hand and realized that the mission had been accomplished. As an excuse to bring up the topic, she said, "Sister, how did you get this music?"

"Dada sent it," Kumu replied.

"The eldest master brought it for you?"

"Yes," Kumu said briefly.

Moti's mother searched Kumu's face for any sign of joy or wonder, but found none.

"Did he say anything about your brother?"

"No."

"He is coming the day after tomorrow. Did the subject of you visiting him not come up?"

"No, nothing was said about Dada."

"Why didn't you ask yourself, sister?"

"Whatever else I may ask of him, this I cannot."

"You won't need to ask. Just go to him; the eldest master won't say anything."

Moti's mother still didn't fully comprehend that Madhusudan's favor had become a crisis for Kumu; she could not give Madhusudan what he desired, even if she wanted to. Her heart had become bankrupt. That was why accepting gifts from Madhusudan, which only increased her debt, caused her such hesitation. Kumu had even felt that it would be better if her brother delayed his arrival a while longer.

After waiting a moment, Moti's mother said, "It seemed today as though the eldest master's mind was favorable."

With eyes filled with doubt, Kumu looked at her and asked, "I don't quite understand the reason for this favor, and that is why I fear it. I cannot find a way to act."

Holding Kumu's chin, Moti's mother said, "You don't need to do anything. Can't you see? He has spent his life only doing business and has never seen a woman like you. As he begins to know you little by little, your value is rising in his eyes."

"I have nothing in me that will make him know me more if he sees me more, Sister. I can see for myself that I am empty inside. That emptiness will eventually be revealed. That is why, when I suddenly see him happy, I feel as though he has been cheated. The moment that is exposed, he will be even more furious. I don't fear that anger; in fact, I feel it is the truth."

"You don't know your own worth, sister! From the day you came to this house, everything you gave from your side is something they can never repay, even all together. My husband is practically desperate—he cannot rest unless he can cross the ocean for you. If I didn't love you, I would have quarreled with him over this."

Kumu smiled and said, "How fortunate I am to have such a brother-in-law."

"And your sister-in-law, I suppose, is the Rahu or Ketu of your fate."

"When one of you is mentioned, there is no need to mention the other."

Moti's mother wrapped her right arm around Kumu's neck and said, "I have a request for you."

"What is it?"

"Let you and I become 'confidantes of the heart'."

"That's a wonderful idea! We have already become that in our hearts from the very beginning."

"Then do not hide anything from me. I cannot understand why you have such a face today."

Looking into her eyes for a while, Kumu said, "Shall I tell you the truth? I feel afraid of myself."

"What do you mean? Afraid of yourself, why?"

"For so long, I thought of myself in a certain way, and today I see I am not that person. I had come here with everything in my mind organized and feeling secure. When my brothers hesitated, I forcefully stepped onto a new path. But the person who set out with such confidence—I cannot find her anywhere today."

"You are unable to love. Tell me truly, do not hide it—have you loved anyone? Do you know what love means?"

"If I say I do, you will laugh. Like the light that comes before the sun rises, love had awakened filling my entire sky. I only felt that the sun was about to rise. With that imagination of sunrise, I set out—carrying sacred water, arranging a basket of flowers. The deity I have worshipped with all my heart for so long—I felt I had received His blessings. I set out like one going to a secret tryst (Abhisar). I didn't even perceive the dark night as dark. Today, opening my eyes in the light, what do I see within, or what do I see outside? How will years after years, moment after moment pass now?"

"Do you think you will never be able to love the eldest master?"

"I could have loved. I had brought something within my heart that would have made it easy to accept everything according to my own liking. Your eldest master has shattered that to pieces from the very start. Today, everything feels harsh and strikes me. It is as if someone has scraped away the soft skin of my body; everything I touch feels raw, I flinch at everything. Perhaps, once the skin hardens, I might endure it, but I will never find joy in life again."

"You never know, sister."

"One very well knows. Today there is not a shred of delusion in my mind. My life has become shamelessly clear. There is no shelter left to deceive myself. Is there no place for women to move to other than death? Has the cruel Creator made their domestic life so tight?"

Moti's mother had never heard Kumu speak with such agitation. Especially today, when they had managed to make the eldest master so favorable toward her,

witnessing this intense impatience frightened Moti's mother. She realized the roots of the vine had been struck; the gardener would not be able to revive it by pouring water of favor from above.

After a while, Kumu said, "I know, not being able to surrender to my husband with reverence is a great sin of mine. But I do not fear that sin as much as I fear the degradation of a surrender without reverence."

Moti's mother, unable to find an answer, sat bewildered. After a silence, Kumu said, "You are so lucky, sister. What virtue you must have practiced, to be able to love your husband with your whole heart. I used to think love was easy—that all wives naturally love their husbands. Today I see that being able to love is the rarest of things, achieved through penance across many lifetimes. Tell me truly, do all wives love their husbands?"

Moti's mother smiled slightly and said, "One can be a good wife even without loving him; otherwise, how would the household run?"

"Give me that assurance. If nothing else, let me be a good wife. There is greater merit in that, it is the harder penance."

"Even that is hindered from the outside."

"That hindrance can be overcome from within. I will be able to, I will not give in."

"If you cannot, who will?"

The rain intensified. The lamp light flickered in the wind. A sudden gust, like a wet nocturnal bird flapping its wings, seemed to enter the room. Kumu's body and mind shuddered. She said, "I no longer find strength in my Lord's name. I recite the mantras, but my mind turns away, refusing to respond. That is what I fear the most."

Moti's mother did not want to offer false comfort with made-up words. Without answering, she pulled Kumu close to her chest. Just then, a voice from outside called out, "Mejobou!"

Kumu rose happily, saying, "Come in, come in, brother-in-law."

"I couldn't find the lamp of the evening in the room, so I came out searching."

Moti's mother said, "Alas, what a tragedy, like a snake that has lost its jewel (monihara foni)."

"Who is the jewel and who is the snake can be understood by watching the chart; what do you say, Boro-bou?"

"Do not make me a witness, brother-in-law."

"I know, if I do, I will lose."

"Then go and rescue your lost treasure; I will not hold it back."

"He has no enthusiasm for his lost treasure, Sister. He has come to catch a glimpse of the Boro-bou's feet on a pretext."

"Is there any need for a pretext? The feet have offered themselves. Who will practice the penance of the most impossible task? When it comes, it comes easily. There are thousands of people in this world more worthy than I, yet I was the one who could touch those beautiful feet; they couldn't. Nobin's birth has been made meaningful, free of cost."

"Oh, what are you saying, brother-in-law? There is no telling. From your encyclopedia, I suppose—"

"You cannot say such things, Boro-bou. How would they know what 'feet' represent? They have kept the feet of goddesses locked in strict seclusion, inside narrow shoes shaped like goat hooves. What does an encyclopedist know of the majesty of feet? Lakshman spent fourteen years in exile just by looking at Sita's feet—our country's brothers-in-law know the meaning of that. Well, if you are pulling your sari over your feet, then do so. Do not fear, just because a lotus closes at evening doesn't mean it stays closed forever—it will open its petals again."

"Sister, of the heart, is this how brother-in-law has won your heart with such flattery?"

"Not at all, Sister. He is not a man to waste sweet words."

"Is there no need for praise?"

"Boro-bou, the hunger for praise is never satisfied in goddesses; it is very much needed. But I am not Shiva with five heads; the praise of this single mouth has become old, and she is no longer finding any flavor in it."

Just then, Muruli the bearer came and informed Nobin, "The master has called you to the outer office."

Hearing this, Nobin's heart sank. He had thought Madhusudan would return from the office and come straight to his bedroom. It seemed the boat had once again run aground.

After Nobin left, Moti's mother said softly, "But remember, the eldest master loves you."

Kumu replied, "That is what surprises me."

"What are you saying? Why is his loving you surprising? Is he made of stone?"

"I am not worthy of him."

"Where is the man you are not worthy of?"

"What immense power he has, what honor, what sharp intellect, he is such a colossal man. How much of him can I find within myself? I have realized in two days after coming here how impossibly immature I am. That is why whenever he loves me, I am the most afraid. I cannot find anything in myself. With such a huge void, how am I to serve him? Last night, I sat and felt I was like an addressed envelope; I had been taken for a price, and if opened, it would be revealed that there is not even a letter inside."

"Sister, you make me laugh. The eldest master has a huge business; no one equals him in business acumen, I know it all. But have you come to manage his business so that you should fear not being qualified? If the eldest master speaks his heart clearly, he would surely say he is not worthy of you either."

"He told me that."

"You didn't believe it?"

"No. On the contrary, I grew afraid. I thought he had made a mistake regarding me, and that mistake would be caught."

"Why did you feel that way, tell me?"

"Shall I tell you? This sudden marriage of mine—I brought it all about myself—but under what strange delusion, what childishness! Everything that deceived me that

day was a fraud. Yet, such firm belief, such terrible stubbornness, that no one could have stopped me that day. Dada knew that for certain, which is why he didn't offer vain resistance; but do you think I didn't understand how frightened, how anxious he was? Even understanding it, I didn't restrain my own impulse one bit; I am such a thoughtless person. From today, I will only suffer and cause suffering forever, and every day I will know that all of this is my own creation."

Moti's mother couldn't think of what to say. After a silence, she asked, "Well sister, when you made up your mind to marry, what were you thinking?"

"At that time, I was certain that no matter how good or bad the husband might be, it was merely an occasion to prove the glory of a wife's chastity. I didn't have a shred of doubt that whoever the Creator had designated as husband, I would surely love him. Since childhood, I had only seen my mother, read the Puranas, listened to Kathakata—it felt as though living in accordance with the scriptures was very easy."

"Sister, scriptures were not written for a nineteen-year-old virgin."

"Today I have realized that in domestic life, love is an extra bounty. Casting that aside, one must sail across the ocean of worldly life clinging to Dharma. If Dharma does not give flowers and fruit, at least let it keep one afloat, dry though it may be."

Moti's mother, saying little herself, let Kumu keep talking.

CHAPTER 45

Upon reaching his office, Madhusudan saw that the news was not good. A major bank in Madras had failed, and they had business with them. Then came word that a staff member, acting on behalf of a director, had been examining his ledgers behind his back. For so long, no one had dared to suspect Madhusudan; but the moment one person exposed him, it was as if a magic spell had been broken. It is easy to find small faults in great works; those who are master generals win grandly on the whole despite many minor losses. Madhusudan had always won just like that—so no one had noticed the minor losses he had chosen. But now, creating a list of just those losses and presenting them before the public, people were praising their own intellect, saying, "If it were us, we wouldn't have made this mistake." Who would explain to them that Madhusudan had set sail with the boat, otherwise there would have been no sailing at all; the bottom line is that he reached the shore. Today, while judging the holes after pulling the boat onto the land, those who had arrived safely at the port felt their blood run cold. It is easy to baffle amateurs with such fragmented criticism. Usually, the advantage of amateurs is that they want to profit, not judge. But if they happen to judge, they become lethal. Madhusudan felt an intense, disdainful rage toward these fools. But where fools dominate, there is no way out but to negotiate. An old ladder creaks, sways, and threatens to break; the person climbing it must keep it alive as a support under his feet. One feels like kicking it in anger, but that would only complicate matters further.

Seeing the danger to his cub, a lioness forgets her hunger; Madhusudan's state of mind regarding his business was much the same. It was his own creation; his devotion to it was not primarily a devotion to money. Whoever has the power to create finds themselves deeply in their own work; when that creation is threatened, all other joys, sorrows, and desires in life become trivial. Kumu had been pulling Madhusudan with a powerful tug for some days, and that suddenly loosened. Madhusudan had felt the need for love in life very strongly in his middle age. When this symptom appears prematurely, it becomes wild. Madhusudan had been dealt a blow, but today, where had that pain gone?

As soon as Nobin entered the room, Madhusudan asked, "Do you know if my private account ledger has fallen into the hands of any outsider?"

Nobin started and said, "What do you mean?"

"You have to find out if anyone is frequenting the accountant's room."

"Ratikanta is a trusted man, could he ever—"

"There is reason to suspect that behind his back, someone is whispering with the clerks. I need to know very carefully who is involved in this."

A servant came to report that the food was getting cold. Ignoring that, Madhusudan said to Nobin, "Tell them to bring my carriage ready immediately."

Nobin said, "Aren't you going to eat before leaving? It's getting late."

"I will eat outside, there is work."

Nobin stepped out, head bowed, deep in thought. It seemed the strategy he had employed was falling apart.

Suddenly, Madhusudan called Nobin back and said, "Give this letter to Kumu."

Nobin saw it was a letter from Bipradas. He understood it had arrived this morning; Madhusudan had kept it to give to Kumu with his own hands in the evening. In this way, he wanted to bring some offering in his hand on every occasion of union. Today, a sudden storm in office work had drowned his loving preparation.

The bank that had failed in Madras had enjoyed the public's unwavering trust. No one among the directors or partners had had the slightest doubt about the Ghoshals' company's connection with them. The moment the machine broke down, many began saying, "We suspected it from the very beginning," and so on.

At the very time when the business needed to be protected through collective effort, blaming others for the defeat became intense, and in an attempt to disgrace those who were envied, the tottering business was tipped over. Madhusudan had understood such attempts would be made. It wasn't the time to be certain about the extent of the Ghoshals' company's loss due to the Madras bank disaster, but there was no doubt that this would provide ammunition for those trying to destroy Madhusudan's prestige. Regardless, times were bad, and now, forgetting all else, Madhusudan had to buckle down for this.

After speaking with Madhusudan at night, Nobin returned to find Moti's mother and Kumu still talking. Nobin said, "Boro-bou, there is a letter from your Dada."

Kumu started and took the letter. Her hands trembled as she opened it. She was afraid there might be some unpleasant news. Perhaps he wouldn't be coming after all. Very slowly, she opened the envelope and read it. She remained silent for a moment. Her face seemed as though it had been wounded somewhere. She said to Nobin, "Dada reached Kolkata at three o'clock this afternoon."

"He arrived today? He was supposed to—"

"He wrote that he was supposed to come after a couple of days, but due to some special reasons, he had to come sooner."

Kumu said nothing more. Toward the end of the letter, it said that Bipradas would come to see Kumu as soon as he recovered a bit, so she should not be anxious or restless. The same thing had been in the previous letter. Why, what had happened? What crime had Kumu committed? It was as if this was clearly saying: Do not come to our house. She felt like throwing herself on the floor and weeping. Suppressing her tears, she sat as hard as stone.

Nobin understood there was a painful blow in the letter. Looking at Kumu's face, his heart ached with pity. He said, "Boro-bou, you must go to him tomorrow."

"No, I will not go." As soon as she said this, she could hold back no longer; covering her face with both hands, she broke into tears.

Without asking any questions, Moti's mother pulled Kumu to her chest. Kumu said in a choked voice, "Dada has forbidden me from going."

Nobin said, "No, no, Boro-bou, you have surely misunderstood."

Kumu shook her head vigorously, indicating she hadn't misunderstood at all.

Nobin said, "Shall I tell you where you misunderstood? Bipradas Babu thought my brother would not want to let you go there. To save you from being insulted while trying, to save you from suffering, he has smoothed your path on his own."

In an instant, Kumu felt deep relief. She lifted her wet lashes toward Nobin's face and looked at him in silence with a gentle gaze. There was no doubt that what Nobin said was the absolute truth. She felt disgusted with herself for having misunderstood her Dada's affection even for a moment. She felt a great strength

within. She could wait for her brother to come instead of rushing to him right now. That was for the best.

Moti's mother lifted Kumu's face by the chin and said, "Oh my, the slightest gust of wind from Dada's words and the ocean of your pride rises up."

Nobin said, "Boro-bou, then I shall make arrangements for you to go tomorrow."

"No, there is no need."

"What do you mean there's no need? If you don't need to, I certainly do."

"What need do you have?"

"Well! Do you think I should just put up with whatever your Dada thinks of my brother? I will fight on my brother's behalf. I cannot accept defeat before you. You have to go to him tomorrow."

Kumu began to smile.

"Boro-bou, this is no joking matter. Our family's disgrace is your dishonor. Now go wash your face and eyes, go eat. Dada has an invitation at the Manager Sahib's place tonight. I believe he won't sleep inside the house tonight; I saw his bed being made in the outer chamber."

Hearing this news, Kumu felt a sense of relief, and the very next moment, she felt ashamed for feeling such relief.

That night, Nobin and Moti's mother conferred in the bedroom regarding the matter. Moti's mother said, "You gave sister assurance. And then?"

"What else? Nobin's words are as good as his deeds. Boro-bou must go, and whatever happens after that, happens."

The status-consciousness of newly rich families is extremely intense. They are surely convinced that by marrying, the young bride has risen far above her former family name. Hence, it is proper to make her forget entirely that there is any such thing as a father's house. In this situation, if it is impossible to protect both sides, then one side must be kept. Nobin had firmly decided in his heart which side that was. A few days ago, Nobin couldn't have dreamt that he would dare to pick a fight with his brother, especially where his brother's authority was absolute.

Consulting with his wife, it was decided that they would propose to Madhusudan that Kumu go to meet Bipradas for only a short while tomorrow morning. If he agrees and Kumu is sent there, it won't be hard to manufacture a reasonable excuse not to bring her back for a few days.

Madhusudan returned home late at night, burdened with a pile of papers. Nobin peeked in and saw that instead of going to sleep, Madhusudan had put on his spectacles and was marking documents or taking notes in a notebook with a blue pencil on his office desk. Nobin dared to enter and said, "Dada, can I do any work for you?" Madhusudan said briefly, "No." Madhusudan wanted to master this business crisis entirely on his own; it was necessary for everything to be visible to his own eyes. Seeking the help of others' vision in this task would be an admission of weakness.

Finding no opening to speak, Nobin stepped out. It didn't seem likely that an opportunity would arise soon. Nobin was determined to send the Boro-bou away the very next morning. He needed to get consent tonight itself.

After a while, Nobin brought a lamp and placed it on his brother's table, saying, "You aren't getting enough light."

Madhusudan felt that this second lamp made his work much easier. But even on this occasion, no conversation could be initiated. Nobin had to step out again.

Shortly after, Nobin prepared tobacco for Madhusudan's familiar hookah and set it on the left side of his chair, slowly placing the tube on the table. Madhusudan realized immediately that this too was needed. Putting down the pencil for a moment, he began to puff on the hookah.

During this interval, Nobin brought up the subject: "Dada, won't you go to sleep? It's very late. Boro-bou is perhaps sitting awake waiting for you."

The phrase "sitting awake waiting" struck the inside of Madhusudan's mind in an instant. When a ship is tossing and turning on the waves, a small bird from the shore comes and sits on the mast; in the midst of a turbulent sea, it brings to mind, if only for a moment, the image of a secluded forest shade on a lush island. But it was no time to give mind to that; the ship had to be steered.

Madhusudan was frightened by this fleeting restlessness of his own mind. Suppressing it instantly, he said, "Tell Boro-bou to go to sleep, I am sleeping outside today."

"I might as well call her here," Nobin said, beginning to blow on the hookah bowl.

Madhusudan flared up suddenly and shouted, "No, no!"

Nobin, undeterred, said, "She is sitting waiting, hoping to make a petition to you."

In a harsh voice, Madhusudan said, "There is no time for petitions now."

"You have no time, Dada, but she has little time too."

"What, what happened?"

"It has been heard that Bipradas Babu has arrived in Kolkata today, so Boro-bou, tomorrow morning—"

"Wants to go in the morning?"

"Not for long, just once—"

Madhusudan waved his hand and stood up, saying, "Let her go, let her go. That's enough, no more, you go."

Having secured the order, Nobin ran out of the room. As soon as he was outside, Madhusudan's call reached his ears: "Nobin."

He was afraid his brother might withdraw the order. As he stood in the room, Madhusudan said, "Boro-bou will stay at her brother's place for some days from now on, you arrange for that."

Nobin was afraid that even a little enthusiasm might show on his face at this proposal. He even scratched his head, feigning hesitation. He said, "If Boro-bou leaves, the house will feel very empty."

Madhusudan, without answering, set down the hookah tube and returned to work. He realized the path of temptation was still open—but not in that direction.

Nobin walked away, overjoyed. Madhusudan continued his work. But he himself hadn't realized for a long time when another, contrary stream of thought had opened up alongside the flow of his work. At one point, before the work with the

blue pencil was finished, he took a break, and the hookah tube went to his lips. During the daytime, when Madhusudan's mind had found complete detachment regarding thoughts of Kumu, he had been very happy to regain his sovereignty over himself like in the old days. But as the night grew deeper, he began to suspect that the enemy had not fled the fortress. It was hiding in the tunnels.

The rain had stopped, and the waning moon had risen over an ancient sissoo tree in the corner of the garden, leaving the damp earth bewildered. The air was cold, and Madhusudan's body had begun to demand the warm, soft touch of a bed. Clutching the blue pencil, he leaned over his ledger, but in the deep sky of his mind, a sentence was ringing with a faint yet clear sound: "Boro-bou is perhaps sitting awake waiting."

Madhusudan had vowed to finish a special task by tonight. It wouldn't have been a great inconvenience if he could finish it by tomorrow morning. But keeping his word was the moral code of his business. If he strayed from that for any reason, he couldn't forgive himself. He had guarded his Dharma very strictly for so long. He had also received enough rewards for it. But lately, a difference in the tone of the daytime Madhusudan and the nighttime Madhusudan was occurring—like two strings on one veena. The firm vow with which he had leaned over his desk—when the night grew deep, through some crack in that vow, a sentence began to buzz like a bumblebee: "Boro-bou is perhaps sitting awake waiting."

He stood up. He left the ledger as it was, without extinguishing the light, and headed toward the bedroom. Through the balcony surrounding the courtyard that one must traverse to reach the third-floor room, Shyamasundari sat on the floor by the railing. The moon was at its zenith, and its light surrounded her. She looked like a picture from a storybook. That is to say, she was not a human of every day; she seemed to have emerged from the harsh shell of excessive familiarity into a distance. She knew Madhusudan walked this path to the bedroom—the sight of him passing was an intense pain for her, which was why the attraction was so powerful. But this waiting wasn't just madness to pierce her heart with failed pain; there was also an expectation—if something might happen in a brief moment; waiting by the path in the hope that the impossible might become possible.

Madhusudan gave her a sidelong glance and went upstairs. Shyamasundari, angry at her own fate, grabbed the railing tightly and began to bang her head against it.

Reaching the bedroom, Madhusudan saw that Kumu was not sitting awake. The room was dark, with a little light coming through the open door of the bathroom. Madhusudan thought once of turning back, but couldn't. He turned on the gas light. Kumu was curled up in bed, sleeping—she didn't wake up even when the light was turned on. Her sleeping so comfortably angered him. Impatiently, he pulled back the mosquito net and sat down on the bed with a thud. The bed groaned and shook.

Kumu woke up with a start and sat up. She knew Madhusudan wouldn't come tonight. Seeing him suddenly, such an expression appeared on her face that it felt like a spear piercing through Madhusudan's heart. Blood rushed to his head; he exclaimed, "You can't tolerate me at all, can you?"

Kumu couldn't think of an answer to such a question. Truly, seeing Madhusudan suddenly, her heart had trembled in terror. At that moment, her mind hadn't been alert. The feeling she always tried to suppress even from herself, the intensity of which even Kumu didn't fully know, had suddenly revealed itself.

Madhusudan said, chewing his words, "Your petition to go to your Dada?"

Kumu had been ready to fall at his feet this very moment, but hearing her Dada's name from his mouth, she stiffened. She said, "No."

"You don't want to go?"

"No, I don't."

"You didn't send Nobin to petition me?"

"No, I didn't."

"You didn't express your wish to go to your Dada?"

"I told him, I won't go to see Dada."

"Why?"

"I cannot say."

"Cannot say? Your same old 'Nurnagari' style again?"

"I am, after all, a girl from Nurnagar."

"Go, go to them. You are not worthy of this place. I bestowed favors, you didn't understand the dignity. Now you will have to repent."

Kumu sat frozen, giving no answer. Grabbing Kumu's hand and giving it an unbearable shake, Madhusudan said, "You don't even know how to ask for forgiveness?"

"For what?"

"For the fact that you have been able to sleep on this bed of mine."

Kumu immediately got up from the bed and went to the next room.

On his way to the outer room, Madhusudan saw Shyamasundari lying prone on that balcony. Madhusudan came alongside, bent down, and tried to pull her up by the hands, saying, "What are you doing, Shyama?" Shyama immediately sat up and wrapped her arms around Madhusudan's legs, saying in a choked voice, "Kill me, you."

Madhusudan pulled her up by the hands and stood her up, saying, "Oh, your body is cold as ice. Come, I will put you to sleep." Saying this, he covered her with a part of his shawl, gripped her tightly with his right arm, and took her to the bedroom. Shyama whispered, "Won't you sit for a while?"

Madhusudan said, "I have work."

A ghost had possessed him at night and was sabotaging his work—no more of that. He realized that the storehouse for compensating the slight he had received from Kumu was stocked elsewhere. Tonight, Madhusudan needed to feel that supreme value a person realizes about themselves through love. Receiving the assurance that Shyamasundari had been waiting for him with her whole life and soul, Madhusudan found the strength for work tonight, which greatly reduced the pain of the thorn of disgrace pricking his mind.

Meanwhile, there was a consolation in the blow Kumu had received that night. Every time Madhusudan had shown her love, Kumu had felt a tug-of-war; the sense of duty that she must reciprocate in the currency of love had made her extremely restless. Kumu had no hope of winning this battle. But the defeat was ugly; Kumu had tried her best to suppress it. Last night, that suppressed defeat was completely exposed in a single moment. In Kumu's unguarded state, Madhusudan had clearly

seen that Kumu's entire nature was opposed to his; once this was confirmed, it would be possible to perform their mutual duties sincerely. Madhusudan desired her, and that was where the problem lay; he wanted to reject her with resentment, and that was where the truth lay. Truly, she had no right to sleep in Madhusudan's bed. By sleeping there, she was only playing a fraud. Her position in this house was a mockery.

Tonight, this one question had risen in Kumu's mind repeatedly—why such insistence from Madhusudan regarding Kumu? He mocks Kumu by bringing up Nurnagari style at every turn, meaning their natures, their castes are entirely different, so why then does Madhusudan profess love to her? Can this ever be true love? Kumu was firmly convinced that no matter what Madhusudan might think today, he could never be fulfilled by her. The sooner Madhusudan understood that, the better for all parties.

The joy with which Nobin had gone to sleep after getting consent from his brother last night didn't last much into this morning. It was 2:30 AM last night. Madhusudan had called Nobin after finishing work. The order was that Kumudini would be sent to Bipradas's place, and there was no need to return until Madhusudan summoned her himself. Nobin realized this was a sentence of exile.

In the part of the courtyard-surrounding balcony where Madhusudan had met Shyama last night, Nobin's bedroom was attached to the opposite balcony. They were discussing Kumu as husband and wife. Just then, hearing a sound, Moti's mother opened the door and saw the picture of Madhusudan's union with Shyama in the moonlight. She realized that in Kumu's web of fate, another tight knot had been tied silently this night.

Moti's mother said to Nobin, "Is it good for sister to leave at such a critical juncture?"

Nobin said, "Sister-in-law hadn't been here for so long, the affair never reached this far. It has happened because sister-in-law is here."

"What are you saying!"

"She awakened a dormant hunger but couldn't provide food, so it has reached the point of catastrophe. I say it is better for her to stay away during this time; at least, if nothing else, she will be able to stay in peace."

"Then will it continue like this?"

"One must watch until the fire for which there is no means of extinguishing burns itself to ashes."

The next morning, Hablū followed Kumu around all the time. When the tutor called him outside for lessons, he looked toward Kumu. Had Kumu told him to go, he would have, but Kumu had told the bearer that Hablū had a holiday today.

The tone that a bride was going to her father's house for a few days didn't apply to Kumu's journey today. It seemed as though this house was about to lose her forever. The bird that had been caged, it seemed, had flown away the moment the door was opened a crack, and it seemed it would never enter this cage again.

Nobin said, "Boro-bou, I would have been relieved if I could have said with all my heart 'don't be late to return', but it didn't come out of my mouth. Go and stay where you are truly respected. If ever you need Nobin for any reason, remember me."

Moti's mother packed amsatva, pickles, etc., made with her own hands into a pot and put them in the palanquin. She didn't say much. But she had a bit of objection in her heart. As long as the obstacle was gross, as long as Madhusudan had insulted Kumu from the outside, Moti's mother's whole heart had been on Kumu's side; but that the obstacle was subtle, that it was essential, that it was hard to define by analysis, and that its power was the strongest—this fact was not easy for Moti's mother. That a wife should consider it good fortune the moment a husband becomes favorable—Moti's mother knows this to be natural. She considers any exception to this as excess. Even that Nobin still has sympathy for the Boro-bou makes her angry. That Kumu's innate aversion is entirely genuine, that it is not pride, or even that this is a fierce conflict Kumu has with herself—it is hard for women generally to admit this. The Chinese girl who didn't object to deforming her feet following custom—if she hears that there are girls in the world who consider it insulting to accept this oppression of foot-binding, she would surely laugh it off, surely say it is affectation. What is deeply natural, she knows to be unnatural. Moti's mother had suffered the most in Kumu's sorrow one day; perhaps that is why today her heart had begun to harden so much. When adverse fate comes to bestow a boon, for a girl not to accept that boon by bowing her head at its feet

immediately is impossible for Moti's mother to show sympathy for—or even to forgive.

CHAPTER 46

As the palanquin neared the house, Kumu peeked through the door and looked up. At this hour, Bipradas usually sat on the veranda reading the newspaper, but today, he was nowhere to be seen. No word had been sent that Kumu was coming. Seeing the Maharaja's insignia on the guard accompanying the palanquin, the gatekeeper grew flustered, realizing it was the eldest daughter-in-law. The palanquin moved past the outer courtyard towards the inner quarters, but Kumu had it stopped. She quickly ascended the outer stairs, desperate to see her brother before anyone else could see her. She knew he was being kept in the outer sitting room, a space where one could look out of the window and see a gathering of Krishnachura, Kanchan, and Ashwattha trees. The morning sun entered this room first through the branches. It was Bipradas's favorite space.

As Kumu reached the stairs, Tom the dog came bounding, leaping upon her and wagging his tail in a frenzy. Kumu walked on, with Tom jumping and barking beside her. Bipradas was leaning against the back of a reclining couch, half-lying down with a cotton quilt drawn over his legs. A book lay in his right hand, which rested on the bed as if he had just stopped reading out of exhaustion. A cup of tea and a saucer with a half-eaten piece of bread lay on the floor nearby. On the shelf against the wall near the head of the bed, books were piled in disarray. The lamp that had burned through the night still sat in the corner, its glass stained with soot.

Kumu looked at Bipradas's face and recoiled. She had never seen him look so pale and sickly. It felt as if an age had passed between the Bipradas she knew and the one before her. Placing her head at his feet, she began to cry.

"Kumu, you've come? Come, sit here," Bipradas said, pulling her close. Though he had practically forbidden her to come in his letter, he had secretly hoped she would. Seeing her there, he felt that perhaps there were no barriers—perhaps her life in that other house had become easier. Usually, it was the custom for the other side to propose her visit and send the palanquin and attendants; that Kumu had come without this, despite the distance, suggested a level of independence that Bipradas had never dared to imagine for her in Madhusudan's household.

Kumu smoothed his disheveled hair with both hands. "Dada, what has happened to you? You look so ill."

"Nothing has happened lately to make me look better. But look at you! You've become so pale."

Hearing the news, Kshemapisi arrived, followed by a crowd of maids and servants. As Kumu bowed to her, Kshemapisi pulled her into a tight embrace and kissed her forehead. After the customary greetings, Kumu said, "Pisi, Dada looks so poorly."

"It's no wonder! He refuses to get better because he hasn't had your care. He's so used to it."

"Pisi," Bipradas said, "aren't you going to feed Kumu?"

"Of course I will! Does that even need to be said? I've already sat down the palanquin bearers and guards to eat. You two talk now, I'm off."

Bipradas gestured for Kshemapisi to come closer and whispered something in her ear. Kumu understood it was a discussion on how to dismiss the people from her husband's house. In this consultation, Kumu felt she had become the 'other party'—she had no say in the matter. She didn't like it at all. She decided to retaliate. She began the work of reclaiming her lifelong place in this house.

First, she whispered a command to Gokul, Dada's valet, and then began rearranging the room to her liking. She moved the saucer, cup, empty soda bottles, a broken cane chair, and dirty towels and undershirts off the outer veranda. She organized the books on the shelf, moved a small side table closer to Dada, and neatly arranged his reading book, pen stand, blotting pad, a glass carafe of drinking water and a glass, a small mirror, and a hairbrush.

By then, Gokul had brought a brass jug of hot water, a brass basin, and a clean towel on a wicker stool. Without waiting for his consent, Kumu soaked a towel in the hot water, wiped Dada's face and hands, and brushed his hair. Bipradas submitted like a child. Having learned when to give his medicine and what his diet should be, she settled in as if she had no other responsibilities in life.

Bipradas wondered to himself: what did this mean? He had thought she had come to visit and would return, but it didn't seem so. He wanted to know how Kumu's relationship stood in her in-laws' house, but felt shy to ask directly. He waited, hoping to hear it from her own lips. Finally, he asked softly, "When do you have to leave today?"

"I don't have to leave today," Kumu replied.

Bipradas was surprised. "Does your husband's house have no objection to this?"

"No, my husband has given his consent."

Bipradas remained silent. Kumu began spreading a cloth over the table in the corner, organizing the medicine bottles. After a while, Bipradas asked, "Then do you have to leave tomorrow?"

"No, I will stay with you for a few days."

Tom the dog, who had been sleeping under the couch, was coaxed into a frenzy of affection by Kumu. He jumped up, putting his front paws on her lap and making sounds of 'conversation.' Bipradas realized Kumu was using the commotion to hide behind the dog.

After a while, Kumu stopped playing with the dog and looked up. "Dada, it's time for your barley water. Should I bring it?"

"No, not yet," he said, gesturing for her to sit on the stool by the bed. Taking her hand in his, he said, "Kumu, tell me honestly, how are things going there?"

Kumu couldn't speak at first. She sat with her head bowed, her face turning crimson, and then, burying her face against Bipradas's broad chest like a child, she broke into tears. "Dada, I misunderstood everything. I knew nothing."

Bipradas stroked her hair gently. After a while, he said, "I couldn't teach you properly. If Mother were here, she could have prepared you for your in-laws' house."

"I have only ever known you," Kumu said. "I never imagined that another place could be so different. Everything I imagined since childhood was based on your world. That's why I wasn't afraid. I know Father caused Mother pain sometimes, but that was sheer playfulness—the pain was on the surface, not deep within. Here, every single thing feels like a personal, internal insult."

Bipradas sat in silence, sighing, lost in thought. He had understood from the very beginning of the wedding ceremonies that Madhusudan belonged to an entirely different world. His anxiety over this had kept his health from improving. There was no way to rescue Kumu from the clumsy, heavy-handed grasp of this man. The

greatest difficulty was that his entire estate was mortgaged to Madhusudan through debt. Kumu, too, was feeling the shock of this humiliated relationship. Lying on his sickbed, Bipradas had only thought about how he could free himself from this debt. He hadn't wanted to come to Calcutta, fearing that simple interaction with Kumu's in-laws would become impossible. He had decided to live in Nurnagar to ensure that his natural right to affection for Kumu wouldn't be constantly insulted. He had been forced to come to Calcutta to arrange a loan from another moneylender. He knew this was a daunting task, and the weight of that anxiety sat heavy on his chest.

After a while, Kumu turned her head away. "Dada, I cannot seem to bring myself to be happy with my husband. Is this a sin?"

"Kumu, you know my opinions on sin and virtue don't align with the scriptures."

Kumu absentmindedly flipped through the pages of an English magazine. Bipradas said, "People's lives can be so different in their events and circumstances that if we fix rigid rules of good and evil, they often remain just rules, not Dharma."

Looking down at the magazine, Kumu whispered, "Like the life of Meera Bai."

Whenever the conflict between duty and personal desire became unbearable, Kumu thought of Meera Bai. She desperately wished someone could help her understand Meera Bai's ideal properly.

"Meera Bai found her true husband within her own heart, which is why she could let go of her worldly husband," Kumu ventured, trying to overcome her hesitation. "But do I have that great right to leave the world behind?"

"Kumu, you have found your Lord with all your heart," Bipradas said.

"I thought so once. But when I faced this crisis, I felt my spirit wither. I try so hard, but I cannot make Him feel real to me! That is my greatest sorrow."

"Kumu, the mind has its tides. Do not be afraid. The night comes, but the day does not die because of it. What you have found has become one with your soul."

"Bless me, Dada, that I do not lose Him. He is merciless—He gives pain only to reveal Himself. I am exhausting you with my worries."

"Kumu, worrying about you has been a habit since your childhood. If I stopped hearing from you or couldn't worry for you, everything would feel empty. My mind is tired from trying to grasp that emptiness."

Kumu stroked his feet. "Don't worry about me, Dada. The One who will protect me is within me; I am in no danger."

"Very well, let's leave that aside. I want to teach you music today, just as I used to."

"It is a blessing that you taught me, Dada—that is what saves me. But not today. You need to regain your strength. Instead, let me sing for you."

Sitting by his bedside, Kumu began to sing softly—

Pia ghar aaye, sohi pritam piya pyaar re. Meera ke prabhu Giridhar nagar, Charan-kamal balihar re.

Bipradas closed his eyes and listened. As she sang, Kumu's eyes filled with a wondrous vision. Her inner sky lit up. The Beloved had come home; she could feel the lotus-feet against her heart. Her inner world, where the union truly happens, became profoundly real. She had reached that place while singing. Charan-kamal balihar re—those lotus-feet filled her entire being, there was no end to them—where was there any room for sorrow or insult in the world? Pia ghar aaye—what more could one want? If this song never ended, Kumu felt she would be saved forever.

Gokul left some toast and a cup of barley water on the side table. Kumu stopped singing. "Dada, I was looking for a Guru a while ago, but why? You have already given me the mantra of music."

"Kumu, don't embarrass me. Gurus like me are found on every street corner; they give mantras to others without knowing their meaning themselves. Tell me, Kumu, how long will you be able to stay here?"

"Until I am called back."

"Did you want to come here?"

"No, I didn't."

"What does that mean?"

"There is no gain in pondering the 'why,' Dada. I wouldn't understand even if I tried. It is enough that I could come to you. As long as I can stay, that is good. Dada, you aren't eating, please have your food."

A servant arrived with the news that Mukujje-moshai had arrived. Bipradas said, "Show him in."

CHAPTER 47

As Kalu entered the room, Kumu bowed to him.

"So, little girl, you've come?" Kalu said. "Now Dada won't take long to recover."

Kumu's eyes welled up. Holding back her tears, she asked, "Dada, won't you add lemon juice to your barley?"

Bipradas waved his hand indifferently—as if it didn't matter. Kumu knew Bipradas didn't like barley, which is why whenever she fed him, she would mix in lemon juice, a little rose water, and ice, turning it into a sherbet. That preparation was missing today, yet Bipradas hadn't expressed his preference to anyone, eating whatever he was given with distaste.

Kumu went to prepare the barley properly.

Bipradas asked anxiously, "Kalu-da, what's the news?"

"No one is willing to give a loan on your signature alone; they want Subodh's signature too. Some wealthy Marwaris might lend, but it's like gambling—the interest is exorbitantly high, we can't afford it."

"Kalu-da, we must telegraph Subodh to come. We can't delay any longer."

"I don't like it either. When I went to pay a part of the principal debt that time with the money from the sale of your ring, Madhusudan refused to take it; that's when I knew things weren't right. He'll tighten the noose whenever he feels like it."

Bipradas sat in silence, thinking.

"Dada," Kalu said, "little girl came suddenly this morning, she didn't come in anger, did she? We aren't in a position to annoy Madhusudan, we must remember that."

"Kumu says she has her husband's consent."

"I won't be at peace until I know what that 'consent' looks like. I can't tell you how carefully I behave with him. Even when my whole body is burning with rage, I stay cool and endure it all; like Mount Gauri-Shankar, his ice doesn't melt even in the midday sun. Dealing with a moneylender who is also your brother-in-law is no easy task!"

Bipradas didn't reply and sat thinking.

Kumu returned with the barley. She held the cup to Bipradas's lips. "Dada, drink up."

Bipradas started from his thoughts. Kumu realized he had been lost in deep anxiety.

When Kalu left the room, Kumu followed him to the veranda and caught him by the arm. "Kalu-da, you must tell me everything."

"What is there to tell, sister?"

"You are worried about something."

"Is it possible to have a household without worries, little girl? It's the fruit of a thorny tree; one must pick and eat it when hungry, even if it tears your skin."

"We can talk about that later, tell me what happened."

"Women are forbidden to talk about business affairs."

"I know exactly what you are talking about. Should I say it?"

"Very well, say it."

"It's about the debt Dada owes my husband."

Kalu stared at Kumu, his large eyes widening with a playful, surprised smile, not uttering a word.

"You have to tell me if I'm right."

"She is Dada's sister, after all—she understands things before they are said."

From the first day after the wedding when Madhusudan had bragged and threatened Bipradas as his creditor, Kumu had understood the indignity of the relationship. She had wished every day for it to end. She had no doubt that this dishonor stung Bipradas. When Nabin explained Bipradas's letter, Kumu realized that this debt relationship was the root of everything. She understood clearly why Dada was so exhausted and why he had come to Calcutta in such a rush.

"Kalu-da, don't hide it from me. Dada has come to borrow money."

"Well, debts must be repaid with more debt; money doesn't fall from the sky. Being a debtor to relatives isn't a good thing."

"True, but have you managed to find the money?"

"I'm scouting around, it'll happen, don't fear."

"No, I know you haven't been able to manage it."

"Very well, little girl, if you know everything, why ask me? When you were a child, you pulled my mustache and asked how it grew. I told you I planted mustache seeds at the right time. That settled the question then. Now, I'd need a doctor to give you an answer. It's not the rule of the world that everything must be spelled out to you."

"I'm telling you, Kalu-da, I must know everything regarding Dada."

"Even how Dada's mustache grew?"

"See, you can't dismiss it like that. I know from Dada's face that you haven't managed the money."

"If you haven't managed, what will you gain by knowing?"

"I don't know, but I must know. Didn't you get the loan?"

"No, I didn't."

"You won't get it easily?"

"I will surely get it, but not easily. Now, sister, instead of trying to answer your questions, if I go out and try to get the work done, it might progress. I'm off."

Kalu returned a moment later. "Little girl, is there no thorn in your coming here today? Tell me the truth."

"I don't know clearly if there is or not."

"Did you get your husband's consent?"

"He gave it without me even asking."

"In anger?"

"I'm not sure of that either; he said there's no need for me to go until he sends for me."

"That's not a practical way to deal with things. Go before that, go on your own."

"If I go, I will be disobeying his orders."

"Well, I'll see about that."

Kumu could not stop thinking that she was the cause of Dada's terrible crisis. She felt like punishing herself, severely. She had heard of ascetics who slept on beds of thorns; she was ready to sleep like that if it could achieve anything. If some yogi or enlightened soul could show her the way, she would sell her soul to them. Surely someone like that existed, but where? If she weren't a woman, she would have found some way. But what was her second brother doing? How could he bear to leave the entire burden on Dada and live in England?

Kumu entered the room to find Bipradas lying silently on the bed, staring at the ceiling. How could his health improve like this? She felt like banging her head against the door of a cruel fate.

Sitting by his bedside and stroking his hair, Kumu asked, "When will Mejo-dada come?"

"I can't say."

"Write to him and ask him to come."

"Why, tell me!"

"You bear all the burdens of the household alone; how can you carry them?"

"Some have claims, others have burdens; the household is made of these two. I have made this burden my own, why should I give it to someone else?"

"If I were a man, I would have snatched it away from you."

"Now you understand, Kumu, there is a greed in taking on burdens. You want to satisfy your desire through your Mejo-dada because you can't take it on yourself. Why blame me?"

"Dada, did you come to borrow money?"

"How did you figure that out?"

"I understood from your face. Can't I do anything?"

"What can you do, tell me."

"Think of something, maybe signing a document. Isn't my signature worth anything?"

"It has great value; but to us, not to the moneylender."

"I beg you, Dada, tell me what I can do."

"Be a good girl, stay calm, wait with patience—remember that in this world, that is a great task too. Just as keeping a boat steady in a storm is a task, keeping one's head steady is the same. Bring me my Esraj, let me play a little."

"Dada, I desperately want to do something."

"Isn't playing music 'something'?"

"I want a really hard task."

"Playing the Esraj is much harder than signing a document. Bring the instrument."

CHAPTER 48

Just as everyone feared Madhusudan, so did Shyama Sundari. Deep down, she felt Madhusudan had sometimes tilted toward her, but she couldn't figure out the path to reach him. She had tried and was rebuffed every time. Madhusudan was building his business with singular devotion; he treated women with utter disdain for the sake of his pursuit of wealth, which is why women feared him greatly. But even this fear had an attraction. With a trembling heart and cautious behavior, Shyama Sundari had often hovered near him behind a slight veil. Every time Madhusudan showed her a little indulgence out of carelessness, the fear became real; and soon after, Madhusudan would try to prove that women were insignificant in his life. Thus, Shyama Sundari had kept herself very restrained for a long time.

After Madhusudan's marriage, she could no longer remain calm. If Madhusudan treated Kumu with disdain like other women, she might have tolerated it. But when Shyama saw that Madhusudan could be blinded by a woman, it was no longer easy for her to remain restrained. Over the past few days, she had dared to move closer and saw that it was possible. She had faced minor hurdles, but they too melted away. Madhusudan's weakness had been exposed, and Shyama could no longer hold back her patience. Madhusudan had never drawn Shyama as close as he did the night before Kumu left. After that, she feared a strong push-back. But Shyama had understood that if she didn't show cowardice, the reason for her fear would vanish on its own.

Madhusudan had gone out early and returned home after one o'clock. He hadn't broken his routine of bath and food for a long time. Today, he was extremely exhausted when he arrived, and the first thing he thought of was that Kumu had gone to her Dada's house and was happy to be there. Madhusudan had stood on his own for so long; when he finally let his guard down, a latent desire to find refuge in a woman's love during his physical and mental weakness had awakened. That was why Kumu's departure caused him such indignation. Today, Shyama Sundari didn't intentionally come to sit near him during his meal; she didn't know if Madhusudan would be annoyed with himself after revealing his vulnerability the previous night. After eating, Madhusudan sat silently in his bedroom, then called for Shyama. Shyama entered the room wearing a red foreign shawl, standing

hesitantly to one side with downcast eyes. Madhusudan called, "Come, come here and sit."

Shyama sat by the head of the bed. "You look so frail today," she said, leaning over and stroking his hair.

"Ah, your hands are quite cool," Madhusudan said.

When Madhusudan went to bed that night, Shyama Sundari entered the room uninvited. "Ah, you are alone."

Shyama Sundari shed her veil with a hint of defiance. She wanted to solidify her hold on him with everyone as witness. There was no time to lose; Kumu could return at any moment, and she had to establish her territory before that. If the occupation was public, it had strength—she couldn't afford to be shy anywhere. Soon, the maids and servants knew of the situation. The dam of Madhusudan's long-suppressed desires burst with full force; he didn't care for anyone. He displayed his intoxication very crudely.

Nabin and Motir Ma both understood that this tide could not be stopped.

"Won't you call Didimoni? Is it wise to delay?"

"That's what I'm thinking. Nothing can be done without Dada's orders. Let me try."

The morning Nabin came to bring up the matter to his elder brother, he saw Dada was ready to leave, his carriage waiting at the door.

"Are you going out somewhere?" Nabin asked.

"To that astrologer, Venkat-swami."

He had wanted to hide his weakness from Nabin. Suddenly, he thought it might be convenient to take him along. "Come with me," he said.

Nabin thought, 'Disaster.' "Let me see if he's home. I have a feeling he's gone back to his country, at least that's what I heard."

"Well, let's go and see."

Nabin went along helplessly, worried.

As the carriage stood before the astrologer's house, Nabin quickly got out, peeked inside, and said, "It seems there's no one home."

Just then, Venkat-swami himself emerged, chewing on a neem twig. Nabin quickly bowed near him and whispered, "Be careful what you say."

They all sat on a cot in the dingy room. Nabin sat behind Madhusudan. Before Madhusudan could say anything, Nabin blurted out, "The Maharaja is going through a very bad time; tell us when the planets will be pacified, Shastriji."

Madhusudan was extremely annoyed by Nabin's question and pinched his thigh hard with his thumb.

Venkat-swami drew a chart and showed clearly that Saturn was casting its gaze on Madhusudan's house of wealth.

There was no gain for Madhusudan in knowing the name of the planet; dealing with it was hard. He wanted the identity of the person acting as his enemy. Nabin didn't know anything about Madhusudan's office affairs. Signs wouldn't help. Venkat-swami recited scriptures and peeked at Madhusudan's face. When it came to names, the sage was silent. Suddenly, the Shastri said, "An enemy is a woman."

Nabin breathed a sigh of relief. If he could somehow frame Shyama Sundari as that woman, his worries would be over. Madhusudan wanted a name. The Shastri began the alphabet. He listened as if to an invisible sage, looking at Madhusudan. When he heard 'Ka,' Madhusudan looked surprised. From behind, Nabin signaled 'No' by shaking his head right and left. Nabin didn't know that in Madras, this signal meant the opposite. Venkat-swami had no doubt—he said loudly, "Ka-varga." He had guessed from Madhusudan's face that the first letter was 'Ka.' He explained, "All the evil in your life is contained within this 'Ka'."

Without pressing for the full name, Madhusudan asked anxiously, "The remedy?"

Venkat-swami said gravely, "Kantakenai-va kantakam—meaning, another woman will save you."

Madhusudan was startled. Venkat-swami was a student of human nature.

Nabin asked anxiously, "Swami-ji, did the Maharaja's horse win the race?"

Venkat-swami, knowing most horses don't win, pretended to calculate and said, "I see a loss."

Madhusudan's horse had won a big race shortly before. Without giving Madhusudan time to speak, Nabin asked with a very distressed face, "Swami-ji, what will become of my daughter?" (Needless to say, Nabin had no daughter).

Venkat-swami surely thought he was searching for a match. Seeing Nabin's face, he realized the girl wasn't an Apsara. He said, "A match won't be found soon, it will cost a lot of money."

After getting weird answers to ten or twelve absurd questions, Nabin said, "Dada, why more? Let's go now."

Once in the carriage, Nabin said, "Dada, it's all his trickery. A fraud!"

"But that day—"

"He had information beforehand."

"How did he know I would come?"

"My own foolishness. It was my fault I brought you to him."

Despite the proof of the astrologer's fraud, the 'Ka-varga' evil remained stuck in Madhusudan's mind. He realized the stars might ignore trivial questions, but they aren't wrong about essential ones. The bad time he hadn't even expected came along with his marriage. What clearer proof could there be?

Nabin spoke slowly, "Dada, two weeks have passed, let's bring back the Bou-rani."

"Why, what's the rush? Listen, Nabin, I'm telling you never to raise this topic again. I will bring her whenever I feel like it."

Nabin knew his brother; the topic was closed.

Still, he dared to ask, "If Mejo-bou goes to see the Bou-rani, is there any harm?"

Madhusudan said dismissively, "Let her go."

CHAPTER 49

Bipradas gestured to a chair. "Come, Nabin-babu, sit here."

"You haven't recognized me, it seems," Nabin said. "You think I'm some pampered boy of the royal house. I am the humble servant of your little sister; do not rob me of your blessings by honoring me. But what have you done? You've left only a shadow of your body!"

"The body is not the truth; the shadow is. It's good to receive that news occasionally. It keeps the final lesson moving forward."

As Kumu entered the room, she said, "Thakurpo, come, eat something."

"I will eat, but there is one condition. The Brahmin guest will wait at your door until it is fulfilled. I requested this at your house, but got no support. You must give me a photograph of yours. You said you didn't have one that day, but you can't say that today; look, it's hanging right there on the wall of your Dada's room."

Good photographs are rare; this one of Kumu was a work of fate. The light that fell on her forehead revealed the expression of her soul. The radiance of clear intellect on her brow, the sorrowful depth of innocence in her eyes—a standing portrait. Kumu's beautiful right hand rested on the arm of an empty chair. It felt as if she had suddenly stood still, seeing a shadow of her own distant self.

Kumu hadn't noticed this picture of herself. Her brother had brought a photographer from Calcutta to take it a few days before the wedding. That he had hung it in his own room made Kumu's heart melt. She looked at her Dada's face. "You understand, Bipradas-babu," Nabin said, "the Bou-rani has taken pity on me. Look, look into her eyes. It is because I am unworthy that she has such special mercy for me."

Bipradas laughed. "Kumu, there are more copies of that picture in my leather box; if you want to grant boons to your devotees, there will be no shortage."

After Kumu took Nabin to eat, Kalu came. "I've telegraphed Mejo-babu to come quickly."

"In my name?"

"Yes, Dada. I know you will waffle till the end, but the time is getting very difficult. What I heard from the doctor, you cannot handle this much pressure."

The doctor had noticed symptoms of a heart ailment; his body and mind needed rest. Bipradas's former addiction to wrestling was taking its toll, compounded by mental anxiety.

Bipradas wondered whether it was right to summon Subodh so urgently; he sat thinking. "Big brother," Kalu said, "don't worry in vain; we need a final solution for the estate affairs right now, and we can't do without him. I won't sell my head to the Marwari for 12% interest. They will cut two lakhs as advance interest. On top of that, there is the brokerage."

"Very well, let Subodh come. But will he come?"

"No matter how much of a 'Sahib' he is, he won't be able to stay away once he gets your wire. Rest assured. But Dada, no more delays—send the little girl to her in-laws'."

Bipradas remained silent for a while. "There is a barrier to her going unless Madhusudan sends for her."

"Why? Is Kumu a laborer on Madhusudan's farm? What kind of orders are needed for her to go to her own house?"

Nabin returned to Bipradas's room alone after his meal. "Kumu is fond of you," Bipradas said.

"She is. I suspect it is because I am unworthy that her affection is so great."

"I want to ask you something about her; do not hide anything from me."

"There is nothing I have that I would hesitate to tell you."

"Kumu has come here, and I feel there is something amiss."

"You have understood correctly. There are places in the world where even the most unimaginable dishonor happens."

"So, she has been dishonored?"

"That is the shame I have come with. I can't do anything else, I just want to bow to your feet and ask for forgiveness in my heart."

"Would there be any harm if Kumu returned to her husband's house today?"

"To tell you the truth, I don't dare tell her to go."

Bipradas didn't ask Nabin exactly what had happened. He thought it would be unjust to ask. He had no appetite to ask Kumu and extract information either. He became restless. Calling Kalu, he asked, "You visit their house, I believe you know something about Madhusudan."

"I have caught glimpses, but I don't want to tell you until I know for sure. Wait two more days, I will be able to give you news."

Bipradas's heart ached with apprehension. Because he had no way to remedy it, the anxiety kept twisting his heart.

CHAPTER 50

Kumu had finally achieved what she had desperately desired; she had returned to that familiar room, to the embrace of her Dada's affection, but she saw that her easy, secure place was gone. She felt in her pride, 'Why go back?' She could clearly see the question in everyone's eyes: 'Why isn't she returning? What happened to her?' There was a deep anxiety hidden within Dada's profound affection; they couldn't discuss it openly, it was about her, and yet it remained unsaid.

It was late afternoon, the sun had faded. Kumu sat by the window. Crows were cawing, and there was the noise of carriages and crowds in the street. The new spring breeze couldn't bring color to the city's bricks. An almond tree stood blocking most of the house in front; the restless wind swayed its deep green leaves, scattering the late afternoon light into fragments. At such times, a pet deer wants to flee toward the unknown forest. On days when the wind carries the touch of spring, it feels as if the earth is eagerly looking toward the distant path of the blue sky. Whatever is built around feels false, and the mind calls the unreachable—the image of which scatters colors into the sky—the only truth. Today, Kumu's mind was gasping, wanting to flee everything, even from herself. But what a fence! There was no liberation even in this house today. In her imagination, she made death sweet. She thought, 'Beyond the black Jamuna, toward that dark Beloved, I am walking day after day—such a long, sorrowful path.' She remembered Dada's illness had worsened—I came to serve, but I only increased it; now whatever I try to do will have the opposite effect. Covering her face with both hands, Kumu cried for a long time. When the sobbing subsided, she decided to return home—let happen what may—she would endure everything—in the end, there was liberation—cool, deep, sweet. The more she clung to the imagination of death, the less the burden of life seemed unbearable. She began to hum—

Path par royon andheri, Kunj par deep ujjara.

At noon, Kumu had left after putting Dada to sleep; by now, it was time for his medicine and diet. Coming into the room, she saw Bipradas sitting up, portfolio on his lap, writing a long letter in English to Subodh. "Dada," Kumu said reproachfully, "you didn't sleep well today."

"You've decided that resting only happens when you sleep! When the mind feels the need to write a letter, writing the letter is the rest."

Kumu understood; the need was about her. One brother across the sea was anxious, the other across the sea was restless—what fate was this sister born with! After Dada had his tea, she said softly, "It's been a long time, I've decided to go home now."

Bipradas looked at Kumu's face to understand the nature of the statement. The clear communication between brother and sister was gone; now they had to grope for words. Bipradas stopped writing. He sat Kumu beside him and gently stroked her hand without saying anything. Kumu understood his language. The knots of the household had tightened, but there was no lack of love. Tears welled up; she closed her eyes tightly. Kumu told herself, 'I won't burden this love.' So she said again, "Dada, I've decided to go."

Bipradas couldn't decide what to say, as Kumu's going was perhaps for the best, or at least the right thing to do. He remained silent. Just then, the dog woke up, put its paws on Kumu's lap, and begged for a piece of Bipradas's bread.

Ramswarup the bearer arrived with the news that Mukujje-moshai had arrived. "Dada, you didn't sleep during the day," Kumu said anxiously. "On top of that, you'll be exhausted from arguing with Kalu-da. I'll go and hear what he has to say, then come and tell you."

"You've become a great doctor! Do you think the patient's mind is calmer if someone else listens to the news?"

"I won't listen, but let it be for today."

"Kumu, the English poet said, 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter.' Likewise, heard news can be tiring, but unheard news is even more tiring; therefore, it's best to hear it immediately."

"But I'll be back in fifteen minutes, and if your talk hasn't stopped, I'll play the Bhimpalashri right in the middle of it."

"Very well, agreed."

Kumu entered with the Esraj half an hour later, but seeing the expression on Bipradas's face, she leaned the instrument in the corner and sat beside him, taking his hand. "What happened, Dada?"

The restlessness Kumu had observed in Bipradas had a deep melancholy. Many sorrows had passed through Bipradas's life, but no one had seen him easily disturbed. Because of his curiosity in diverse subjects—books, music, telescopes, horse riding, gardening—he never let personal sorrows accumulate within. Now, the weakness of disease had bound him too tightly within his small circle. He became eager for service and companionship, anxious if he didn't receive letters, and his thoughts grew dark. Thus, Kumu's affection for her Dada today took the form of maternal love—how did the child-like quality emerge in such a patient, self-contained Dada? Such demands, such restlessness, such obstinacy. And along with it, such profound melancholy and anxiety.

But Kumu saw that the trance had left her Dada. The fire in his eyes was like the fire of Mahadev's third eye—not for his own pain—he was seeing some sin in the world before him, and he wanted to burn it. Bipradas remained silent, staring intently at the wall.

After a while, Kumu asked again, "Dada, tell me what happened."

"Trying to avoid sorrow brings more sorrow," Bipradas said, staring into the distance. "One must accept it with force."

"You advise me, and I can accept it, Dada."

"I can see that the dishonor women face exists within the entire society; it is not of just one woman."

Kumu didn't fully understand her Dada's words.

"I was suffering by thinking of the pain as my own," Bipradas continued. "Today I realize I must fight this, for everyone."

A red glow appeared on Bipradas's pale face. He pushed away the silk-embroidered cushion on his lap. He started to rise, but Kumu held his hand. "Calm down, Dada, don't get up, your illness will worsen." She gently helped him lean back on the pillows.

Bipradas clutched his garment. "Because there is no other way for women but to endure, they are constantly being struck. The day has come to say we will not endure. Kumu, can you stay here considering it your home? You cannot go back to that house."

Bipradas had heard much from Kalu today.

The relationship between Shyama Sundari and Madhusudan was no longer hidden. Both sides were unashamed. They grew defiant thinking people considered them guilty. There was no subtlety in this relationship, so there was no need for them to respect each other or public opinion. It was rumored Madhusudan sometimes beat Shyama Sundari; when she quarreled loudly, Madhusudan told her before everyone, "Get out, you wretch, get out of my house." But even that didn't change anything. Madhusudan maintained his absolute authority over Shyama; whenever Shyama tried to grab more than what Madhusudan gave her, she was rebuked. Shyama wanted to occupy Motir Ma's place in the household, but was blocked; Madhusudan trusted Motir Ma completely, not Shyama Sundari. His imagination didn't color his feelings for Shyama, yet a very crude attachment had grown. Like a dirty, worn-out quilt in winter, devoid of any craft, not something to be cared for—it didn't matter if it fell from the bed to the dust. But there was comfort in it. There was no need to be careful with Shyama; moreover, knowing that Shyama respected him with her whole heart and soul, and was ready to endure anything, kept Madhusudan's self-respect healthy. During Kumu's time, his self-respect had been bruised too often.

Kalu didn't have to search hard to find this modern history of Madhusudan. There was enough talk about it among the household staff; eventually, it became so mundane that the talk had almost ceased.

The news hit Bipradas like an arrow of fire. Madhusudan hadn't tried to hide anything; publicly insulting his wife was so easy—the external barriers to oppressing one's wife were so few. A thousand kinds of instruments and tortures had been created in society to force a woman to be submissive to her husband, yet no mandatory path had been kept to save the powerless woman from the husband's oppression. Bipradas realized in an instant how this cruel sorrow and dishonor had been spreading from home to home for ages. An attempt to mask this

pain with the pride of 'chastity,' but no attempt to make the suffering impossible. Women were so cheap, so insignificant!

"Kumu," Bipradas said, "enduring dishonor is not difficult, but enduring it is wrong. On behalf of all women, you must claim your own respect. Let society give you whatever sorrow it can."

"Dada, I don't clearly understand what dishonor you are talking about."

"Do you not know everything?"

"No."

Bipradas remained silent. "The sorrow of women's dishonor has accumulated in my heart," he said later. "Do you know why?"

Kumu looked at his face. "Mother endured so much suffering her whole life, I can't forget it. Our society, devoid of righteousness, is responsible for that."

Here was the difference between the brother and sister. Kumu loved her father very much and knew how soft his heart was. She couldn't help but think her father was a great man, and she secretly blamed her mother for the tragic end of her father's life.

Bipradas also respected his father as a great man. But that he didn't stop himself from dishonoring his mother repeatedly through his lapses was something he couldn't forgive. Bipradas felt proud that his mother hadn't forgiven him either.

"Mother's dishonor was the dishonor of all womankind," Bipradas said. "Kumu, you must stand against that dishonor, forgetting your personal life—do not surrender."

Kumu lowered her head and whispered, "Dada, don't forget Father loved Mother very much. Much sin is pardoned through that love."

"I accept that, but even with so much love, that he could so easily dishonor Mother—that sin belongs to society. I cannot forgive society; it has no love, only mandates."

"Dada, have you heard something?"

"Yes, I have. I will tell you everything gradually later."

"That is better. I fear these discussions today will weaken your health even more."

"No, Kumu, just the opposite. The fatigue of sorrow was making my body wither. Today, when my mind says I must fight until the last day of my life, strength is coming from within my body."

"Fight against what, Dada?"

"Fight against the society that has cheated women of their worth. I must think what else I can do—today marks the start, Kumu. You have a place in this house, it is completely your own—not compromised with anyone else. You will stay here by your own strength."

"Very well, Dada, it will be so, but don't speak anymore."

Just then, news arrived that Motir Ma had come.

CHAPTER 51

Kumu sat in the bedroom with Motir Ma. As they spoke, darkness descended. A bearer came to light the lamps, but Kumu forbade him.

Kumu listened to everything; she remained silent.

Motir Ma said, "A dark blight has settled over that house, Bou-rani; it is impossible to survive there. Will you not go back?"

"Have I been summoned?"

"No, I don't suppose the thought of summoning you has even crossed his mind. But you simply must go; there is no other way."

"What is there for me to do? I will never be able to satisfy him. Come to think of it, everything that happened was for my sake, yet there was no way out. He could not accept what I had to give. What will I do there today, going back with empty hands?"

"What are you saying, Bou-rani? The household is yours; you cannot let it slip from your grasp."

"What do you mean by 'household,' sister? The house, the doors, the belongings, the people? I feel ashamed to even claim that I have any right to them. I have lost my right to the inner sanctum; can I now harbor greed for those external things?"

"What are you saying, Bou-rani? Will you absolutely never return home?"

"I cannot understand everything clearly anymore. A few days ago, I would have sought a sign from my Lord, I would have gone to an astrologer. But all those reliances have been washed away. In the beginning, all the omens were auspicious. Yet in the end, not a single one held true. How many times today have I sat and thought that had I relied on Dada's judgment rather than the deity's, such a disaster would never have occurred. And yet, despite the doubts that have arisen in my mind regarding the deity, I cannot escape Him in my heart. I keep falling back and surrendering right there."

"It frightens me to hear you speak like this. Will you truly never go back?"

"It is hard to imagine that I will never go back, but to say I will go is not easy either."

"Well, let me go and speak to your brother once. Let us see what he says. Will I be able to see him?"

"Come, I will take you to him right now."

Entering Bipradas's room and seeing his condition, Motir Ma stopped in her tracks; he looked like a ruined temple after an earthquake, its spires shattered and its sacred lamps extinguished. Within, there was only darkness and a profound silence. She bowed, taking the dust of his feet, and sat on the floor.

Bipradas said anxiously, "Please, there is a chair right here."

Shaking her head, Motir Ma said, "No, I am quite alright here."

From behind her veil, her eyes brimmed with tears. She understood that seeing her brother in this state was causing Kumu immense pain.

To ease into the subject, Kumu said, "Dada, she has come specifically to ask your opinion."

Motir Ma interjected, "No, no, asking for an opinion is a secondary matter; I came primarily to pay my respects to his feet."

"She wishes to know," Kumu continued, "whether I must return to their house."

Bipradas sat up. He said, "That is someone else's house; how can Kumu go and live there?" Had he spoken in a tone of anger, the fire within his words would not have burned so intensely. His voice was calm; there was no sign of agitation on his face.

Motir Ma whispered something. Her intention was for Kumu, sitting beside her, to relay her words to Bipradas. Kumu did not agree. She said, "Speak up and tell him yourself."

Raising her voice slightly, Motir Ma said, "What belongs to her cannot be made alien by anyone, no matter who he is."

"That is not true. She is merely a dependent there. She has no power to assert her own rights. If he throws her out of the house, people might criticize him, but they will not stop him. All the punishment is solely for her. Yet, even the refuge of charity could be endured, provided it was a noble refuge."

Motir Ma could not fathom how to answer such words. When an obstacle arises in a husband's shelter, it is the woman's family who usually falls at their feet, begging for grace; this was the exact opposite.

Remaining silent for a moment, she said, "But without a household of their own, women cannot survive. Men can drift around, but women need a place of stability."

"Stability where? In the midst of dishonor? I am telling you, the One who created Kumu created her from beginning to end with the utmost reverence. No one possesses the right to despise Kumu—not even an Emperor."

Motir Ma loved and revered Kumu deeply, yet the idea that a woman could hold such immense value that her dignity would surpass her husband's simply did not sit right with her. A husband and wife might quarrel, a wife might suffer neglect and insult as her fate, and she might even ingest opium or hang herself to escape it—that could be understood. But for a wife to completely disregard her husband and stand solely on her own strength, Motir Ma considered this sheer audacity. Why such arrogance for the female caste? No matter how unworthy or unjust Madhusudan might be, he was still a man; in that one aspect, he was naturally superior to his wife, and no earthly logic applied there. Who could win a lawsuit against the Creator?

Motir Ma said, "She will have to go there one day; there is no other path."

"The phrase 'will have to' applies to no human being except a slave."

"Once the mantras are chanted, the wife has been bought. The day she walked the seven circles around the fire, she was bound in body and mind; there is no longer any escape for her. This bond is stronger than death. Having been born a woman, a woman's fate for this lifetime cannot be reversed by any means."

Bipradas realized that a woman's dignity was valued least by women themselves. They did not even know that this was precisely why it was so easy for women to be humiliated in every home. They had extinguished their own light and sat in darkness. And then they constantly died of fear, died of anxiety, constantly suffered beatings at the hands of unworthy men, and believed that enduring it all in silence was the highest fulfillment of their birth as a woman. No—such profound degradation of humanity could not be indulged. The society that had degraded her so far was being degraded by her every single day.

Beside Bipradas's bed, Kumu sat on the floor with her head bowed. Saying nothing to Motir Ma, Bipradas placed his hand on Kumu's head and said, "Let me tell you something, Kumu, try to understand. Where power is merely inherited, where it faces no scrutiny, where it requires no proof of worthiness to maintain its authority—in such a world, it only breeds degradation. I have told you this many times; you could not overcome your conditioning, and so you suffered. When you took special care to feed the Brahmins, I never stopped you; I only tried to explain repeatedly that blindly acknowledging a person's superiority without reason not only harms that person but also diminishes the very ideal of greatness in society. Why does no one consider that through such blind reverence, we disrespect our own humanity? You have read a little English literature; do you not understand that a wind of rebellion is blowing across the entire world today against all such faction-made, scripture-made, unquestioned authorities? The day has come to tear down the nest of willful, blind servitude that humanity has nurtured for so long under the guise of noble names."

Keeping her head bowed, Kumu asked, "Dada, are you saying a wife should overstep her husband?"

"I only condemn an unjust overstepping. A husband, too, should not overstep his wife—that is my belief."

"If he does, should the wife then—"

Before Kumu could finish, Bipradas interjected, "If the wife accepts that injustice, then an injustice is committed against all women. It is through everyone's compliance that the sorrow of all has accumulated. The path of tyranny has been paved."

In a slightly impatient tone, Motir Ma said, "Our Bou-rani is a pure and virtuous wife (Sati-Lakshmi); if someone insults her, that insult cannot even touch her."

Bipradas's voice now flared with agitation. "You are only thinking of the virtuous wife! Why do you not think of the degradation of the coward who has been granted the absolute right to insult her freely and exercises it every single day?"

Kumu instantly stood up, running her fingers through Bipradas's hair, and said, "Dada, do not speak anymore. What you call liberation, what comes through knowledge, faces a barrier within our very blood. We cling to people, and we cling

to beliefs; we simply cannot untangle the knots. The more we are struck, the more we return and get entangled again. You know much, and through that, your mind finds freedom; we revere much, and through that, the emptiness of our lives is filled. When you explain it to me, I can understand that perhaps I am wrong. But is understanding a mistake the same as being able to let it go? Like the creeping tendrils of a vine, our devotion desperately clings to everything—be it good or bad—and after that, we can no longer let it go."

"That is exactly why," Bipradas said, "the world never lacks priestesses to worship cowards. When it comes to knowing, they know the impure to be impure; but when it comes to revering, they revere it as if it were holy."

Kumu said, "What are we to do, Dada? We were created to embrace the world with both arms. That is why we cling to trees, and even to dry twigs. It takes us just as long to revere a true Guru as it does to revere a fraud. The net is within ourselves. Who will save us from sorrow? That is why I think, if we must suffer sorrow, we must accept it and find a way to rise above it. That is precisely why women take such deep refuge in religion."

Bipradas said nothing; he sat in silence.

Even his silence caused Kumu pain. Kumu knew the weight of this silence was far heavier than words.

Stepping out of the room, Motir Ma asked Kumu, "What have you decided, Bouri?"

"I cannot go," Kumu replied. "Besides, he has not given me permission to return."

Inwardly, Motir Ma felt quite annoyed. It wasn't that she held immense respect for her in-laws' household, but a long-standing sense of attachment to it occupied her heart. That any bride of that household would defy it did not sit well with her at all. The underlying sentiment of what she told Kumu was this: men inherently lack compassion and possess a lack of restraint; this is an accepted fact from the very beginning. The creation of the world is not in our hands; we must deal with what we have been given. We must condition our minds to accept that "they are just like that," and somehow keep the household running. Because the household ultimately belongs to the women. Whether the husband is good or bad, the

household must be accepted. If that becomes absolutely impossible, then there is no other way out but death.

Smiling, Kumu said, "Then let it be so. What is the crime in death?"

Alarmed, Motir Ma cried out, "Do not say such things."

Kumu did not know that recently, in their very own neighborhood, a seventeen-year-old bride had committed suicide by drinking carbolic acid. Her husband—who held an M.A. degree and a high position in a government office—had kicked her after hearing a complaint from his mother that the wife had lost a silver hairpin. Remembering that incident gave Motir Ma goosebumps.

Just then, Nabin entered. Kumu's face brightened. She said, "I knew it wouldn't take Thakurpo long to arrive."

Smiling, Nabin said, "The Bou-rani has a firm grasp of logic; having first seen Madam Smoke, calculating the arrival of Mister Fire wasn't too difficult."

Motir Ma said, "Bou-rani, you are the one who has indulged him and made him so bold. He has realized that you are happy to see him, and with that pride—"

"To possess the ability to make her happy just by my presence—is that a small power?" Nabin interrupted. "The One who created me repents upon seeing His own handiwork, and as for the state of mind of the man who married her—even the gods know not, let alone men!"

"Thakurpo, you two go ahead and banter; a third person shouldn't break the rhythm, I shall take my leave now," Motir Ma said.

"What are you saying, sister!" Kumu exclaimed. "Who is the third person here? You or I? Do you think he rented a carriage just to come and see me?"

"No, let me go and order some food for him," Kumu said, and walked away.

CHAPTER 52

Motir Ma asked, "Do you have some news?"

"I do. I couldn't delay; I came to consult with you. Right after you left, Dada suddenly barged into my room. He was in a terrible mood. A cheap, gilt cigar ashtray had vanished from a table. The person into whose possession it recently fell must have mistaken it for solid gold, otherwise why risk losing their afterlife over it? You know that if even a trivial item goes missing, it feels as if Dada's vast estate has been shaken to its core; he cannot bear it. This morning, before leaving for the office, he ordered me to send Shyama back to the village. I set about that holy task with great enthusiasm. I had decided to finish the job before he returned from the office. Just then, at half-past one, Dada suddenly barged into my room in a single breath. He said, 'Let it be for now.' Just as he was leaving the room, his eyes fell upon Bou-rani's photograph on my desk. He stopped dead. I understood that he felt embarrassed to turn his sidelong glance into a direct stare at the picture. So I said, 'Dada, sit for a moment, I want to show you a Dhaka sari. Motir Ma's younger sister-in-law is having a baby shower, so we have to gift it to her. But I feel Ganeshram is cheating me on the price. I want you to take a look at it. From my estimation, it cannot possibly be worth thirteen rupees. At most, it should be between nine and nine-and-a-half rupees.'"

Astonished, Motir Ma said, "Where did that pop into your head? There is absolutely no chance of my younger sister-in-law having a baby shower. Her youngest child is barely a month and a half old! I see you have no hesitation in fabricating stories these days. Where did you acquire this new skill?"

"From where Kalidasa acquired his poetry—from Saraswati, the Goddess of Speech."

"Until the Goddess lets go of you, living with you is going to be a liability."

"I have vowed to witness hell on my ascent to heaven; this is my offering at the feet of the Bou-rani."

"But where did you suddenly procure a Dhaka sari worth nine-and-a-half rupees on the spot?"

"Nowhere. I returned twenty minutes later and told him that Ganeshram had taken the sari back without telling me. Looking at Dada's face, I understood that the picture had already entered his brain and taken the form of a dream. I don't know why, but in this whole world, I am the only one Dada feels a slight sense of shame in front of; were it anyone else, he wouldn't have hesitated to snatch the picture away."

"You aren't lacking in greed either. You could have just given it to Dada."

"Oh, I did give it to him, but not easily. I said, 'Dada, wouldn't it be nice to get an oil painting made from this photograph and keep it in your bedroom?' With feigned indifference, Dada replied, 'Well, we'll see.' Saying this, he took the picture and went upstairs. I don't know exactly what happened after that. I don't think he went to the office, and I have no hope of ever getting that picture back."

"If you are willing to forfeit heaven itself for your Bou-rani, then forfeiting a single picture is nothing."

"I have my doubts about heaven, but I had absolutely no doubts about that picture. Such a photograph is a stroke of divine luck. The auspicious alignment, the exact rare moment when the grace of the Goddess of Wealth descended fully upon her face, was perfectly captured in that image. On certain nights, I would wake up, light the lamp, and look at that picture. In the glow of the lamp, the inner beauty of her soul seemed to reveal itself even more profoundly."

"Look here, do you have no fear of speaking with such wild excess in front of me?"

"If I had any fear, then you would have reason to worry. My sheer wonder at seeing her never fades. I think to myself: how did this become possible in our destiny? The very thought that I can address her as 'Bou-rani' gives me goosebumps. And the fact that she can make an insignificant man like me sit near her with a smiling face and feed me—how did this become so effortless in the universe? The most unfortunate person in our family is my Dada. He lost the one he easily received, precisely by trying to bind her too harshly."

"Goodness, when your mouth opens on the subject of the Bou-rani, it refuses to shut."

"Mejobou, I know it stings you just a little bit."

"No, never."

"Yes, just a little. But on this occasion, it is good to remind you of something. The words you spoke the first time you saw Bou-rani's Dada at the Nurnagar station could also be called a 'wild excess' in common parlance."

"Alright, alright, let's leave that argument. Tell me what you were going to say."

"I believe Dada will send for the Bou-rani within a day or two. The fact that the Bou-rani left for her father's house with such eagerness, and hasn't mentioned returning since, has caused Dada a tremendous amount of hurt pride, I know that. Dada simply cannot understand why a bird has no greed for a golden cage. A foolish bird, an ungrateful bird!"

"Well, that is for the best; let the elder brother-in-law send for her. That was the understanding, after all."

"I think it would be better if the Bou-rani went before he calls for her; that way, Dada would at least win his little battle of pride. Besides, Bipradas-babu also wants Bou-rani to return to her household; I was the one who forbade it."

Motir Ma gave no hint of what had been discussed with Bipradas regarding this today. She said, "Why don't you go and tell Bipradas-babu yourself."

"I will go right now; he will be pleased to hear it."

Just then, from outside the door, Kumu asked, "May I come in?"

Motir Ma replied, "Your Thakurpo has been watching the path for you."

"I have been watching the path for lifetimes, and now I have been granted a vision."

"Ah, Thakurpo! How do you manage to fabricate so many words?"

"I am astounded by it myself; I cannot understand it."

"Alright, come along now, it's time for you to eat."

"Before I eat, let me go and have a few words with your Dada."

"No, that cannot be."

"Why?"

"Dada has spoken much today; no more for today."

"I have good news."

"Be that as it may, come back tomorrow instead. No words today."

"I might not get leave tomorrow; there might be obstacles. I beg of you, just for five minutes today. Your Dada will be pleased; it will do him no harm."

"Alright, eat your food first, then we shall see."

After he had eaten, Kumu brought Nabin to Bipradas's room. She saw that Dada had not yet fallen asleep. The room was almost dark; the flame of the lamp was dim. Stars could be seen through the open window; the south wind blew in gusts from time to time; the curtains of the room, the frills of the bed, the clothes hanging on the rack all cast dancing, shifting shadows; a sheet of newspaper fluttered aimlessly across the floor. In a half-reclining posture, Bipradas sat perfectly still. Nabin's feet hesitated to step forward. The shadows of twilight and the emaciation of disease enveloped Bipradas in an aura; it felt as though he were far removed from the mundane world, existing in another realm. It felt as if there were no other man as solitary as him in the entire world.

Approaching and taking the dust of Bipradas's feet, Nabin said, "I do not wish to disturb your rest. I will just say one thing. The time has come; we are now waiting for the Bou-rani to return home."

Bipradas gave no answer; he remained sitting motionless.

A little later, Nabin said, "If I receive your permission, I shall make arrangements to take her back."

Meanwhile, Kumu had slowly come to sit near her brother's feet. Keeping his gaze fixed on her face, Bipradas said, "If you feel the time has come for you to go, then go, Kumu."

Kumu said, "No, Dada, I will not go." With that, she buried her face against Bipradas's knees.

The room was silent, save for the occasional rattle of a loose window pane in the gusty wind, and the rustling of leaves in the garden outside.

A moment later, rising from the bed, Kumu said to Nabin, "Come, let us not delay any further. Dada, you sleep now."

Returning to her room, Motir Ma said, "This much is not good, however."

"Meaning, no matter how much the eye is poked, the eye turning red is absolutely not good."

"No, no, it is their arrogance. Nothing in the world matches their worth; they are above everyone."

"Mejobou, such immense pride does not suit everyone, but they are a different matter."

"Does that mean one must sever ties with one's own relatives?"

"Merely calling someone a relative does not make them one. They are an entirely different breed of people from us. I feel hesitant to interact with them merely on the basis of a familial title."

"No matter how great a man may be, remember that the bond of relation has its own strength."

Nabin realized that embedded in this discussion was a slight sting of jealousy from Motir Ma toward Kumu. Besides, it was also true that the value of family ties was exceedingly high for women. Therefore, deciding not to argue the point in vain, Nabin said, "Let us wait and see for a few more days. Let Dada's eagerness grow; there is no harm in that."

CHAPTER 53

Having solidified her place in Madhusudan's household, Shyama Sundari could have had expectations, but she could not feel that reality. At first, she had thought that her claim to authority over the household servants had been established, but at every step, she realized that they were mentally unwilling to place her on the pedestal of a mistress. It was as if they would be relieved if they could muster the courage to show her blatant disrespect. That is why Shyama constantly scolded them unnecessarily and gave them pointless orders, just to catch their faults. She bickered incessantly. She cursed their parents. Not long ago, Shyama had been a nobody in this very house; in her attempt to scrub that memory from the household with a heavy hand, she found that it didn't take. Unable to bear Shyama's verbal abuse, an old servant of the house resigned. Shyama had to bow her head over this. The reason was that Madhusudan held certain blind superstitions regarding his financial fortune. He considered the death or resignation of any servant who had been with him during his rise to wealth as a bad omen. For a similar reason, an ink-stained, exceedingly old desk from that era sat unapologetically in the office room amidst the expensive, modern furniture; upon it rested the very same zinc inkwell from those days, along with a cheap English wooden pen—the very pen with which he had signed his first major contract in the new era of his business. When the Odia servant, Dadhi, from that era tendered his resignation, Madhusudan simply refused to accept it; instead, the man ended up receiving a bonus. When Shyama tried to throw a massive fit of pride over this, she found she was treading water. She had to endure Dadhi's smiling face.

Shyama's predicament was that she truly loved Madhusudan, so she didn't dare push his temper too far; she constantly walked on eggshells, trying to gauge at what exact boundary her affection would cross over into insolence. Madhusudan, too, knew for certain that there was no need to waste time or thought on Shyama. While he did curtail the expenses related to her indulgences and demands, the risk of a disastrous falling out was minimal. Yet, he harbored a crude sort of infatuation for Shyama, and the joy of being able to indulge this infatuation entirely while easily keeping her in check gave Madhusudan a sense of thrill—had this balance broken, the bond would have snapped. To Madhusudan, nothing was greater than his work. And for that work, what he needed most was unwavering self-command. Within those boundaries, Shyama's authority was not allowed to enter; if she tried to step

even slightly out of bounds, she stumbled and retreated. Therefore, Shyama only kept giving of herself; whenever she tried to claim anything, she was cheated. Shyama had always been deprived of money and luxuries—and her greed for them was endless. Even in this, she had to maintain a strict measure. To effortlessly expect anything from such a wealthy man was a futile hope for her. Occasionally, on a day he was pleased, Madhusudan would bring her some clothes or jewelry, but that did not satisfy her hunger for accumulation. Her hands constantly twitched to appropriate small, tempting items. There, too, she met with barriers. Over a similarly trivial incident, her banishment had been arranged some time ago; but Shyama's company and service had become a habit for Madhusudan—cheap yet potent, much like the habit of chewing betel leaves or smoking tobacco. Fearing that a disruption to this habit might disrupt his work, Shyama's sentence had been revoked that time. But the fear of punishment kept hanging over her head.

Within this fragile hold on her rights, a persistent dread lingered in Shyama Sundari's mind: When will Kumu return to her throne? Tormented by this jealousy, she had not a moment's peace. She knew she could never compete with Kumu; they did not stand on the same ground. Kumu was beyond Madhusudan's grasp, and therein lay her infinite power; whereas Shyama was so completely within his grasp that she possessed utility, but no value. Shyama had wept many tears over this, often thinking, I would be better off dead. Beating her forehead, she asked, Why did I become so cheap? Then she thought, It was precisely because I was cheap that I found a place; she who costs more is valued more, perhaps the cheap one wins precisely because she is cheap.

When Madhusudan had not yet accepted Shyama, her sorrow had not been so unbearable. She had somehow accepted her starved fate. Occasionally, even a meager ration felt sufficient. Today, there was absolutely no harmony between the rights she had gained and the ones she hadn't. Her mind was terrified by the constant fear of losing what she had. The railway tracks of her fate were laid so poorly that the fear of derailment was omnipresent and constant! She had once tried to open her heart to Motir Ma to seek solace. Motir Ma had brushed past her with such a sharp toss of her head that, had Shyama been able to exact some fatal revenge, she would have done so instantly; but she knew that in the household arrangements, Motir Ma held value for Madhusudan, and not the slightest disturbance would be tolerated there. Since then, the two had stopped speaking;

they avoided looking at each other whenever possible. Thus, Shyama's place in this house had become even narrower than before. She found no ease anywhere.

Then, one evening, entering the bedroom, she saw Kumu's photograph leaning against the wall on the table. The lightning strike of the very thunderbolt she feared would fall on her head flashed into her eyes. Like a fish pierced by a hook, her heart began to thrash wildly in her chest. She wanted to tear her eyes away from the picture, but she could not. She continued to stare at it unblinking, her face pale, a burning fire in her eyes, her fists clenched tight. She wanted to break something, to tear something to pieces. Fearing that if she stayed in the room she would immediately destroy something, she ran out. Going to her own room, she threw herself face-down on the bed and tore the bedsheet to shreds.

Night fell. A bearer called from outside, bringing the message that the Maharaja had summoned her to the bedroom. She lacked the strength to say she would not go. Quickly getting up, she washed her face, put on a spotted Dhaka sari, dabbed on a little perfume, and went to the bedroom. Her goal was to avoid looking at the picture. But the lamp was placed right in front of that very picture—all the light seemed to illuminate it like someone's radiant gaze. In the entire room, that picture was the most visible object. As was her routine, Shyama took the betel-leaf box, offered Madhusudan a pan, and then sat at his feet, massaging them. For whatever reason, Madhusudan was in a good mood today. He had brought a silver photograph frame from an English shop. Gravely, he told Shyama, "Take this." Even when offering tokens of affection to Shyama, Madhusudan was quite miserly with his sweetness. He knew that if he gave her even a little indulgence, she would fail to maintain boundaries. The object was wrapped in brown paper. Slowly unwrapping the paper, Shyama asked, "What is this for?"

Madhusudan replied, "Don't you know? It's for keeping a photograph."

As if someone had lashed a whip across Shyama's heart, she asked, "Whose photograph will you keep in it?"

"Your own. The picture that was taken the other day."

"I have no need for such affection." Saying this, she threw the frame onto the floor.

Astonished, Madhusudan asked, "What is the meaning of this?"

"It means nothing," Shyama said, covering her face and bursting into tears. Then she fell from the bed to the floor and began banging her head. Madhusudan assumed Shyama hadn't liked the inexpensive gift; perhaps she had wanted a piece of expensive jewelry. After completing a full day's work at the office, he had absolutely no patience for this nuisance. This was practically hysteria. And he harbored a severe disdain for hysteria. Shouting a harsh reprimand, he ordered, "Get up, I tell you! Get up this instant!"

Shyama got up and ran out of the room. Madhusudan said, "This absolutely will not do."

Madhusudan knew Shyama very well. He was certain she would return shortly, fall at his feet, and beg for forgiveness—and at that moment, he would deliver a few very harsh words to put her in her place.

Ten o'clock struck; Shyama did not come. Once again, a voice called from outside Shyama's door, "The Maharaja has summoned you."

Shyama replied, "Tell the Maharaja I am unwell."

Madhusudan thought, Her audacity is quite something, refusing to come when ordered.

He decided he would wait a little longer. Still, she didn't come. It was fifteen minutes to eleven. Leaving the bed, Madhusudan walked briskly into Shyama's room. He saw there was no light in the room. In the darkness, he could clearly see Shyama lying on the floor. Madhusudan thought this was all just a ploy to extract affection.

Roaring, he commanded, "Get up, I tell you! Get up immediately. Stop this melodrama."

Without a word, Shyama got up and followed him.

CHAPTER 54

The next day, resting in the bedroom after his meal before leaving for the office, Madhusudan saw that the picture was gone. Unlike other days, Shyama was not already present with the betel leaves, ready to serve Madhusudan. Today, she was completely absent. She was sent for. It was quite evident that she arrived with some hesitation. Madhusudan asked, "There was a picture on the table. What happened to it?"

Feigning intense surprise, Shyama said, "A picture! Whose picture?"

The amount of feigned ignorance was a bit overdone. It was only because women generally harbor a disdain for the intellectual capacities of men that such a performance was even attempted.

In an angry voice, Madhusudan demanded, "You didn't see the picture!"

With the face of an absolute innocent, Shyama said, "No, I didn't see it."

Madhusudan roared, "You are lying."

"Why would I lie? What would I do with a picture?"

"I am telling you, bring it out from wherever you have hidden it. Or else it won't end well for you."

"Oh my, what a bother! Where would I find your picture to bring it to you?"

The bearer was summoned. Madhu told him, "Call the younger master."

Nabin arrived. Madhusudan ordered, "Send for the elder bride."

Twisting her face, Shyama sat silently like a wooden doll.

After a while, scratching his head, Nabin suggested, "Dada, shouldn't you go there yourself once? If you go personally and ask her, the Bou-rani will be pleased."

Madhusudan puffed on his hookah gravely for a moment and said, "Very well, tomorrow is Sunday; I will go tomorrow."

Nabin went to Motir Ma and said, "I have done a deed."

"Without taking my advice?"

"There was no time to take advice."

"Then it seems you will have to regret it."

"Not impossible. In my horoscope, there are no other planets in the house of intellect, only my own wife. That is why I always keep you close at hand. The matter is this—Dada ordered today that the Bou-rani must be brought back. I quickly blurted out that it would be better if he went and raised the matter himself. Dada was in such a mood that he agreed. Ever since, I have been wondering what the consequences will be."

"It won't be good. From the mood I saw Bipradas-babu in, who knows what he might say; in the end, the battle of Kurukshetra will break out. Why did you do such a thing?"

"The first reason is that the chamber of my intellect was completely empty at that exact moment, and you were elsewhere. The second is that the day the Bou-rani said, 'I will not go,' I understood the underlying meaning. Her Dada came to Calcutta with a sick body, yet the Maharaja didn't go to see him even for a single day; this disrespect is what hurt her heart the most."

Hearing this, Motir Ma startled slightly; she was surprised that this thought hadn't occurred to her earlier. In truth, even without realizing it, she harbored a sense of pride regarding the glory of her in-laws' household. Her mind did not naturally concede that Maharaja Madhusudan had obligations of kinship just like ordinary people.

As a continuation of that day's argument, Nabin added a slight comment: "With my own intellect, the thought might not have occurred to me; you were the one who reminded me."

"How so, pray tell?"

"You said that day that the responsibility of kinship is greater than the responsibility of self-respect. Therefore, I dared to think that even a man as great as the Maharaja ought to go and visit Bipradas-babu."

Refusing to admit defeat, Motir Ma brushed the remark aside. "How can you speak such nonsense when there is serious work to be done! Think about what needs to be done now."

"If you try to think everything through to the very end right at the beginning, you get cheated. We should immediately think about what the first duty is. That is for Dada to go and see Bipradas-babu. If we sit down right now to worry about finding solutions for what might happen as a result of his visit, it might show thoughtfulness, but it would be over-thinking."

"I don't know, I just have a feeling that a disaster will break loose."

CHAPTER 55

That morning, Kumu sat in her brother's room for a long time, playing music. In the melodies of the morning, her personal sorrow transcended into a universal entity, taking on an infinite form. She experienced a liberation from her bonds. Just as venomous snakes manifest themselves as divine adornments in the matted hair of Lord Shiva, the rivers of her pain found a vast, tranquil resting place in the ocean of universal sorrow. Its form changed; its restlessness vanished into depth. Letting out a breath, Bipradas said, "In the material world, Kumu, the brief, fleeting moments appear as the ultimate truth, while eternity remains hidden behind a veil; but in music, eternity steps to the forefront, and the fleeting moments become insignificant. That is how the mind finds its liberation."

At that moment, news arrived: "Maharaja Madhusudan has come."

In an instant, Kumu's face turned pale. Seeing this struck a deep chord of pain in Bipradas's heart. He said, "Kumu, go inside the house. You probably won't be needed."

Kumu walked away with rapid steps. Madhusudan had come unannounced on purpose. It was part of his plan to ensure they had no time to cover up the poverty of their arrangements. Madhusudan firmly believed that Bipradas harbored a great deal of arrogance in his mind for belonging to a highly aristocratic lineage. He could not tolerate that notion. That was why he arrived today in a manner that suggested he hadn't come to 'visit' them, but rather to 'grant them an audience.'

Madhusudan's attire was bizarre, deliberately chosen to leave the household servants awestruck. Over a striped English shirt, he wore a colorful, floral-embroidered waistcoat; a neatly folded shawl rested on his shoulder, paired with a meticulously pleated Shantipuri dhoti with a black border, and varnished black court shoes. His fingers sparkled with large diamond and emerald rings. A thick gold watch chain spanned the circumference of his broad belly, and in his hand he carried a fancy walking stick, its gold handle shaped like an elephant's head and studded with various jewels. Offering a swift, half-finished nod of greeting, he sat in a chair next to the bed and said, "How are you, Bipradas-babu? Your health doesn't look too good."

Without answering the question, Bipradas replied, "Your health seems quite fine."

"I wouldn't say it's exceptionally good—I get headaches towards the evening, and my appetite isn't great. I can't tolerate even the slightest neglect in my meals. I also suffer from insomnia from time to time; that is what causes me the most grief."

This was the prelude to establishing that he was a man in constant need of nursing and attention.

Bipradas said, "I suppose you have to exert yourself too much with your office work."

"Not really! The office work runs on its own; I don't have to oversee much. The bulk of the responsibility rests on Mr. MacNaughton, and Sir Arthur Peabody also assists me quite a bit."

The hookah was brought in, and a servant stood by with a box of betel leaves and spices. Madhusudan took a single small cardamom pod and popped it into his mouth; he took nothing else. Taking the pipe of the hookah, he took a couple of mild puffs. After that, he simply held the pipe in his left hand, resting it on his lap. It was not used again. Word arrived from the inner quarters that refreshments were ready. Feigning busyness, he said, "I won't be able to have that. As I said before, I have to be very strict and regimented about my diet."

Bipradas did not offer a second time. He told the servant, "Tell Aunt that he isn't feeling well and won't be able to eat."

Bipradas remained silent. Madhusudan had expected the topic of Kumu to come up naturally. It had been so many days; he assumed Bipradas would anxiously propose taking Kumu back to her in-laws' house himself—but the man didn't even mention Kumu's name! Inwardly, a slow, simmering anger began to build within Madhusudan. He thought, I made a mistake by coming here. This is all Nabin's doing. His mind grew frantic to return immediately and deal Nabin a very harsh punishment.

Just then, wearing a simple white sari with a narrow black border and the edge pulled over her head as a veil, Kumu entered the room. Bipradas had not expected this. He was surprised. Taking the dust of her husband's feet first, and then her brother's, Kumu said to Madhusudan, "Dada's body is exhausted; the doctor has forbidden him from speaking too much. Come with me to the next room."

Madhusudan's face turned red. He stood up abruptly from the chair. The hookah pipe fell from his lap to the floor. Without even looking at Bipradas's face, he said, "Very well, I shall take my leave then."

His first impulse was to storm out, get into his carriage, and return home. But his mind was tethered. He had seen Kumu today after many days. This was the first time he was seeing her in such simple, everyday domestic clothes. He had never seen her look so beautiful. So composed, so effortless. In Madhusudan's house, she had been a dressed-up girl, almost like an outsider; here, she was entirely a girl of the home. It felt as though he was seeing her from very close quarters today. What a soothing presence! Madhusudan felt an overwhelming urge to take her along with him right this instant, without a moment's delay. She is mine, she is entirely mine, she belongs to my house, to my wealth, to my entire body and mind—he wanted to repeat these words over and over.

When Kumu pointed to a sofa in the next room and asked him to sit, he had no choice but to sit down. Had it not been a somewhat public outer room, he would have grabbed Kumu and made her sit beside him on the sofa. Instead of sitting, Kumu stood behind a chair, resting her hands on its back. She asked, "Did you want to say something to me?"

Madhusudan did not like the tone of the question. He asked, "Aren't you going home?"

"No."

Madhusudan was startled. "What do you mean!" he said.

"You have no need of me."

Madhusudan realized that the news of Shyama Sundari had reached her ears; this was wounded pride. He actually liked her pride. He said, "You are talking nonsense. What do you mean I have no need? Does an empty house feel good to anyone?"

Kumu had no desire to argue over this. She simply repeated briefly, "I will not go."

"What does that mean? The bride of the house won't go to her house—?"

Kumu said simply, "No."

Standing up from the sofa, Madhusudan declared, "What! You won't go! You absolutely have to go."

Kumu gave no answer. Madhusudan threatened, "Do you know I can call the police and have you dragged there by the neck? You think a simple 'no' is enough!"

Kumu remained silent. Madhusudan roared, "Has the Nurnagari arrogance you learned in your Dada's school started up again?"

Glancing toward her brother's room, Kumu said, "Be quiet, do not speak so loudly."

"Why? Must I carefully guard my words in front of your Dada? Do you know I can throw him out on the street this very instant?"

The next moment, Kumu saw her brother standing at the door of the room. A tall, emaciated figure, a pale face, two eyes burning with fire, wrapped in a thick white shawl that trailed on the floor. Calling Kumu, he said, "Come, Kumu, come into my room."

Madhusudan yelled out, "I will remember this audacity of yours! I will shave off the 'Nur' (the light and pride) of your Nurnagar, or my name isn't Madhusudan."

Returning to his room, Bipradas lay down on the bed. He closed his eyes, not in sleep, but in sheer exhaustion and deep thought. Sitting by his pillow, Kumu began fanning him. After a long time had passed like this, Aunt Kshema came and said, "Aren't you going to eat today, Kumu? The day has advanced quite a bit."

Opening his eyes, Bipradas said, "Kumu, go and eat. Send your Kalu-da to me."

Kumu pleaded, "Dada, I beg of you, do not see Kalu-da right now. Try to get some sleep."

Saying nothing, Bipradas stared at Kumu's face with a look of profound sorrow. After a while, he sighed and closed his eyes again. Kumu slowly left the room, leaving the door ajar.

A little later, Kalu sent word that he wished to come in. Bipradas sat up, leaning against the bolster. Kalu said, "The son-in-law came and left after only a short while. Tell me what happened. Did he say anything about taking Kumu back to their house?"

"Yes, he did. Kumu gave him her answer: she will not go."

Terribly frightened, Kalu exclaimed, "What are you saying, Dada! This is disastrous!"

"We have never feared disaster at any point in time; what we fear is dishonor."

"Then prepare yourself, it won't be long now. It is in the blood; where else would you go? I know very well that your father, in his attempt to defy the Magistrate, lost at least two lakh rupees. Puffing out your chests and bringing ruin upon yourselves is your ancestral hobby. At least that trait doesn't exist in my lineage, which is why I cannot quietly endure your fatal madness. But how will we survive?"

Resting his right leg over his raised left knee, Bipradas leaned his head against the bolster, closed his eyes, and thought for a while. Finally, opening his eyes, he said, "According to the terms of the deed, Madhusudan cannot demand the money from me without giving six months' notice. Meanwhile, Subodh will arrive by the month of Ashadh—we will be able to find a way out then."

Slightly annoyed, Kalu said, "Of course we'll find a way out. The lamps would have been blown out in one massive gust; instead, they will be extinguished one by one, in a gentlemanly fashion."

"The candle has burned down into the socket; now, whatever servant comes and blows it out—there is nothing much to lament about. I no longer have the desire to tend to that dying, residual flame; I'd find more peace in complete darkness."

Kalu's heart ached. He understood that these were the words of a sick man; Bipradas was not naturally a man who gave up so easily. To prevent this very outcome, Bipradas had been making various plans for so long. He had believed he would overcome it. Today, he couldn't even think about it—he lacked the strength to even believe.

Looking affectionately at Bipradas's face, Kalu said, "You don't have to worry about a thing, brother. I will do whatever needs to be done. Let me go and take a round of the brokers' circles."

The next day, a letter written in English arrived for Bipradas—written by Madhusudan. The language had a legalistic tone to it—perhaps he had an attorney draft it. He demanded to know definitively whether Kumu would return to their house, after which he would take the appropriate and necessary actions.

Bipradas asked Kumu, "Kumu, have you thought everything through carefully?"

Kumu said, "I have finished all my thinking, which is why my mind is very much at peace today. It feels exactly as if I am exactly where I always was—everything that happened in between was merely a dream."

"If an attempt is made to take you away by force, will you have the strength to resist?"

"If there is no tyranny inflicted upon you, I certainly will."

"I am asking because if, in the end, you have to go back anyway, the longer you delay it, the uglier it will become. Has the thread of your relationship with them entangled your heart anywhere at all?"

"Not in the slightest. I only love Nabin, Motir Ma, and Hablu. But they feel exactly like people from another house."

"Look, Kumu, they will cause trouble. Backed by the power of society and the power of the law, they have the ability to harass us. That is exactly why we must defy it. But to do so, you will have to discard all shame, hesitation, and fear, and stand before society. A storm of slander will rise everywhere, inside the house and out; you must keep your head held high and remain steadfast in the midst of it."

"Dada, won't that bring you harm and turmoil?"

"What do you call harm and turmoil, Kumu? If you remain drowned in dishonor, what greater harm could there be for me? If I know that the house you are in never became your own, that the man who holds absolute rights over you is an absolute stranger to your soul, then I can imagine no greater turmoil for myself. Father loved you very much, but in those days, the patriarchs kept their distance. He didn't even think it was necessary for you to study. I myself taught you from the very beginning; I raised you. I am in no way less than your parents. Today, I understand the true weight of the responsibility of raising you. Had you been like other girls, nothing would have snagged you. But today, the place where no one will understand or respect your individuality is a living hell for you. With what heart could I banish you there? If you were my younger brother, you would have stayed with me forever; stay with me just like that."

Resting her head against her brother's chest at the edge of the bed and turning her face away, Kumu asked, "But I won't be a burden on you, will I? Are you telling the truth?"

Stroking Kumu's hair, Bipradas said, "Why would you be a burden, sister? I will make you work very hard. I will hand all my work over to you. No private secretary could work as you will. You will have to play music for me; my horses will be under your charge. Besides, you know I love to teach. Where will I find a student like you? We can do one thing: I've had a desire to learn Persian for a long time. I don't enjoy studying alone. I'll study it with you. You'll surely advance faster than me, but I won't be jealous at all, you'll see."

Listening to this, Kumu's heart thrilled with joy; there could be no greater happiness in life than this.

A little later, Bipradas spoke again, "Let me tell you one more thing, Kumu. Very soon, our times will change, and our lifestyle will change too. We will have to live like poor people. Then, you will be the wealth of our poverty."

Tears sprang to Kumu's eyes. She said, "If such is my destiny, then my life will be saved."

Bipradas kept Madhusudan's letter in his hand; he did not send a reply.

CHAPTER 56

Two days later, Nabin, Motir Ma, and Hablu arrived. Climbing onto his aunt's lap and resting his head against her chest, Hablu wept. It was hard to say exactly what the tears were for—was it hurt pride over the past, a demand for affection in the present, or anxiety for the future?

Hugging Hablu tight, Kumu said, "It is a harsh world, Gopal; there is no end to tears. What do I have, what can I give that could lessen the tears of a human child? I want to wipe away tears with my own tears, but I have no power beyond that. The love that gives of itself can give nothing more. My children, you have received that love; your aunt will not be here forever, but remember this, remember this, remember this." Saying this, she kissed his cheek.

Nabin said, "Bou-rani, we are heading to our ancestral home in Rajabpur now; our chapter here has come to an end."

Distressed, Kumu cried out, "It is I, the unfortunate one, who came and brought this disaster upon you."

Nabin replied, "Just the opposite. My mind had been wanting to leave for a long time. We were all packed and ready, and right then you entered our house. Our desire for a true home was deeply fulfilled, but the Creator could not tolerate it."

It was evident that Madhusudan had returned that day and unleashed a massive upheaval.

No matter what Nabin said, Motir Ma had no doubt that Kumu was the one who had turned their entire world upside down, and she was not ready to forgive that offense easily. Her belief was that Kumu should still go back there with her head bowed, and then accept whatever humiliation followed. In a rather harsh tone, she asked, "Have you decided absolutely never to go to your in-laws' house?"

Kumu answered firmly, "No, I will not go."

Motir Ma asked, "Then where is your destination?"

Kumu said, "This earth is vast; there will be a tiny place for me somewhere in it. Much falls away in life, yet something always remains."

Kumu could sense that Motir Ma's heart had distanced itself from her considerably. She asked Nabin, "Thakurpo, what will you do now?"

"We have some land by the river; it will yield enough coarse rice, and we'll get plenty of fresh air."

With a hint of anger, Motir Ma interjected, "No, sir, you won't have to worry about that. I hold a claim to the food and water of Mirzapur; no one can snatch that away. We are not such highly honorable people that the moment the elder brother-in-law scolds us, we renounce the world and leave forever. He is the one who will call us back tomorrow or the day after, and we will return. The wait will be bearable, mark my words."

Slightly offended, Nabin said, "I know that, Mejobou, but I don't boast about it. If there is a rebirth, let me be born with honor; even if I have to struggle for food and water, I will accept it."

In truth, Nabin had often resolved to leave his brother's shelter and take up farming in the village. Motir Ma had made a lot of noise verbally, but when it came down to it, she never wanted to move easily and had repeatedly held Nabin back. She knew she had an absolute claim over her elder brother-in-law. An elder brother-in-law was akin to a father-in-law. In her view, an elder brother-in-law might act unjustly, but it could not be called an insult. Thus, no matter how Kumu's husband treated Kumu, the idea that Kumu could deny her husband's home was utterly unnatural to Motir Ma.

Word arrived that the doctor had come. Kumu said, "Wait a little, let me go and hear what the doctor says."

The doctor told Kumu that the pulse had worsened, his sleep at night had decreased, and it seemed the patient was not getting proper rest.

As Kumu was returning to her guests, Kalu came up and said, "I cannot help but tell you something. The net has grown very tangled; if you do not return to your in-laws' house at this moment, the danger will close in completely. I cannot think of any way out."

Kumu stood silently. Kalu continued, "An ultimatum has come from your husband's side; do we have the power to ignore it? We are entirely within his clutches."

Clutching the veranda railing, Kumu said, "I cannot understand anything, Kalu-da. My soul feels suffocated; it seems there is no path open for me except death." Saying this, Kumu walked away rapidly.

While Kumu was in her brother's room, Aunt Kshema and Motir Ma had a conversation. Comparing various signs, both of them suspected that Kumu was pregnant. Motir Ma was delighted; she said to herself, May Mother Kali make it so! Serves her right! The proud woman wishes to despise her in-laws, but now the knot is tied in her very womb—not just a ceremonial knot of clothes—how will she escape now!

Taking Kumu aside, Motir Ma shared her suspicion. Kumu's face turned ashen. Clenching her fists, she said, "No, no, that can never be, absolutely not."

Annoyed, Motir Ma replied, "Why can't it be, sister? No matter how great a family you belong to, the rules of the world won't turn upside down just for you. You are the bride of the Ghoshal house; do you think the ancestral deity of the Ghoshals will grant you leave so easily? He is standing right there, blocking your escape route."

With the fear of pregnancy, it became vividly clear to Kumu how her brief acquaintance with her husband had internally taken on a deformed, grotesque shape day by day. The elements that make the divide between two human beings the most insurmountable are often very subtle. In language, in posture, in behavior, in small gestures, in unexpressed hints when doing nothing at all, in the tone of voice, in taste, in manners, in the ideals of living—the signs of that divide are scattered in subtle reflections. There was something in Madhusudan that not only hurt Kumu but caused her profound shame. It felt obscene to her. In the early days of his life, Madhusudan had been unbearably poor; therefore, the way he constantly expressed the glory of 'money' in his boastful words carried the degradation of a poverty that had seeped into his blood. Madhusudan brought up this worship of money repeatedly just to taunt Kumu's paternal lineage. In that natural crudeness, in the harshness of his language, in his arrogant discourtesy—in the complete, internal ungracefulness of Madhusudan's body, mind, and household—Kumu's entire being recoiled every single day. The more she tried to banish these things from her sight and thoughts, the more they piled up around her like a massive heap of garbage. Kumu had fought desperately against her own

feelings of disgust. Her efforts to keep the ideal of husband-worship pure were endless, but she had never understood until now what a colossal defeat she had suffered. Now that the bond of flesh and blood with Madhusudan had become unbreakable, its grotesqueness tormented her agonizingly. With a look of extreme anxiety, Kumu asked Motir Ma, "How do you know for sure?"

Motir Ma was very angry, but controlling herself, she said, "I am the mother of a child, if I don't know, who will? Still, it isn't time to say for absolutely certain. It would be best to call a good midwife and have her examine you."

It was time for Nabin, Motir Ma, and Hablu to leave. But today, Kumu could focus on nothing else except this ultimate injustice of fate. Thus, her farewell to her friends from her in-laws' house was very ordinary. As he was leaving, Nabin said, "Bou-rani, everything in the world comes to an end. But the right to serve you that I suddenly received one day—I cannot even bear to think that it could end just as suddenly and bizarrely another day. We will meet again." Nabin bowed, Hablu wept silently, and Motir Ma kept her face rigid, not uttering a single word.

CHAPTER 57

The news reached Bipradas's ears. The midwife arrived; there remained no doubt about Kumu's pregnancy. The news also reached Madhusudan's ears. Madhusudan had wanted wealth, and wealth had accumulated in full measure; he had received a title befitting that wealth; now, if he could establish his own glory within a future lineage, his duty in this world would reach its ultimate goal. As much as his heart rejoiced, he shifted the entire responsibility for the offense away from Kumu and unloaded it squarely onto Bipradas. He wrote a second letter to him, beginning with Whereas, and ending by signing it Your obedient servant, Madhusudan Ghoshal. In the middle, it read: I shall have the painful necessity... and so on. Such intimidating letters had the opposite effect on the Chatterjee lineage, especially when there was a threat of loss. Bipradas showed the letter to Kalu. Kalu's face turned red. He said, "Even in the body of an ordinary man like me, such a letter makes the blood boil to imperial degrees. It makes me want to summon an invisible executioner and yell, 'Off with his head!'"

During the day, there was various paperwork to attend to; finishing all of it, Bipradas sent for Kumu in the evening. Kumu had not come to her brother all day. She had been hiding herself.

Bipradas left the bed and sat in the chair. Lying down like a patient made the mind feel weak. He had a small stool arranged in front of him for Kumu. The lamp was placed in the corner, slightly shielded. Overhead, a large hand-pulled punkah swung back and forth with a whoosh, whoosh sound. The heat still lingered in the sky of late Baisakh; the south wind would occasionally let out a faint sigh and then stop; the leaves of the trees were completely still, as if listening with rapt attention. Like the estuary where the Ganges dilutes the blue waters of the ocean, the darkness felt exactly like that. The lingering, final light of the prolonged twilight was still mingling within its blackness. The pond in the garden would have remained invisible in the shadows, but the steady reflection of a very bright star pointed it out like a guiding finger from the sky. Beneath the trees, servants moved back and forth with lanterns from time to time, and an owl hooted.

Kumu arrived, perhaps hesitating a little, delaying slightly. Sitting on the stool near Bipradas, she said, "Dada, I don't feel good at all. I feel like going away somewhere."

Bipradas said, "You are mistaken, Kumu, you will feel good. In just a few days, your heart will be full."

"But then—" Kumu said, and stopped.

"I know—who will sever your bonds now?"

"So I will have to go, Dada?"

"I no longer have the right to forbid you. With what audacity could I banish your child from its own home?"

Kumu sat silently for a long time; Bipradas too said nothing.

Finally, in a very soft voice, Kumu asked, "Then when must I go?"

"Tomorrow; it will bear no further delay."

"Dada, you probably understand one thing: if I go this time, they will never let me come to you again."

"I am very well aware of that."

"Alright, so be it. But let me tell you one thing: you must never, for any reason, go to their house. I know, Dada, my soul will ache to see you, but you must never be seen there. I will not be able to bear that."

"No, Kumu, you won't have to worry about that."

"But they will try to cause you trouble."

"Once they have done everything they can, their power over me will also end. Then I will be free. Why do you call that trouble?"

"Dada, on that day, free me too. Until then, I will leave their son in their hands. There is a certain core of humanity that cannot be forfeited, not even for the sake of a child."

"Alright, let the child be born first, then we shall see."

"You do not believe me, but you remember Mother, don't you? She possessed the will to die. That day, she couldn't find her place in the world, so she could easily leave her children behind. When a human soul desires liberation, nothing can stop

it. I am your sister, Dada; I want liberation. I am telling you now, the day I sever these bonds, Mother will bless me."

Once again, the two remained silent for a long time. Suddenly, a gusty wind blew up, and the pages of Bipradas's reading book on the side table fluttered and turned rapidly. The room filled with the scent of jasmine from the garden.

Kumu said, "Do not think they intentionally caused me pain. They cannot give me happiness; I am simply built that way. And I cannot make them happy either. If I occupy the place of those who could easily make them happy, it will only create one problem or another. Then why this tragic farce? I will endure all the stigma of the crime from society alone; no stain will fall on them. But one day I will set them free, and I will take my own freedom; I will come away, you'll see. I cannot become false and live within a falsehood. I am their 'Barobou' (Elder Bride), but does that have any meaning if I am no longer Kumu? Dada, you do not believe in the Lord, but I do. I believe even more today than I did three months ago. All day today, I have been thinking this: there is so much chaos, so much upside-down everywhere, yet this garbage hasn't completely buried the world. Even transcending all this, the work of the universe goes on with the sun and the moon; the place that transcends all this is Vaikuntha (Heaven), and there resides my Lord. I feel shy to say these things to you—but I will never have the chance again, so I am telling you today. Otherwise, you will worry about me in vain. I have understood that even when everything is lost, this one truth remains. That is my inexhaustible wealth, that is my Lord. If I hadn't understood this, I would have beaten my head against your feet and died right here; I wouldn't have entered that prison. Dada, only because I have you in this world was I able to understand this." With that, Kumu slipped from the stool and laid her head on her brother's feet. The night deepened; Bipradas stared unblinking out the window, lost in thought.

CHAPTER 58

Early the next morning, Bipradas sent for Kumu. When Kumu arrived, she saw Bipradas sitting on the bed, holding an Esraj on his lap, with another one lying beside him. "Take the instrument," he told Kumu, "let the two of us play together." It was still slightly dark; after the long night, the cool breeze was rustling through the peepal leaves, and the crows had begun to caw. The two of them began a musical improvisation in the Bhairavi raga—deep, serene, and full of a poignant sorrow; like the meditation of Lord Mahadeva on that dawn when the grief of separation from Sati had finally grown still. As they played, the rosy glow of dawn brightened through the branches of the blooming Krishnachura tree, and the sun appeared over the garden wall. Servants came to the door, stood for a moment, and returned. The room was not cleaned. Sunlight streamed into the room; the guard stepped in quietly, placed the newspaper on the side table, and left with silent steps.

Finally, stopping the music, Bipradas said, "Kumu, you think I have no religion. If I try to put my religion into words, it gets depleted, so I do not speak of it. I see its form in the melody of a song, where profound sorrow and profound joy merge into one; I cannot give it a name. You are leaving today, Kumu, and perhaps we will not meet again. This morning, I came to guide you across to the other shore, beyond all the discord and dissonance. You have read Shakuntala—when Shakuntala set out for Dushyanta's house, Kanva accompanied her part of the way. The realm he stepped out to deliver her to was filled with sorrow and insult. But she did not stop there; crossing even that, Shakuntala reached an unwavering peace. In the Bhairavi of this morning is the melody of that peace; may the blessing of my entire soul guide you toward that pure, absolute fulfillment; may that fulfillment flood your inner and outer worlds, washing over all your sorrows and all your insults."

Kumu said nothing. Placing her head on Bipradas's feet, she offered her obeisance. She stood for a while, gazing at the light outside the window. Then she said, "Dada, let me go and prepare your tea and toast."

Madhusudan had summoned an astrologer today and fixed an auspicious time for her journey. It was shortly after ten in the morning. At the exact time, a palanquin with a red broadcloth cover embroidered in gold arrived at the door; attendants came with staffs and maces, and with great ceremony, they took Kumu to the

palace in Mirzapur. Today, the ceremonial music pavilion was playing there, and preparations were underway for feeding the Brahmins and distributing alms to them.

Manik entered Bipradas's room holding a cup of barley. Today, Bipradas was not in bed; he had pulled a chair up to the window and sat perfectly still. When the barley arrived, he paid no attention to it. The servant returned. Then Aunt Kshema arrived with his diet, placed her hand on Bipradas's shoulder, and said, "Bipu, the day is advancing, my child."

Bipradas slowly rose from the chair and lay down on the bed. Aunt Kshema had wanted to tell him in detail with what great pomp and affection they had taken Kumu away. But seeing Bipradas's profound silence, she couldn't say a word; it felt as if Bipradas was staring into a bottomless void.

When Bipradas finally spoke and said, "Pisi, send Kalu to me," even this simple sentence seemed to echo through the massive, silent shadow of destiny. The aunt felt a chill run down her spine.

When Kalu arrived, Bipradas handed him a letter. A letter from England, written by Subodh. Subodh wrote that if he returned to the country without finishing his Bar dinners, he would have to go back again later. Instead, it would be much more convenient for him, and save him from unnecessary expenses, if he finished his final dinner and returned around the months of Magh or Falgun. He believed the necessities of the estate affairs could wait until then.

Today, of all days, Kalu had absolutely no desire to torment Bipradas with the crisis of the estate affairs. Kalu said, "Dada, the demand to withdraw the money hasn't been raised yet; if we tread carefully for a few more days and don't provoke anyone, no disaster will strike soon. Anyway, don't you worry about a thing."

Bipradas replied, "I have no worries, Kalu. Not in the slightest."

Bipradas's worry did not sit well with Kalu—but this absolute lack of worry felt even worse.

Bipradas picked up the newspaper and began to read; Kalu understood that Bipradas had no desire whatsoever to discuss this matter. On other days, Kalu would leave as soon as the business talk was over; today, he sat in silence, wishing

he could talk about something else, or engage in some act of service. He asked, "Shall I close that window on the outside? The sun is coming in."

Bipradas waved his hand, indicating there was no need.

Yet Kalu remained sitting. Today, Kumu was not in Dada's room; this emptiness weighed heavily on his chest. Suddenly, he heard Tom the dog whimpering and whining from under the bed. He had seen Kumu leave; he understood something, but he couldn't quite explain it.