

Novel

THE CROWN PRINCESS'S MARKET

BOU THAKURANIR HAAT

Rabindranath Tagore



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INTRODUCTION

When the mind, stepping out from the subjective poetry of internal emotions, first entered the objective realm of imagination and began to wander, it was perhaps driven by sheer curiosity.

The walled-in mind ventured outside, and thus began its journeys along the diverse paths of the world. It was during this time that my pen sought new imagery and fresh experiences in the realm of prose. Its first endeavor manifested in the novel *Bou-Thakuranir Haat*—a play on human character set against a romantic backdrop; a game, truly, of youth. The traits of life exhibited by the characters hardly transcended the nature of puppets. They were not driven to inevitable destinies by the sheer force of their own personalities; rather, they were arranged objects fitted into a predetermined framework. Even today, one might look back at this story. It resembles a painting drawn by untutored fingers; it bears no marks of a confident mind or a seasoned hand. Yet, there is a certain value to the childishness found in the playroom of art. When youthful whimsy runs wild on the unobstructed path of intellect, it brings forth a certain primal craftsmanship of the mind.

That there must have been an occasional spark of spontaneous vitality in this writing is proven by the fact that, after its publication, I received an unsolicited letter of praise from Bankim Chandra, written in English. That letter was unfortunately lost due to the careless handling of a friend. Bankim expressed the opinion that although it was the early work of an immature age, the mark of power was evident within it—he did not condemn the book. He saw something in that youthful exuberance that gave him joy, prompting him to suddenly write a letter to an unknown boy. A distant, unknown potential had brought him a promise of hope. His words of encouragement were of immense value to me.

On this occasion, one thing must be clarified. Swept up in the fervor of nationalist sentiment, there was a time when attempts were made to project Pratapaditya as the ideal heroic figure of Bengal. That effort has not entirely ceased even today.

From the historical data I gathered about him at that time, I found proof that he was an unjust, tyrannical, and cruel man; he possessed the ignorant arrogance to defy the Emperor of Delhi, but lacked the actual power. The historians of that era were not influenced by the patriotism of later times. When I unabashedly wrote this book, the cult of his worship had not yet been established.

Udayan, 29.1.40

CHAPTER ONE

The night was far advanced. It was summertime. The wind had died down completely; not a single leaf on the trees was stirring. The Crown Prince of Jashore, Pratapaditya's eldest son, Udayaditya, sat by the window of his bedchamber. Beside him was his wife, Surama.

Surama said, "My dearest, bear with it, hold on to your patience. A day of happiness will surely come."

"I ask for no other happiness," Udayaditya replied. "I only wish I hadn't been born in a royal palace, hadn't been a crown prince. I wish I were the lowliest, most insignificant subject of the Lord of Jashore! To not be his eldest son, the sole heir to his throne, his wealth, honor, fame, power, and glory! What penance must I perform to reverse this past?"

Deeply anguished, Surama took the prince's right hand, pressing it firmly between both of hers, and looking into his face, she let out a slow, deep sigh. Her sorrow lay in the fact that she would gladly give her life to fulfill the prince's wish, but even giving her life could not make it come true.

The prince continued, "Surama, I could never be happy precisely because I was born into royalty. In a royal house, it seems, one is born only as an heir, never as a son. Since my childhood, my father has tested me at every moment—watching to see if I can uphold the glory he has earned, if I can brighten the family name, if I can bear the heavy burden of the kingdom. He has scrutinized my every action, every gesture, with the eyes of an examiner, not with the eyes of love. The relatives, ministers, courtiers, and subjects have dissected my every word and deed to predict my future. And all of them shook their heads and concluded—no, this kingdom cannot be saved from peril by me. I am a fool; I understand nothing. Everyone began to neglect me, and my father began to despise me. He abandoned all hope for me. He wouldn't even check on me."

Tears welled up in Surama's eyes. "Alas! How could he?" she whispered.

Filled with both sorrow and anger, she declared, "Those who thought you a fool are the real fools."

Udayaditya smiled faintly. Taking Surama by the chin, he gently shook her flushed, indignant face. In an instant, he turned serious again. "No, Surama, it is true, I have no aptitude for ruling. That has been tested thoroughly enough. When I was sixteen, the Maharaja handed over the charge of the Hosenkhali pargana to me to teach me the ropes. Within six months, utter chaos ensued. Revenue plummeted, and the subjects began showering me with blessings. The officials complained against me to the king. The royal court unanimously agreed that since the prince had become so overly beloved by the subjects, it was clear proof he could never govern a kingdom. From then on, the Maharaja hardly ever looked my way. He would say, 'That disgrace of a son will turn out exactly like his uncle, Basanta Ray of Raygarh—dancing around playing the sitar and letting the kingdom go to the dogs.'"

Surama spoke again, "My beloved, endure it, have patience. Whatever he may be, he is still your father. These days, his entire heart is consumed by the singular, boundless ambition of acquiring and expanding his kingdom; there is no room for affection there. But as his ambitions are fulfilled, the realm of his affection will surely grow."

"Surama, your intellect is sharp and farsighted, but this time you are mistaken. First, ambition has no end. Second, the further the boundaries of my father's kingdom expand, the more territory he gains, the greater his fear of losing it will become. And the more burdensome the affairs of the state grow, the more unfit he will consider me."

Surama hadn't misunderstood; she merely believed. Belief often defies logic. She simply hoped with all her heart that things would turn out the way she wished.

"Unable to bear the alternating pity and neglect from all sides, I used to frequently run away to my grandfather in Raygarh. Father hardly noticed. Ah, what a change that was! There, I could see trees and nature, visit the villagers in their huts, and I didn't have to wear royal attire day and night. Besides, you know very well that wherever Grandfather is, sorrow, anxiety, or grim solemnity cannot exist within miles. He fills the air with singing, playing, and merriment. Joy, goodwill, and peace are everywhere. As soon as I arrived there, I would forget I was the Crown Prince of Jashore. What a comforting oblivion! Eventually, when I was eighteen, one day the spring breeze was blowing in Raygarh, green groves surrounded us, and in that spring, I saw Rukmini."

"I have heard that story many times," Surama interrupted.

"Hear it once more," Udayaditya insisted. "Sometimes, certain thoughts bite into my soul. If I don't let them out, how will I survive? Even now, it shames me and pains me to speak of it to you; that is why I tell it over and over. The day it no longer brings shame or pain, I will know my penance is complete. That day, I will speak of it no more."

"What penance, my beloved? If you committed a sin, the fault lies with the sin, not with you. Do I not know you? Can the Inner Guide not see your heart?"

Udayaditya went on, "Rukmini was three years older than me. She was a solitary widow. By Grandfather's grace, she was allowed to live in Raygarh. I don't remember by what trick she first drew me in. At that time, the midday sun was blazing in my mind. The light was so harsh that I couldn't see anything clearly; the whole world seemed shrouded in a luminous mist. All the blood seemed to rush to my head; nothing felt surprising, nothing seemed impossible. The right path and the wrong path, every direction merged into one. Nothing like this had ever happened to me before, and nothing like it has happened since. God knows what purpose He meant to serve when He agitated the entire universe against this small, weak, foolish heart of mine for just one day. It was as if the whole cosmos conspired to lead my fragile heart astray for a moment. Just a moment—no more—a fleeting, devastating blow from the outside world, and in that instant, the core of a weak heart was shattered; it fell to the earth, embracing the dust with the speed of lightning. When it rose again, it was covered in grime, sullied—that dust could never be wiped away, the mark of that stain never vanished. What had I done, O Creator, that You blackened all the purity of my life in a single moment of sin? Turned my day into night? Even the jasmine and malati flowers in the garden of my heart seemed to turn dark with shame."

As he spoke, Udayaditya's fair complexion turned crimson, his large eyes widened further, and a tremor like a streak of lightning ran from his head to his toes. With a mix of joy, pride, and sorrow, Surama pleaded, "For my sake, let it be. Say no more."

"When the blood slowly cooled, I began to see everything in its proper proportion. When the world ceased to look like the hazy, swirling dream of a hot-blooded, dizzy-headed, red-eyed drunkard, and instead appeared as a harsh field of reality—imagine the state of my mind then! What a fall it was! Down into the abyss of the

underworld, hundreds of thousands of miles deep, into the darkest, blindest of nights, I plummeted before I could even blink. When Grandfather affectionately called for me, with what face could I go to him? But since then, I had to leave Raygarh. Grandfather cannot bear it if he doesn't see me; he would send for me. I was so terrified that I could not bring myself to go. So, he himself would come to see me and my sister, Vibha. No wounded pride, nothing of the sort. He wouldn't even ask why I hadn't come. He would see us, make merry, and then leave."

Udayaditya smiled faintly, looking into Surama's face, his large eyes overflowing with an incredibly gentle and tender love. Surama knew what was coming next. Her face bowed down; she grew slightly restless. The prince took her cheeks in both hands and lifted her bowed face. Moving closer, he gently rested her head on his shoulder. Wrapping his left arm around her waist, he kissed her cheek with a deep, serene love and said, "And then what happened, Surama, tell me? Where did this face—radiant with intelligence, tender with affection, bright with smiles, and flawlessly serene—emerge from? Was there any hope that my deep darkness would ever break? You are my dawn, my light, my hope. By what magic spell did you dispel that gloom?"

The prince kissed Surama's face again and again. Surama said nothing; her eyes filled with tears of joy.

"After so long, I found true refuge," Udayaditya said. "It was from you I first heard that I am not a fool; I believed it, I finally understood it. It was from you I learned that intellect is not a crooked, uneven, dark, narrow alley, but straight, level, and broad like a royal highway. Before, I despised myself, neglected myself. I dared not do anything. If my mind said, 'This is right,' my self-doubting instinct would say, 'It might not be.' I silently endured however anyone treated me, never trying to think for myself. After all this time, I feel that I am something, I am someone. I was undiscovered for so long, and you brought me out into the light. Surama, you discovered me. Now, whatever my heart tells me is good, I want to achieve it instantly. I have such faith in you that when you believe in me, I can fearlessly believe in myself. Where did such strength lie in this delicate frame of yours, that you have made even me strong?"

With what boundless reliance did Surama wrap her arms around her husband's chest! With what complete self-surrender did she gaze into his face! Her eyes seemed to say, *"I have nothing else but you, and therefore, I have everything."*

Having endured the neglect of his relatives since childhood, Udayaditya loved to revisit his old life story—told a hundred times over—piece by piece, step by step, with Surama in the stillness of the deep night.

"How long can this go on, Surama?" Udayaditya asked. "On one side, the courtiers look at me with a sort of mocking pity; on the other, my mother torments you in the inner chambers. Even the servants don't respect you as they should. I can't bring myself to say anything forcefully to anyone; I stay quiet and bear it. You have a spirited nature, yet you too endure it in silence. Since I could not make you happy, since you have only had to suffer insult and pain because of me, it would have been better if this marriage had never happened."

"What are you saying, my lord?" Surama replied. "It is precisely now that you need Surama. What could I have done for you in times of happiness? In times of joy, Surama would merely be an object of luxury, a plaything. Surpassing all sorrow, this joy awakens in my heart: that I am of use to you. I am relishing the unparalleled bliss of suffering for your sake. My only grief is that I cannot carry the entirety of your pain myself."

The prince remained quiet for a while before saying, "I do not worry so much for myself. I am used to it all. But why should you bear insults for my sake? Like a true wife, you have offered me solace in my sorrow and rest in my exhaustion; but like a husband, I have failed to protect you from humiliation and shame. Because your father, the King of Sripur, refuses to acknowledge my father as his overlord, refuses to submit to the sovereign umbrella of Jashore, my father neglects you to assert his own dominance. If someone insults you, he turns a deaf ear. He thinks making you his daughter-in-law is honor enough for you. Sometimes I feel I can take it no more; I want to leave everything behind and take you away. I probably would have by now, if you weren't holding me back."

The night deepened. Many evening stars had set, and the stars of the late night had risen. The footsteps of the guards on the fortress gates could be heard from afar. The whole world was fast asleep. All the lamps in the city were extinguished, doors were bolted shut; save for the occasional howl of a jackal, there was not a living soul about. The door to Udayaditya's bedchamber was locked. Suddenly, someone began knocking on the door from outside.

The prince hastily opened it. "What is it, Vibha? What's the matter? Why have you come so late in the night?"

The readers are already aware that Vibha is Udayaditya's sister. Vibha said, "A terrible disaster is about to happen!"

Surama and Udayaditya asked in unison, "Why, what has happened?"

Vibha whispered something in a trembling voice. Unable to contain herself as she spoke, she burst into tears, crying, "Brother, what will happen now?"

"Then I must go," Udayaditya declared.

"No, no, you mustn't go!" Vibha cried out.

"Why, Vibha?"

"If Father finds out? If he gets angry with you?"

Surama intervened, "Shame on you, Vibha; is this the time to worry about that?"

Udayaditya quickly dressed, strapped his sword to his belt, and prepared to leave. Vibha grabbed his arm. "Brother, please don't go. Send someone else. I am so scared."

"Don't stop me now, Vibha; there is no time," Udayaditya said, and immediately rushed out.

Holding Surama's hand, Vibha asked, "What will happen, sister? What if Father finds out?"

"What else can happen?" Surama replied with a sigh. "I suppose there is no affection left anyway. Even if the little that remains is lost, it won't be much of a tragedy."

"No, sister, I am terrified. What if Father harms him? What if he punishes him?"

Surama sighed deeply. "It is my belief that for those who have no one in this world, the Lord is their greatest ally. O Lord, let Your name not be tarnished. Do not break this faith of mine."

CHAPTER TWO

The minister asked, "Your Majesty, will this action be wise?"

"Which action?" asked Pratapaditya.

"The order you gave yesterday."

Annoyed, Pratapaditya said, "What did I order yesterday?"

"Regarding your uncle," the minister said.

Growing even more irritated, Pratapaditya demanded, "What about my uncle?"

"Your Majesty ordered that when Basanta Ray takes shelter at the Shimultali inn on his way to Jashore, then—"

Pratapaditya knitted his brows. "Then what? Finish the sentence."

"Then two Pathans are to go and—"

"Yes."

"—assassinate him."

Furious, Pratapaditya snapped, "Minister, have you suddenly turned into a child? Why must I ask ten questions to hear one simple thing? Do you hesitate to even utter the words? I suppose the time for you to focus on state affairs has passed; it is now time for you to contemplate the afterlife. Why haven't you asked to retire yet?"

"Your Majesty has misunderstood my intent."

"I have understood it perfectly well. But let me ask you: an act that I am prepared to carry out, you cannot even bring yourself to speak of? You should have considered that if I am about to do this, there must be a grave reason for it. I have, of course, weighed all matters of righteousness and sin."

"Sire, I—"

"Quiet. Listen to everything I have to say first. When I—when I am prepared to execute my own uncle, I have surely thought about it far more than you have. There is no sin in this act. My vow is this: these Mlecchas [foreigners/Mughals] who have come to our land and started their atrocities, whose tyranny threatens to wipe out the eternal Aryan religion from our country—the Kshatriyas are giving them their daughters, the Hindus are falling from their customs—I will drive these Mlecchas out. I will free our Aryan faith from the jaws of Rahu. To achieve this vow, great strength is required. I want all the kings of Bengal to unite under me; this cannot be achieved without destroying those who are allies of the Yavanas [foreigners]. My uncle Basanta Ray is worthy of my reverence, but it is no sin to speak the truth: he is a stain on our lineage. He has proudly declared himself a servant of the Mlecchas; Pratapaditya Ray has no relation with such a man. If a limb is infected, it must be amputated. My desire is to amputate that ulcer of our family, that ulcer of Bengal—Basanta Ray—and thereby save the Ray lineage, save Bengal."

"I never held a differing opinion from Your Majesty on this matter," the minister replied.

"Yes, you did. Speak the truth. You still do. Listen, Minister, as long as your views do not align with mine, voice them. If you lack that courage, this position is not for you. If you have doubts, say so. Give me the opportunity to explain. You think killing one's own uncle is always a sin; do not say 'no', that is exactly what is on your mind. There is an answer to this. On his father's orders, Parashurama beheaded his own mother; can I not slay my uncle for the sake of *Dharma*?"

In truth, regarding the matters of righteousness and sin, the minister had no personal opinion whatsoever. The king could not fathom the depths the minister had plumbed. The minister knew very well that by showing hesitation now, the king might be momentarily annoyed, but ultimately, he would be inwardly pleased with him. If he didn't play this part, the king might eventually harbor suspicions and fears against him.

The minister said, "What I was trying to say is, the Emperor of Delhi will surely be furious upon hearing this news."

Pratapaditya flared up. "Yes, yes, he will be furious! Everyone has the right to be furious. But the Emperor of Delhi is not my God. There are plenty of creatures who

will tremble like leaves if he gets angry—there is Man Singh, there is Birbal, there is our Basanta Ray, and recently I see there is you too. But do not judge everyone by your own standards."

The minister smiled and replied, "Sire, I too am not overly afraid of empty rage, but when it is backed by shields and swords, one must give it some thought. The anger of the Emperor of Delhi means fifty thousand soldiers."

Unable to find a good retort, Pratapaditya said, "Look here, Minister, do not try to deter me from any action by threatening me with the Emperor of Delhi; I find it extremely insulting."

"What will the subjects say if they find out?" the minister pressed.

"If they find out?"

"This deed will not remain hidden for long. If this news spreads, the entirety of Bengal will turn against you. The very purpose for which you wish to do this will be destroyed at its roots. You will be outcasted and face severe backlash."

"Look, Minister, I tell you again, whatever I do, I do with careful deliberation. Therefore, once I have set my mind to a task, do not try to needlessly frighten me into backing down. I am not a child. I did not keep you as my minister to act as my personal shackle, obstructing me at every step."

The minister fell silent. The king had given him two contradictory orders: first, to voice his dissent as long as their opinions differed; second, never to try to deter the king from an action by expressing a contrary opinion. To this day, the minister hadn't quite managed to reconcile the two.

After a while, the minister spoke again, "Your Majesty, the Emperor of Delhi—"

"The Emperor of Delhi again?" Pratapaditya exploded. "Minister, if you chanted the name of God as many times a day as you chant the name of the Emperor of Delhi, you could secure a prime spot in heaven! Until this task is finished, do not bring his name to your lips. When I receive news this afternoon that the deed is done, you may come and chant the Emperor's name in my ears to your heart's content. Until then, exercise a little self-restraint."

The minister went quiet again. Dropping the topic of the Emperor, he said, "Your Majesty, Crown Prince Udayaditya—"

"So, first the Emperor of Delhi, then the subjects, and now finally you want to scare me with the name of that henpecked boy?"

"Your Majesty, you misunderstand completely. I have absolutely no intention of hindering your actions."

Cooling down slightly, Pratapaditya said, "Then tell me what you were saying."

"Last night, the Crown Prince suddenly mounted his horse and rode out alone. He has not returned yet."

Annoyed, Pratapaditya asked, "In which direction did he go?"

"Towards the east."

Gritting his teeth, Pratapaditya asked, "When did he leave?"

"Around midnight yesterday."

"Is the daughter of the Zamindar of Sripur still here?"

"Yes, Sire."

"It would be better if she stayed at her father's house."

The minister gave no reply.

"Udayaditya was never fit to be a king," Pratapaditya muttered. "Since childhood, he's always mingled with the common folk. Who knew a son of mine would turn out like this? Does a lion cub need to be taught how to be a lion? But then again—*a man takes after his maternal uncles*. I suppose he's inherited the nature of his mother's side. On top of that, I recently married him into the house of Sripur; since then, the boy has completely gone to the dogs. May God ensure my youngest son proves worthy, so that if I cannot finish what I have started, I won't die ridden with anxiety. Has he really not returned yet?"

"No, Your Majesty."

Stomping his foot on the ground, Pratapaditya demanded, "Why didn't a guard go with him?"

"One was ready to accompany him, but he forbade it."

"Why didn't they follow him invisibly from a distance?"

"They suspected no foul play."

"Suspected no foul play! Minister, are you trying to convince me they did a splendid job? Do not waste your breath making up pointless excuses. The guards have shown gross negligence in their duty. Summon whoever was at the gates at that time. If a single wish of mine is thwarted because of this incident, I will wreak havoc. Minister, you too have reason to fear. You came to prove to me that no one is responsible for this failure. Therefore, the responsibility falls on you."

Pratapaditya sent for the guards. Remaining grim for a while, he suddenly asked, "Yes. What were you saying about the Emperor of Delhi?"

"I heard a complaint has been lodged against you before the Emperor."

"By whom? Your Crown Prince Udayaditya?"

"Sire, please do not say such things. I have not yet discovered who did it."

"Whoever it is, do not lose sleep over it. I am the Emperor of Delhi's judge, and I am preparing his punishment. Have those Pathans not returned yet? Has Udayaditya not come back? Summon the guards immediately."

CHAPTER THREE

Along the deserted road, the prince galloped his horse with the speed of lightning. It was a dark night, but the path was long, straight, and wide, leaving little room for fear. In the still night, the sound of the horse's hooves echoed all around; a stray dog or two barked in alarm, and an occasional jackal darted out of the way to hide in the bamboo groves. Among the lights were the stars in the sky and the fireflies in the trees along the road; among the sounds was the ceaseless chirping of crickets; and among the humans, a skeletal old beggar woman slept under a tree.

After covering ten miles, the prince left the road and descended into a field. He had to rein in the horse's speed somewhat. It had rained during the day, the ground was muddy, and the horse's hooves sank at every step. Struggling to move forward, the horse stumbled onto its front knees three times. The exhausted animal's nostrils flared, foam gathered at its mouth, its hind legs chafed and lathered, a rattling sound came from its ribs, and its entire body was drenched in sweat. It was a fiercely hot summer night, not a breath of wind stirred, and there was still a long way to go.

After crossing numerous marshes and plowed fields, the prince finally reached a dirt road. He spurred the horse into a furious gallop once more. Patting its neck affectionately, he urged, "Sugreev!" The horse flicked its ears, cast a sidelong glance at its master with its large eyes, arched its neck with a loud neigh, forcefully lowered its head to slacken the reins, and bolted forward at a breakneck pace. The trees on either side blurred into a rush of shadows; looking up at the sky, it seemed as if clusters of stars were flying furiously past like sparks of fire, and in that windless night, the sheer speed created a roaring gale in his ears.

During the third watch of the night, just as the jackals near the village settlements howled to mark the hour, the prince arrived at the door of the Shimultali inn. Immediately, his horse collapsed dead to the ground. He dismounted, patted its back, lifted its head, and called out "Sugreev" time and again, but the beast moved no more.

With a heavy sigh, the prince walked to the door and knocked. After repeated pounding, the innkeeper, without opening the door, called out through the window, "Who are you at this ungodly hour?" He saw an armed young man standing outside.

"I need to ask you something; open the door," the prince commanded.

"What need is there to open the door? Ask whatever you want from there."

"Is King Basanta Ray of Raygarh here?" the prince asked.

"Well, he was supposed to arrive after dusk, but he hasn't turned up yet. I suppose he won't be coming today."

The prince took out two silver coins, jingled them, and said, "Take this."

The man hurried over, opened the door, and took the coins. The prince then said, "My good man, I am going to search your inn just once to see who is here."

Looking suspicious, the innkeeper protested, "No, sir, that won't do."

"Do not stop me. I am an official of the royal palace. I have come in search of two criminals."

With these words, he entered. The innkeeper dared not obstruct him further. Udayaditya searched the entire premises. He found neither Basanta Ray, nor his entourage, nor any Pathans. Only two middle-aged women, rudely awakened from their sleep, yelled out, "May you drop dead! Why are you staring at us like that, you brute?"

Emerging from the inn and standing on the road, the prince began to think. For a moment, he felt relieved; perhaps, by some stroke of divine luck, his grandfather hadn't traveled today. But then he wondered: what if he was staying at a previous inn along the route, and the Pathans had gone there looking for him? Plagued by these thoughts, he began walking back along the road.

After a short distance, he saw a horseman approaching from the opposite direction. As the rider drew near, Udayaditya called out, "Who goes there? Is that Ratan?"

The rider immediately dismounted, bowed deeply, and said, "Yes, Sire. Crown Prince, what brings you here so late at night?"

"I will explain the reason later. First, tell me, where is Grandfather?"

"Why, he is supposed to be at the inn."

"What! I just checked, he is not there."

Astonished, Ratan said, "The Maharaja set out for Jashore with an escort of thirty men. I fell behind due to an errand. I was supposed to reunite with him at this inn tonight."

"With the mud on the road, his tracks should be visible. I will follow them and search for him. Give me your horse. You follow on foot."

CHAPTER FOUR

Beside a desolate road, under the shade of a peepal tree, the elderly Basanta Ray sat inside a palanquin resting on the ground, devoid of its bearers. There was no one else around, save for a single Pathan standing outside. A distant clamor of voices had long since faded away. The night had grown absolutely still.

"Khan Sahib," Basanta Ray asked, "why didn't you leave?"

The Pathan replied, "Huzoor, how could I leave? You sent all your guards away just to protect our lives and property. To leave you unprotected by the roadside at night—do not think me so ungrateful. Our poet says: *He who harms me makes me his debtor, a debt he must repay in the afterlife; he who helps me makes me his debtor, a debt I can never repay in this life or the next.*"

Bravo, Basanta Ray thought to himself, *this fellow is a thoroughly good man.*

After a moment's hesitation, he poked his bald head out of the palanquin and said, "Khan Sahib, you are a very fine man."

The Khan Sahib immediately offered a crisp salute. On this matter, he was in complete agreement with Basanta Ray.

Examining the man's face in the torchlight, Basanta Ray observed, "You look like a man from a noble family."

The Pathan saluted again. "What a marvel! You have guessed correctly, Maharaja."

"What do you do for a living now?"

The Pathan let out a sigh. "Huzoor, I have fallen on hard times. I now make ends meet by farming. The poet says: *O Fate, the fact that you made a blade of grass a blade of grass shows no cruelty on your part; but that you made a mighty peepal tree, only to fell it in a storm and lay it low beside the grass—that tells me your heart is made of stone.*"

Overjoyed, Basanta Ray exclaimed, "Wah, wah! What a profound thought the poet has expressed! Sahib, you must write down those two verses for me today."

The Pathan thought his luck had taken a brilliant turn. The old man was quite a character; he could be very useful to a poor man.

Basanta Ray, meanwhile, felt a pang of sympathy. *Alas*, he thought, *a man who was once great is now in such dire straits. The Goddess of Fortune is truly cruel.* Feeling deeply moved, he said to the Pathan, "With such a magnificent physique as yours, you could easily secure a position in the army."

The Pathan instantly replied, "Huzoor, I certainly could. That is our true calling. My father and forefathers all died with swords in their hands, and that is my only desire too. The poet says—"

Laughing, Basanta Ray interrupted, "Whatever the poet may say, my boy, if you take up employment with me, your wish to die with a sword in hand might still be fulfilled, but the chance to actually draw that sword from its scabbard will be a rare luxury. I have grown old, my subjects live in peace and comfort, and God willing, there will be no more need for fighting. My youth has passed; I have forsaken the sword. Now, instead of a weapon, someone else has taken my hand in marriage."

Saying this, he lightly strummed the sitar lying beside him, awakening a few musical notes.

The Pathan nodded, closed his eyes, and said, "Ah, what you say is absolutely true. There is a verse that goes: *With a sword, one can conquer an enemy; but with music, one can turn an enemy into a friend.*"

"What did you say, Khan Sahib?" Basanta Ray cried out. "Music can turn an enemy into a friend! How wonderful!"

He fell silent, pondering the thought, and the more he thought about it, the more marvelously profound it seemed. After a few moments, he began interpreting the verse himself. "Even a weapon as terrifying as a sword cannot truly destroy an enemy's hatred—how can one call that a cure? Healing a patient by killing him, what kind of cure is that? But music is such a sweet thing that it destroys the enmity without destroying the enemy! Is this ordinary poetry? Bah! What brilliance!"

The old man grew so excited that he stepped out of the palanquin, asked the Pathan to come closer, and repeated, "With a sword, one conquers an enemy, but with music, one turns an enemy into a friend. Isn't that right, Khan Sahib?"

"Yes, Huzoor."

"You must visit Raygarh sometime. Once I return from Jashore, I will do everything in my power to help you."

Beaming, the Pathan said, "What is there that you cannot do, if you wish it?" *I've got this well sorted out*, he thought to himself. He then asked, "Do you know how to play the sitar?"

"I do," Basanta Ray replied, and immediately picked up the instrument. Fixing a *mezrab* (plectrum) to his finger, he began playing the *Behag* raga.

Every now and then, the Pathan would nod his head and exclaim, "Wah, wah! Khasi (Excellent)!" Gradually, caught up in the fervor of the music, it became impossible for Basanta Ray to remain seated. He stood up and continued playing. Forgetting all sense of dignity, solemnity, and his surroundings, he eventually broke into a song: "*Kesyse katongi rayn, so piya bina*" (How shall I pass the night, without my beloved?).

When the song ended, the Pathan remarked, "Bah! What a marvelous voice."

"I suppose on a quiet night, in an open field, any voice sounds sweet," Basanta Ray chuckled. "Because, while I have practiced a great deal, people don't exactly praise my singing. But you see, just as the Creator has provided a remedy for every disease He created, He has also provided a listener for every voice He made. There are exactly two foolish souls who actually like my voice. Otherwise, Sahib, I would have shut down this musical shop long ago. Those two amateur customers of mine, they don't know the first thing about quality, yet they applaud me endlessly. I haven't seen the two of them in a long time, so my singing has been on hold; that's why I am rushing to see them. I will sing to my heart's content, unload the burden off my soul, and then return home." The old man's dim eyes sparkled with affection and joy.

The Pathan thought to himself, "*One of your desires has been fulfilled—you've had your singing heard. Now, should I unload the burden of your life? Toba, toba (God forbid)! Who could do such a thing? Killing an infidel surely earns merit, but I have earned so much merit already that I'm not too worried about the afterlife. However, considering my worldly affairs are in utter shambles, if I can secure a good arrangement with this infidel instead of killing him, I see no objection.*"

Unable to contain himself any longer, Basanta Ray's imagination took over. He stepped close to the Pathan and whispered excitedly, "Do you know who I was talking about, Sahib? They are my grandson and granddaughter." Growing impatient, he muttered, "When will my guards return?" and picked up his sitar to start singing again.

Just then, a man on horseback approached and said, "Ah, thank goodness! Grandfather, who are you singing to by the roadside at this hour of the night?"

Overcome with joy and surprise, Basanta Ray hurriedly placed his sitar on the palanquin, took Udayaditya's hands, helped him dismount, and embraced him tightly. "What news, my boy? Is your sister well?"

"All is well," Udayaditya replied.

Laughing, the old man picked up his sitar again, tapped his foot to the rhythm, bobbed his head, and launched into a song:

"Why, my love, do you appear at such an untimely hour? It all feels like a dream, beyond my belief's power. Were you not in Chandrabali's bower, where affection does shower? Has your thirst for romance faded so soon? The night is still dark, morning is not yet in bloom, And this Radhika's tears still fall in the gloom. Has Chandrabali's floral adornment wilted away? O Chakora bird, has the moon's sweet smile gone astray?"

Glancing at the Pathan, Udayaditya whispered in Basanta Ray's ear, "Grandfather, where did you pick up this Kabuliwala?"

Basanta Ray quickly replied, "Khan Sahib is a very fine man. A true connoisseur. We've spent a most delightful night together."

Seeing Udayaditya, the Khan Sahib had grown extremely nervous, unsure of what to do.

Udayaditya asked his grandfather, "Why are you here instead of the inn?"

The Pathan suddenly blurted out, "Huzoor, if I may be granted pardon, I will speak. We are subjects of King Pratapaditya. The Maharaja ordered me and my brother to assassinate you on your way to Jashore."

Basanta Ray gasped, "Ram, Ram, Ram! (God forbid!)"

"Go on," Udayaditya commanded.

"We have never done such a thing, and when we objected, he threatened us with dire consequences. We were forced to set out on this mission. We intercepted you on the road. My brother faked a village robbery to lure your guards away, crying and begging for help. I was left behind to finish the job. But Maharaja, even though it was the king's command, my conscience absolutely forbade it. For our poet says: *At the command of a king or a master, you may destroy the whole world; but beware, do not destroy even a corner of heaven.* Now, this poor man seeks your protection. If I return to my country, I will be ruined. If you do not save me, I have no way out." He stood with his hands folded in supplication.

Basanta Ray stood utterly stunned. After a long pause, he said to the Pathan, "I will give you a letter. Go to Raygarh. When I return, I will make proper arrangements for you."

"Grandfather, are you still going to Jashore?" Udayaditya asked in disbelief.

"Yes, my boy."

"What are you saying!"

"Pratap is not a stranger to me," Basanta Ray explained. "He may commit a thousand sins, but he remains exceptionally dear to my heart. I do not fear any harm coming to me. I am, my boy, standing on the very edge of the ocean of life; one strong wave, and it will all be over for me. But knowing the ruin Pratap is bringing upon his present life and his afterlife by committing this sin, how can I rest easy? I must embrace him and make him understand everything."

Tears streamed down Basanta Ray's face as he spoke. Udayaditya covered his eyes with both hands.

At that moment, Basanta Ray's guards returned, making a great commotion.

"Where is the Maharaja? Where is the Maharaja?"

"I am right here, boys, where else would I go?"

In unison, they shouted, "Where is that wretched Pathan?"

Flustered, Basanta Ray stepped between them. "Now, now, boys, don't say anything to the Khan Sahib."

The first guard said, "Maharaja, we have suffered greatly today. That scoundrel—"

"Oh, shut up," the second guard interrupted. "Let me explain it properly. That Pathan rogue led us straight for a while, and then took a left into a mango orchard—"

"No, it was a babul thicket," the third corrected.

"It wasn't on the left, it was on the right," argued the fourth.

"Get lost, you fool, it was on the left," retorted the second.

"Just because you say so, it's on the left?"

"If it wasn't on the left, then what about that pond—"

"Alright, alright," Udayaditya interjected. "It seems it was on the left. Go on."

"Yes, Sire. He took us through that leftward mango orchard into a field. We crossed countless plowed fields, marshes, and bamboo groves, but found no trace of any village. After making us wander in circles for three hours, just as we neared a settlement, that rascal vanished into thin air. We couldn't find hide nor hair of him."

"I didn't like the look of that fellow from the start," the first guard declared.

"I knew something like this would happen," added the second.

"Whenever I see a shaven-headed rogue like that, I get suspicious," the third chimed in.

Eventually, everyone loudly proclaimed that they had seen through the whole plot from the very beginning.

CHAPTER FIVE

"Look here, Minister," Pratapaditya said. "Those two Pathans haven't returned yet."

"That is hardly my fault, Your Majesty," the minister replied softly.

Annoyed, Pratapaditya said, "I am not talking about fault. There must be a reason for the delay. I am asking what you assume it might be."

"Shimultali is quite far from here. It is only natural that traveling there, finishing the task, and returning would take time."

Pratapaditya was displeased with the minister's answer. He wanted the minister's assumptions to mirror his own anxieties, but the minister refused to indulge him.

"Did Udayaditya ride out last night?" Pratapaditya asked.

"Yes, Sire. I informed you of that earlier."

"Informed me earlier! What impeccable timing! Do you think your job is done simply by informing me whenever you please? Udayaditya was never like this before. The daughter of the Zamindar of Sripur must be feeding him bad advice. What do you think?"

"How am I to say, Your Majesty?"

Pratapaditya flared up, "Am I asking you for the word of God? Tell me what you suspect!"

"You hear everything about the daughter-in-law directly from the Queen; you are the one in a position to guess. How can I possibly make assumptions about the inner chambers?"

A Pathan entered the room.

Pratapaditya immediately asked, "What happened? Have you finished the job?"

"Yes, Maharaja, the job is finished by now."

"What kind of answer is that? Don't you know for sure?"

"Yes, I know for sure. The job is done, there is no doubt about it, though I was not present at the exact moment."

"Then how was it done?"

"Following your instructions, I lured his men away. Hosen Khan finished the deed."

"And if he hasn't?"

"Maharaja, I stake my head on it."

"Very well. Wait over there. When your brother returns, you will get your reward."

The Pathan stood at a distance near the door, under the watch of the guards.

After a long silence, Pratapaditya said quietly to the minister, "We must ensure the subjects do not find out about this under any circumstances."

The minister replied, "Your Majesty, if I may speak without angering you—this will inevitably become public knowledge."

"How can you be so sure?"

"You have previously expressed your hostility towards Basanta Ray in public. You did not invite him to your daughter's wedding; he arrived uninvited. Today, you suddenly invited him without any apparent reason, and he was murdered on the way. Under these circumstances, the subjects will undoubtedly hold you responsible."

Furious, Pratapaditya shouted, "I cannot understand your attitude at all, Minister! It seems you would be delighted if this leaked; your heart's desire would be fulfilled if my name were dragged through the mud. Why else would you constantly harp on about how it *will* be exposed? I see no reason for it to come out. I suppose if the news doesn't spread any other way, you will personally go door to door announcing it!"

"Forgive me, Your Majesty," the minister replied calmly. "You possess far greater wisdom than I in all matters. It is highly presumptuous for a man of my meager

intellect to advise you. However, since you have chosen to keep me as your minister, I take the liberty of speaking my mind when something occurs to me. If my counsel angers you, I beg you to relieve this servant of his duties."

Pratapaditya straightened up. Occasionally, when the minister delivered a hard truth, Pratapaditya felt a begrudging respect and inner satisfaction.

"I am considering," Pratapaditya mused, "that if we kill these two Pathans, there will be no further cause for worry on this matter."

"Covering up one murder is a liability; managing three is impossible. The subjects will find out," the minister insisted, standing his ground.

"Then I must be terrified!" Pratapaditya mocked loudly. "The subjects will find out! Jashore is not Raygarh; the subjects do not rule here. Here, besides the King, no one else is king. So do not try to scare me with the subjects. If any subject dares to speak a word against me regarding this, I will sear their tongue with a hot iron."

The minister smiled inwardly. *So terrified of a subject's tongue!* he thought. *Yet he comforts himself by loudly claiming he fears no one!*

"Once the funeral rites are completed, I must take an entourage and visit Raygarh," Pratapaditya said. "I don't see anyone else fit to inherit that throne besides myself."

At that moment, the elderly Basanta Ray slowly stepped into the room. Pratapaditya jumped back in shock. For a second, he thought he was seeing a ghost. Utterly stunned, he couldn't utter a single word.

Basanta Ray approached him, gently stroked his arm, and said softly, "Why do you fear me, Pratap? I am your uncle. And even if that doesn't reassure you—I am an old man; I have no power to cause you any harm."

Pratapaditya had regained his senses, but he was terrible at improvising words. He stood there, speechless and dumbfounded. He didn't even bend to touch his uncle's feet in greeting.

Basanta Ray spoke slowly again, "Pratap, say something. If by chance you have done a deed that makes you feel ashamed and hesitant to look at me, do not fret

over it. I will not bring it up. Come, my son, let us embrace. We are seeing each other after a long time, and we won't be seeing each other for much longer."

Finally, Pratapaditya bowed, touched his feet, and embraced his uncle. Meanwhile, the minister quietly slipped out of the room.

With a tender smile, Basanta Ray patted Pratapaditya's arm and said, "Basanta Ray has lived a long time, hasn't he, Pratap? The time has come; only God knows why I haven't been summoned yet. But it won't be long now."

Basanta Ray stayed silent for a while; Pratapaditya made no reply.

"Let me speak plainly," Basanta Ray continued. "The fact that you raised a knife against me has wounded me more deeply than the knife ever could." Tears sprang to his eyes as he spoke. "But I am not angry in the slightest. I will only tell you two things. Do not kill me, Pratap! It will bode ill for your present and your afterlife. If you could wait this long for my death, can you not wait a few days more? Will you take on the burden of such a sin for just this little while?"

Basanta Ray noticed that Pratapaditya gave no response. He neither denied the guilt nor offered any words of repentance. Instantly, Basanta Ray changed the subject. "Pratap, you must visit Raygarh. You haven't been there in a long time. You will see many changes. The soldiers have put down their swords and taken up plows. Where the barracks used to be, there is now a guesthouse—"

At that moment, Pratapaditya spotted the Pathan from afar, trying to sneak away. He could contain himself no longer. The suppressed rage boiling inside him erupted like a volcano. He roared in a thunderous voice, "Guards! Don't let him escape! Seize him!" With that, he stormed out of the room.

The king summoned the minister and barked, "I am noticing a severe lack of attention to state affairs on your part."

"Your Majesty, I am entirely blameless in this matter," the minister replied mildly.

Pratapaditya shouted at the top of his lungs, "Am I referring to any specific incident? I said, I am noticing a severe lack of attention to state affairs! The other day I gave you a letter to keep, and you lost it."

Something like that had indeed happened a month and a half ago, but the king hadn't said a word about it then.

"And another day, I ordered you to visit Umesh Ray, and you just sent a messenger instead! Be quiet. Do not make pathetic excuses to cover your faults. Regardless, consider yourself warned: you are paying no attention to your duties."

The king then summoned the guards. He had previously docked the pay of the night watchmen; now, he ordered them all to be thrown into the dungeons.

Marching into the inner chambers, he summoned the Queen and said, "My Queen, I see utter chaos within the royal household. Udayaditya was never like this before. Now he rides out whenever he pleases. He mingles with the commoners. He opposes us. What is the meaning of all this?"

Terrified, the Queen replied, "Maharaja, he is not to blame. The root of all this trouble is that eldest daughter-in-law. My poor boy was never like this. Ever since he was married into the house of Sripur, I don't know what has come over Uday."

The king ordered Surama to be kept under strict discipline and left the chambers.

The Queen sent for Udayaditya. When he arrived, she looked at his face and wailed, "Alas, my poor boy has grown so thin and dark! Before his marriage, his complexion was like molten gold. Who has done this to you? My son, do not listen to what your wife says. It is because you listen to her that you are in this state."

Surama stood quietly in a corner, her face veiled.

The Queen continued, "She comes from a lowly lineage; is she worthy of you? Does she even know how to give good counsel? I tell you the truth, she never advises you well; she thrives only when you suffer. To think the Maharaja married you off to such a demoness!" Beads of sweat appeared on the Queen's usually serene forehead. Fearing her inner agitation might be exposed, she turned her large eyes away.

An old maidservant sitting nearby waved her hands and chimed in, "The women of Sripur know black magic! She has definitely fed the boy a potion." Standing up, she walked over to Udayaditya and declared, "My child, she has put a spell on you. That

girl you see over there, she is no ordinary woman. She is from Sripur. They are witches! Alas, she has drained the life right out of his body."

With that, she shot a venomous glare at Surama like an arrow, then rubbed her dry eyes with the corner of her sari until they were red. Seeing this, the Queen's sorrow overflowed once more. The contagion of weeping quickly spread among the elderly women in the inner quarters. To partake in the crying, everyone gathered in the Queen's room.

Udayaditya cast a single, mournful glance at Surama's face. From beneath her veil, Surama saw it; wiping her eyes, she quietly walked away into her room without uttering a single word.

That evening, the Queen told Pratapaditya, "I reasoned with Uday and explained everything to him today. My boy is not like that. If you make him understand, he understands. Today, his eyes have finally been opened."

CHAPTER SIX

Seeing Vibha's pale face, Surama could no longer hold back. Embracing her, she said, "Vibha, why do you stay so quiet? Why don't you speak your mind when you feel something?"

Vibha replied softly, "What is there for me to say?"

"You haven't seen him in so long; it's only natural that your heart aches for him! Why don't you write him a letter asking him to come? I will arrange for your brother to send it."

They were speaking of Vibha's husband, Ramchandra Ray, the Lord of Chandradwip.

With her head bowed, Vibha continued, "If no one here respects him, if no one considers it necessary to invite him, then it is better he doesn't come. If he comes on his own accord, I will forbid him. He is a king; why should he come where he is not welcomed? How is he any lesser than us that Father should insult him?" As she spoke, Vibha could no longer control her emotions; her face flushed red, and she burst into tears.

Surama pulled Vibha's face to her chest, wiped away her tears, and said, "Tell me, Vibha, if you were a man, what would you do? Would you refuse to visit your in-laws just because you didn't receive a formal invitation?"

"No, I couldn't do that," Vibha cried out. "If I were a man, I would have gone immediately; I wouldn't have cared about honor or insult. But even so, why should he come if he isn't invited with the affection and respect he deserves?"

Vibha had never spoken so much before. Swept up in emotion, she had said a great deal today, and now she began to feel a little shy. *I have said too much*, she thought. The way she had spoken embarrassed her deeply. Gradually, her agitation subsided, and a heavy, melancholic exhaustion settled over her mind. Hiding her face in her arms, she lay her head on Surama's lap. With her head bent, Surama gently ran her soft fingers through Vibha's thick hair. A long time passed like this. Neither spoke a word. Tear after tear slipped from Vibha's eyes, and Surama quietly wiped them away.

Much later, as evening approached, Vibha slowly sat up, wiped her eyes, and smiled faintly. That smile seemed to say, *"How childish I have been today."* She turned her face away and prepared to slip out of the room.

Without a word, Surama held onto her hand. Dropping the previous topic, she asked, "Vibha, did you hear? Grandfather has arrived."

"Grandfather is here?"

"Yes."

Eagerly, Vibha asked, "When did he arrive?"

"Around late afternoon."

"And he hasn't come to see us yet?"

A slight sense of wounded pride arose in Vibha's heart. She was fiercely protective of her claim over her grandfather. Once, when Basanta Ray had spent a long time talking to Udayaditya, making Vibha wait in the inner chambers for hours before coming to see her, she had felt so hurt that, although she didn't say anything, she couldn't bring herself to speak to him with a happy face.

As soon as Basanta Ray entered the room, he smiled and broke into a song:

"I have come to see you today after so long. Have no fear, dwell in joy, For I shall not tarry long. I have come but for a fleeting moment. I will merely look upon your face, Hear a sweet word or two, Catch your smile from the shadows, and leave for another land."

Hearing the song, Vibha lowered her head and smiled. She was overjoyed, but feeling embarrassed lest her immense delight be exposed, she appeared slightly flustered.

Surama lifted Vibha's chin and said, "Grandfather, you didn't have to hide in the shadows to see Vibha smile."

"No," Basanta Ray chuckled. "Vibha simply thought, 'If the old man refuses to leave unless I smile, then I might as well smile a little.' I know this little witch's schemes perfectly well—it's a trick to chase me away. But that won't happen so soon. Now

that I am here, I will tease you thoroughly before I go, so that you remember me until we meet again."

Surama laughed, "Look, Grandfather, Vibha just whispered in my ear that if your intention is to be remembered, the teasing you've already done is more than enough; you don't need to add any more to it."

Basanta Ray found this highly amusing and burst out laughing.

Looking thoroughly embarrassed, Vibha protested, "No, I never said that! I didn't say a word!"

"Well, Grandfather, your wishes are fulfilled!" Surama said. "You wanted to see a smile, and you saw it; you wanted to hear some words, and I made sure you heard them. Now, you may leave for another land."

"No, my dear, I cannot," Basanta Ray replied. "I have brought about fifteen songs and a head full of white hair; I cannot leave until I have exhausted them all."

Unable to hold back, Vibha giggled and said, "But Grandfather, you don't even have half a head of hair left!"

The grandfather's strategy had succeeded. After a long absence, it always took a little effort to get Vibha to open her mouth during their first meeting; but once her mouth was open, it took even more effort to shut it. And yet, there was no one besides her grandfather with whom Vibha spoke so freely.

Rubbing his bald head, Basanta Ray sighed, "Those days are gone, my dear. When Basanta Ray had a full head of hair, do you think he would have walked all this way to flatter you? If even a single hair turned gray, five beauties like you would volunteer to pluck it, and in their enthusiasm, they'd pull out ten black ones along with it."

Assuming a serious tone, Vibha asked, "Tell me truly, Grandfather, when you had a head full of hair, did you look better than you do now?"

In her mind, Vibha seriously doubted it. She tried to mentally alter her grandfather's shiny bald pate, the broad, mustache-less smile on his lips, and his overall appearance—which resembled a ripe mango—but none of it felt right. She realized

that without that bald head, her grandfather wouldn't look like himself at all. And if she imagined a mustache on him, his face looked completely ruined. It looked so dreadful that she couldn't help but laugh just picturing it. Grandfather with a mustache! Grandfather without a bald head!

"There are many differing opinions on that matter," Basanta Ray replied. "My granddaughters are enchanted by my baldness; they have never seen my hair. My grandmothers were enchanted by my hair; they never saw my baldness. Those who have seen both still haven't been able to come to a firm conclusion."

"But even so, Grandfather," Vibha pointed out, "if you lose any more hair than you already have, it won't look good."

Surama intervened, "Grandfather, we can discuss baldness later. Right now, please do something about Vibha's situation."

Vibha quickly rushed to Basanta Ray and blurted, "Grandfather, let me pluck your white hairs!"

"I was saying—" Surama tried again.

"Listen, Grandfather, your—" Vibha interrupted.

"Vibha, be quiet," Surama scolded gently. "I was saying, why don't you go and—"

"Grandfather, you have nothing but white hair left; if I pluck them, your whole head will be completely bald!" Vibha chattered on.

"If you two sisters don't let me hear what she has to say, if you keep pestering me, I will start playing the *Hindol* raga out of sheer spite," Basanta Ray threatened.

With that, he began twisting the tuning pegs of his little sitar. Vibha had a particular distaste for the *Hindol* raga.

"Oh, what a disaster! I'm running away then," Vibha declared, and dashed out of the room.

Turning serious, Surama said, "If the Maharaja knew the pain Vibha silently carries in her heart day and night, perhaps he would feel some pity!"

"Why? Why? What has happened to her?" Basanta Ray asked, immediately drawing closer to Surama with great concern.

"Not once in the whole year did anyone remember to send an invitation to our brother-in-law!" Surama explained.

Pondering this, Basanta Ray agreed, "That is very true."

"How many women can endure such neglect shown to their husbands?" Surama asked. "Vibha is too gentle, so she doesn't complain to anyone; she just cries in secret."

Distressed, Basanta Ray cried out, "She cries in secret?"

"She was crying so much with me just this afternoon."

"Vibha was crying this afternoon?"

"Yes."

"Alas, call her back here at once, let me see her."

Surama brought Vibha back. Holding her chin, Basanta Ray said, "Why do you cry, my dear? When something hurts you, why don't you tell your Grandfather? I will do whatever is in my power. I will go to Pratap right this instant and speak to him."

"Grandfather, I fall at your feet, please do not say anything to Father about me," Vibha pleaded urgently. "Grandfather, I beg you, do not go."

But even as she spoke, Basanta Ray walked out. He went straight to Pratapaditya and said, "You haven't invited your son-in-law in a long time, showing utter neglect towards him. If the son-in-law of the Lord of Jashore is not treated with the respect he deserves, it is your own honor that suffers. There is no glory in this."

Pratapaditya did not utter a single word of argument against his uncle. Orders were immediately given to dispatch an envoy with an invitation to Chandradwip.

Back in the inner chambers, Vibha came to Surama, and a lively session of Basanta Ray's sitar-playing commenced.

"Let a smile bloom on that melancholy face, soothing the eyes."

Looking embarrassed, Vibha asked, "Grandfather, did you tell Father everything about me?"

Basanta Ray just kept singing,

"Let a smile bloom on that melancholy face, soothing the eyes. Cast off those sorrowful garments, my friend, and put on your jewels."

Vibha placed her hand on the sitar's strings, stopping the music, and asked again, "Did you speak of me to Father?"

Just then, Udayaditya's eight-year-old youngest brother, Samaraditya, peeked into the room and yelled, "Aha, sister! Chatting with Grandfather, are we? I'm going to tell Mother!"

"Come here, come here, my boy!" Basanta Ray called out, grabbing him.

The royal family believed that Basanta Ray and Surama, together, were ruining Udayaditya. Because of this, whenever Basanta Ray visited, everyone went on high alert. Samaraditya began struggling to free himself from Basanta Ray's grasp. But Basanta Ray handed him the sitar, hoisted him onto his shoulders, put his own spectacles on the boy's face, and within two minutes had him so entirely captivated that the boy followed his grandfather around all day, constantly strumming the sitar until he broke five of its strings, and snatched away the plectrum, refusing to give it back.

CHAPTER SEVEN

King Ramchandra Ray of Chandradwip was seated in his royal court. The chamber was octagonal. A chandelier covered in cloth hung from the ceiling beams. In the niches along the walls, one held a statue of Ganesha, while the rest housed idols of Lord Krishna in various postures—all crafted by the renowned artisan, the potter Batakrishna. A large sheet was spread across the floor, and in the center lay a velvet-covered cushion embroidered with gold thread. On it sat the king, leaning against a bolster adorned with golden fringes at its four corners. Indigenous mirrors hung on the walls, though they didn't reflect faces accurately. The human mirrors surrounding the king didn't reflect him accurately either; they magnified his stature enormously. To the king's left sat his minister, Harishankar, next to a massive hookah. To his right were Ramai the jester and the bespectacled commander, Fernandez.

"Well, Ramai," the king began.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Ramai replied.

The king burst into uproarious laughter. The minister laughed even harder than the king. Fernandez clapped his hands and giggled. Ramai's eyes twinkled with satisfaction. The king believed that not laughing at Ramai's words was a sign of being uncultured; the minister believed that if the king laughed, it was his duty to laugh; Fernandez believed there must surely be something funny going on. Besides, if some unfortunate soul accidentally failed to laugh when Ramai opened his mouth, Ramai would torment him until he cried. Otherwise, very few people actually found genuine amusement in Ramai's ancient, stale jokes. However, out of fear and a sense of duty, everyone—from the king down to the gatekeeper—was struck by severe fits of laughter.

"What is the news?" the king asked.

Ramai decided it was time for a joke. "Rumor has it that a thief broke into our Commander's house."

The commander grew restless. He knew an old joke was about to be recycled at his expense. He was deeply afraid of Ramai's mockery, which only made Ramai target him every single time. The king found this immensely entertaining. Whenever

Ramai was present, Fernandez was specifically summoned. The king had two main sources of amusement in life: watching ram fights, and placing Fernandez in the line of Ramai's fire. Ever since taking up his post, the commander hadn't suffered a single scratch from a musket ball or an arrow, but enduring the constant barrage of mocking laughter had nearly driven him to tears. (Readers must forgive us; we cannot transcribe all of Ramai's jokes, as the majority must be omitted for the sake of good taste.)

Winking, the king asked, "And then?"

"Allow me to explain, Maharaja." (Fernandez began nervously unbuttoning and buttoning his coat). "For the past three or four days, a thief had been prowling around the Commander's house at night. The master's good wife realized this and shoved her husband repeatedly, but could not wake him up for the life of her."

The king roared, "Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!" The minister bellowed, "Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho!" The commander squeaked, "Hee! Hee!"

"Unable to bear his wife's nagging during the day, he folded his hands and pleaded, 'For God's sake, I will catch the thief tonight.' Sometime after midnight, the wife whispered, 'Listen, the thief is here.' The master replied, 'Oh dear! The lamp is still lit. The thief will see us, and if he sees us, he will run away.' He then called out to the thief, 'You're very lucky today! There's a light in the room, so you can escape safely. Come back tomorrow, and we'll see how you avoid getting caught in the dark!'"

The king roared, "Ha ha ha ha." The minister bellowed, "Ho ho ho ho." The commander squeaked, "Hee."

"And then?" the king prompted.

Ramai saw the king wasn't satisfied yet. "I don't know why, but the thief wasn't sufficiently intimidated. He returned the next night. The wife panicked, 'Disaster! Get up!' The master replied, 'You get up.' The wife retorted, 'What will I do by getting up?' The master said, 'Why, light a lamp in the room! I can't see a thing.' The wife was furious. The master grew even more furious and yelled, 'See here, we're losing everything because of you! Light the lamp and fetch the gun!' Meanwhile, the thief finished packing up the loot and said, 'Sir, could you offer me a bowl of tobacco? I've worked up quite a sweat.' The master scolded him fiercely,

'Hold on, you rascal! I'm preparing the tobacco. But if you come near me, I'll blow your head off with this gun!' After enjoying the tobacco, the thief said, 'Sir, it would be a great help if you lit the lamp. I've dropped my crowbar and can't find it.' The Commander declared, 'The rascal is terrified! Stay away, don't come near me!' With that, he quickly lit the lamp. The thief leisurely gathered his tools and left. The master then turned to his wife and said, 'That rascal was scared out of his wits!'"

The king and the minister couldn't contain their laughter. Fernandez kept letting out sporadic, strained snippets of a "hee hee" laugh.

The king said, "Ramai, have you heard that I am going to my father-in-law's house?"

Making a face, Ramai quoted a mock-Sanskrit verse, "*The world is indeed meaningless; the only true meaning lies in the father-in-law's house!*" (Laughter erupted. First the king, then the minister, then the commander). "It is no lie," Ramai continued with a theatrical sigh. "Everything in the father-in-law's house is of the highest essence—the feasts, the pampering. You get the cream of the milk, you get the best piece of the fish; it's all pure substance. The only thing utterly without substance is the wife herself."

The king laughed, "How can you say that? Your better half—"

Folding his hands in mock panic, Ramai interrupted, "Maharaja, please do not call her my half. If I perform rigorous penance for three lifetimes, I might, perhaps, one day hope to become *her* half. Even if you combined five halves of a man like me, it wouldn't equal her sheer volume." (More sequential laughter). Everyone grasped the humor in this, except the minister, which was why he had to laugh the loudest.

"But I've heard," the king remarked, "that your wife is very mild-mannered and highly skilled in household chores."

"What's the use of that?" Ramai said. "The house is full of all sorts of rubbish, but there is no room for *me*. Every morning, she sweeps the house so vigorously that she sweeps me right out to Your Majesty's doorstep."

Here, it is necessary to provide a brief description of Ramai's wife. She was incredibly thin, growing frailer by the day. Whenever Ramai came home, she would desperately seek a place to hide. At the royal court, Ramai bared his teeth in a sycophantic grin; at home, he bared his teeth in a very different, terrifying manner.

But truthfully describing his wife's condition would evoke pity rather than amusement, which is why Ramai always painted her as a massive, domineering tyrant, to the great amusement of the king and his ministers.

When the laughter died down, the king said, "Listen, Ramai, you must come with me. I will take the Commander too."

The commander realized Ramai was about to launch a second attack on him. He adjusted his spectacles and began nervously fumbling with his buttons again.

Ramai said, "The Commander can have no objection to attending a festival, since it's certainly not a battlefield."

Anticipating a punchline, the king and minister eagerly asked, "Why?"

"The Sahib wears his spectacles day and night," Ramai explained. "He even sleeps with them on, otherwise he can't see his dreams clearly. The Commander has absolutely no objection to going to war; his only fear is that a cannonball might hit the glass of his spectacles, shatter them, and blind him! Isn't that right, sir?"

Blinking rapidly, the commander squeaked, "What else could it be?" He then rose from his seat and said, "Maharaja, if you command it, I shall take my leave."

The king ordered the commander to prepare for the journey. "Make all the arrangements. Ensure my sixty-four-oared boat is ready." The minister and the commander departed.

"Ramai, you must have heard," the king said. "Last time at my father-in-law's house, they humiliated me completely."

"Yes, indeed," Ramai agreed. "They turned Your Majesty into a laughingstock."

The king smiled, displaying a flash of teeth, but a dark cloud gathered in his mind. He was not entirely pleased that Ramai knew of this. If anyone else had known, it wouldn't have mattered as much. He began puffing fiercely on his hookah.

Ramai continued, "One of your brothers-in-law came up to me and said, 'We've seen your King's true colors in the bridal chamber; is his name Ram-chandra (the Lord), or Ram-das (the servant)? We never knew this before.' I immediately replied,

'How could you have known? It wasn't like this before. He came to marry into your house, so *when in Rome, do as the Romans do*—he merely adopted your family's customs!'"

The king was thoroughly delighted by this retort. He felt Ramai had brilliantly upheld his honor and the glory of his ancestors, permanently eclipsing Pratapaditya's pride. The king cared little for actual warfare; he viewed these petty squabbles as matters of monumental, martial importance. Until now, he had carried the belief that he had suffered a severely humiliating defeat. The shame of it haunted him day and night, making him wish the earth would swallow him whole. Today, his heart found great solace in the thought that his champion, Ramai, had won the verbal war. Yet, the heavy burden of humiliation had not entirely lifted from his mind.

"Ramai," the king commanded, "this time, you must go and return victorious. If you win, I shall gift you my ring."

"Maharaja, victory is not a concern," Ramai boasted. "If you can manage to sneak me into their inner chambers, I can thoroughly humiliate even the Queen Mother herself to my heart's content."

"Is that all?" the king declared. "I will personally take you into the inner chambers."

"What is there that you cannot do?" Ramai flattered.

The king firmly believed this as well. What couldn't he do? If a follower said, "Victory to the Maharaja, fulfill your servant's wish," the magnanimous Ramchandra Ray would instantly reply, "Yes, it shall be done." He couldn't abide the thought that any task was beyond his power. He decided right then and there that he would smuggle Ramai the jester into Pratapaditya's inner chambers, orchestrate the mockery of the Queen Mother herself, or his name wasn't King Ramchandra Ray. If he couldn't accomplish such a 'noble' feat, what kind of king was he?

The Lord of Chandradwip summoned Rammohan Mal. Rammohan possessed the immense strength of Bhima. He was nearly seven feet tall, his body rippling with muscles. He was a veteran from the era of the late king, and had raised Ramchandra since childhood. Everyone feared Ramai, but if Ramai feared anyone, it was Rammohan. Rammohan despised Ramai. Under his disgusted glare, Ramai would

instinctively shrink into himself. Rammohan never missed a chance to intimidate him.

Rammohan arrived and stood before the king. The king ordered that an escort of fifty men would accompany him, and Rammohan was to lead them.

"As you command," Rammohan said. "Is Ramai Thakur going as well?"

The cat-eyed, dwarfish Ramai Thakur shrank back visibly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The royal officials at the Jashore palace were extremely busy today. The son-in-law was arriving, and elaborate preparations were underway. Grand feasts were being arranged. The Queen fully agreed with Pratapaditya that the royal house of Chandradwip was thoroughly insignificant compared to Jashore; nevertheless, she was immensely overjoyed at her son-in-law's impending arrival. Since morning, she had been personally adorning Vibha.

Vibha was in a terrible bind. There was a vast difference in taste regarding fashion between the mature mother and the young daughter; but ultimately, it didn't matter, for the Queen firmly believed she knew what looked best on Vibha. Vibha secretly felt that wearing just three thin, turquoise-colored bangles would make her fair, delicate wrists look beautiful; but the Queen slipped eight thick gold bangles and massive diamond bracelets onto her arms. The Queen was so thrilled with the result that she summoned all the elderly maidservants and widowed aunts in the house to show off her handiwork. Vibha knew that a nose ring didn't suit her small, delicate face at all—but the Queen pierced a large nose ring through her nostril, turning Vibha's face from side to side, inspecting her with immense pride. Vibha endured even this in silence, but the way the Queen arranged her hair was absolutely intolerable. Sneaking away to Surama, she had her hair styled exactly to her liking. But this did not escape the Queen's sharp eyes. The Queen immediately declared that the new hairstyle had completely ruined Vibha's entire look. She 'clearly' saw that Surama had deliberately messed up Vibha's hair out of pure jealousy. She spent a long time trying to open Vibha's eyes to Surama's malicious intentions, and when she finally felt she had succeeded, she undid Vibha's hair and restyled it herself.

Thus, burdened by her heavy bun, her nose ring, her arms full of bangles, and a heart overflowing with joy, Vibha felt incredibly awkward. She realized she couldn't contain her overwhelming happiness within herself; it kept peeking out like flashes of lightning from her eyes and face. She felt as if even the walls of the house were ready to mock her. Crown Prince Udayaditya entered, and looking at Vibha's shy, radiant face, he felt a deep, serene, and affectionate joy. Seeing Vibha so happy filled him with such delight that he returned to his own room and, with a tender smile, gently kissed Surama.

"What is it?" Surama asked.

"Nothing," Udayaditya replied.

Just then, Basanta Ray forcefully dragged Vibha into the room. Holding her chin and lifting her face, he said, "Look, my boy, look at your Vibha's face today. Surama, oh Surama, come and see this." The old man chuckled, his voice thick with emotion. Looking into Vibha's face, he said, "If you're happy, then give us a proper smile, let me see it.

How will you hold that smile captive at your feet? The heart's deepest desires dance upon those lips.

If I hadn't lost my youth, I would have dropped dead right here just looking at that face of yours. Alas, the age for dying is gone. In my youth, I died every other hour. In old age, unless you catch a disease, death simply refuses to come."

When Pratapaditya's brother-in-law came and asked him, "Who has gone to welcome our dear son-in-law?" Pratapaditya curtly replied, "How should I know?" "Should we arrange for lights along the road today?" With widened eyes, the Maharaja replied, "There is absolutely no rule that says we must." Hesitantly, the brother-in-law asked, "Will the *nahabat* (ceremonial band) not play?" "I have no time to think about such trivialities." The truth was, making a grand musical spectacle to welcome a son-in-law was beneath Pratapaditya.

Ramchandra Ray's pride was deeply wounded. He concluded that he was being deliberately insulted. Previously, officials from the royal palace would travel all the way to Chakdihi to welcome him. This time, after he had traveled two miles past Chakdihi, only the Dewanji (chief minister) had come to Bamanghati to receive him. And even then, the Dewanji had arrived with barely two hundred and fifty men. Why? Couldn't they find another fifty men in all of Jashore? Furthermore, according to Ramai the jester, the corpulent Dewanji was even larger than the elephant sent to carry the king. Ramai had asked the Dewan, "Sir, is that one your younger brother?" The good-natured, slightly bewildered Dewan had replied, "No, that is an elephant."

Annoyed, the king told the Dewan, "The elephant your minister rides is bigger than this one."

"The larger elephants have been sent far away on state business; there isn't a single one left in the city," the Dewan explained.

Ramchandra decided they had been sent away specifically to insult him. What other reason could there be?

Growing red in the face, the King of Kings, Ramchandra Ray, referring to his father-in-law by his first name, bellowed, "In what way am I any lesser than Pratapaditya Ray?"

Ramai the jester chimed in, "Only in age and relation, otherwise in what way? The mere fact that you married his daughter proves—"

Rammohan Mal, who was standing nearby, could tolerate this no longer. Furious, he shouted, "Look here, Thakur, you are crossing the line. Do not speak of my Queen Mother in that tone. I'm telling you plainly."

Aiming his barb at Pratapaditya, Ramai sneered, "I have seen many such 'Adityas' (Suns). You know, Maharaja, a man who can tuck the Sun under his arm is merely Ramchandra's servant."

The king smiled tightly. Rammohan then walked slowly up to the king, folded his hands, and said, "Maharaja, I cannot bear to hear this dwarf insult your father-in-law however he pleases. Say the word, and I will shut his mouth."

"Rammohan, stop," the king ordered.

Rammohan walked away, distancing himself.

That day, after scrutinizing thousands of petty details, Ramchandra concluded that Pratapaditya had made elaborate preparations over a long period solely to humiliate him. Puffed up with wounded pride, he decided he would present such a formidable demeanor that Pratapaditya would finally realize just how great a man his son-in-law was.

When Ramchandra Ray finally met Pratapaditya, the latter was seated in his royal chamber with his minister. Upon seeing Pratapaditya, Ramchandra approached slowly with his head bowed and offered his respects.

Without showing the slightest enthusiasm or eagerness, Pratapaditya calmly said, "Come in. Are you well?"

"Yes, Sire," Ramchandra replied softly.

Turning back to his minister, Pratapaditya asked, "Have you investigated the complaint against the Tahsildar of the Bhangamathi pargana?"

The minister handed the king a long document, which the king began to read. Halfway through, he glanced up at his son-in-law and asked, "I trust you didn't have floods in your region this year, like the last?"

"No, Sire. There was a slight rise in water levels in the month of Ashwin—"

"Minister, ensure a copy of this letter is kept," Pratapaditya interrupted, immediately returning to the document. Finishing it, he finally turned to his son-in-law and dismissed him: "Go now, boy. Go to the inner chambers."

Ramchandra stood up slowly. He had clearly understood precisely how Pratapaditya was greater than him.

CHAPTER NINE

When Rammohan Mal entered the inner chambers, bowed to Vibha, and said, "Mother, I have come just to see you," Vibha was overjoyed. She loved Rammohan dearly. Bearing the responsibilities of their familial ties, Rammohan frequently traveled from Chandradwip to Jashore. Even without any official business, he would come to see Vibha whenever he had a moment to spare. Vibha felt no shyness around him. When the tall, elderly, and powerfully built Rammohan stood before her and called her "Mother," it conveyed such pure, simple, and unadorned affection that Vibha felt like a little girl in his presence.

"Mohan, why haven't you visited in so long?" she asked.

"Well, Mother," Rammohan replied, "they say, 'A son may be a bad son, but a mother is never a bad mother.' But did you ever think of me? I told myself, 'I won't go unless Mother calls for me; let's see how long it takes her to remember.' But look, you never remembered me at all."

Vibha found herself in a tight spot. She couldn't properly articulate why she hadn't sent for him. Besides, the logic that 'not calling' equaled 'not remembering' felt flawed somewhere, yet she couldn't quite explain how.

Seeing her struggle, Rammohan laughed and said, "No, Mother, the truth is I just didn't get the time to come."

"Mohan, sit down," Vibha urged. "Tell me your stories."

Rammohan sat down and began describing Chandradwip. Resting her chin on her hands, Vibha listened with rapt attention. As she listened, countless fantasies blossomed in her little heart; there was no counting the castles she built in the air that day. When Rammohan told her how his house had been swept away in last monsoon's floods, and how, just before dusk, he had swum with his old mother on his back to the top of a temple spire where they spent the entire night, Vibha's little heart pounded with terror.

When the stories ended, Rammohan said, "Mother, I have brought you four conch-shell bangles. You must wear them on those wrists, I want to see."

Vibha took off her four gold bangles, slipped on the conch bangles, and ran to her mother, laughing. "Mother, Mohan took off my gold bangles and made me wear these four conch bangles."

The Queen wasn't displeased in the least. She smiled and said, "They look lovely on you; they suit you perfectly."

Rammohan beamed with pride and enthusiasm. The Queen called him over and personally oversaw his meal. After he had eaten to his heart's content, she was highly pleased and said, "Mohan, sing that *Agamani* song of yours now."

Looking at Vibha, Rammohan sang:

"I haven't seen you all year, Mother; what a state I am in, Having lost the apple of my eye, my vision has gone blind. Have you come, O heartless one? Let me look upon you until my eyes are full; Yet, nothing can stop this cursed stream of tears, Mother."

Tears welled up in Rammohan's eyes, and the Queen, looking at Vibha's face, also wiped her eyes. The song of the Goddess's arrival (*Agamani*) reminded her of the inevitable sorrow of her departure (*Bijoya*).

Gradually, evening fell. The crowd of women in the inner chambers began to swell. Neighbors flocked to the *antahpur* to see the son-in-law and, according to traditional relations, to tease him. Joy, shyness, fear, and an uncertain, indefinable anxiety of 'what-will-happen-next' churned in Vibha's heart; her face and ears burned red, while her hands and feet turned icy cold. Whether this was agony or ecstasy, who could say!

The son-in-law arrived in the inner chambers. The women descended upon him from all sides like a swarm of beautiful, stinging bees. Roars of laughter erupted. From every direction came sharp, cuckoo-voiced mockery, the harsh prodding of lotus-stalk arms, and the sharp pinching of moon-like nails from champak-flower fingers. Just as Ramchandra Ray was feeling thoroughly overwhelmed, a middle-aged woman approached and took his side. She began speaking in such a harsh, biting tone, spewing such vulgar obscenities, that the royal women were effectively stunned into silence. Even the usually talkative Thakodidi shut her mouth. Bimaladidi got up and left the room. Only Bhuto's mother managed to give her a piece of her mind. While Bhuto's mother was delivering her sharp retort, the

middle-aged woman snapped, "My goodness, mother, that's not a mouth you have, it's a broom!" To which Bhuto's mother instantly shot back, "And you, you hag, your mouth is a garbage dump! I swept it so much, yet it still isn't clean!" With that, she stormed off in a huff. One by one, the room emptied, and Ramchandra Ray was finally given some respite.

The middle-aged woman then left the room and made her way to the Queen's chambers. The Queen was busy feeding the maids and servants there. Rammohan was also sitting in a corner, eating. The middle-aged woman approached the Queen, inspected her, and sneered, "Ah, here is Mother Nikasha!"

Hearing this, Rammohan started and stared at the woman's face. Instantly abandoning his food, he leapt like a tiger, grabbed her two hands in an iron grip, and thundered, "I recognize you, Thakur!" He forcefully tore the veil from her head.

It was none other than Ramai the jester.

Trembling with rage, Rammohan threw off his own shawl, effortlessly hoisted Ramai into the air with both hands, and roared, "You will meet your end at my hands today!" He spun him around in the air a couple of times.

The Queen rushed over, crying, "Rammohan, what are you doing?"

Ramai pleaded pitifully, "Have mercy, father! Do not commit the sin of killing a Brahmin!"

A massive commotion erupted all around. Rammohan lowered Ramai to the floor and, shaking with fury, said, "You wretched fool, couldn't you find anywhere else to die?"

"The Maharaja ordered me to," Ramai whimpered.

"What did you say, you ungrateful wretch?" Rammohan roared. "If you ever say that again, I will grind your face into this stone floor!" He grabbed Ramai by the throat.

Ramai let out a shriek. Rammohan then tied the dwarfish Ramai up in a shawl, slung him over his shoulder like a sack of grain, and marched out of the inner chambers.

In no time, the scandal became widely known. It was well past midnight. That very night, the king's brother-in-law went to Pratapaditya with the news that the son-in-law had brought Ramai the jester into the inner chambers disguised as a woman. There, he had mocked the royal women, and even insulted the Queen herself.

Pratapaditya's demeanor turned terrifying. His entire body shook with wrath. He sat up in bed like a lion with an expanded mane. "Call Lachhman Sardar!" he bellowed.

When Lachhman Sardar arrived, Pratapaditya ordered, "Tonight, I want to see Ramchandra Ray's severed head."

The Sardar saluted immediately and said, "As you command, Maharaja."

At once, the king's brother-in-law fell at Pratapaditya's feet, pleading, "Maharaja, forgive him! Think of Vibha! Do not commit this act!"

But Pratapaditya reiterated in a voice of steel, "Before this night is over, I want Ramchandra Ray's head."

His brother-in-law clung to his feet, crying, "Maharaja, they are sleeping in the inner chambers tonight! Forgive him, Maharaja, forgive him!"

Pratapaditya remained utterly silent for a moment, then said, "Listen, Lachhman. When Ramchandra Ray emerges from the inner chambers tomorrow morning, you are to kill him. That is my order."

The brother-in-law realized the situation was far worse than he had anticipated. That night, he crept silently to the door of Vibha's bedchamber and knocked.

From afar, the ceremonial *nahabat* was playing the midnight tune. In the silent night, the music mingled with the moonlight and the southern breeze, weaving dreams into the sleeping souls. Through the open window of Vibha's room, moonlight spilled onto the bed. Ramchandra Ray was fast asleep. Vibha sat up quietly, her chin resting on her hand, lost in thought. Gazing out at the moonlight, a few teardrops slipped from her eyes. Perhaps things hadn't turned out exactly as she had imagined. Her heart was weeping. The day she had waited for so long had finally arrived, yet...

Since getting into bed, Ramchandra Ray hadn't spoken a single word to Vibha. Pratapaditya had insulted him—how could he insult Pratapaditya in return? By ignoring Vibha. He wanted to make it clear: "You may be the daughter of Pratapaditya of Jashore, but do you truly belong beside King Ramchandra Ray of Chandradwip?" Having made up his mind, he turned his back to her and didn't change his position once. All his wounded pride and anger were directed at Vibha.

Vibha sat awake, thinking. She looked at the moonlight, then at her husband's face. Her chest heaved with intermittent sighs; a deep ache resonated in her soul.

Suddenly, Ramchandra woke up. He saw Vibha sitting silently, crying. In that first moment of waking, before the memory of his humiliation returned, when the deep sleep had restored his mind to a state of calm and his anger had temporarily vanished—he suddenly felt a surge of pity upon seeing Vibha's tear-streaked, tender face. He took her hand and asked, "Vibha, are you crying?"

Vibha was overwhelmed. She couldn't speak, her vision blurred with tears, and she lay down. Ramchandra Ray sat up, gently placed Vibha's head on his lap, and wiped her tears.

Just then, someone knocked on the door. "Who is it?" Ramchandra called out.

A voice from outside replied, "Open the door immediately."

CHAPTER TEN

Ramchandra Ray unbolted the door to the bedchamber and stepped out. The king's brother-in-law, Ramapati, urged, "My boy, flee right now. Do not delay a single moment."

Hearing these words so suddenly in the dead of night, Ramchandra Ray was startled; his face turned deathly pale. Breathlessly, he asked, "Why? Why? What has happened?"

"I will not say what has happened. Just run, right now."

Vibha left the bed and came to the door. "Uncle, what is the matter?"

"You shouldn't hear of this, my child," Ramapati replied.

Vibha's heart cried out in terror. She thought of Basanta Ray, then of Udayaditya. "Uncle, tell me what has happened!" she demanded.

Ignoring her, Ramapati turned to Ramchandra, "My boy, you are wasting precious time. Look for a way to escape secretly while you still can."

A sudden, terrible premonition gripped Vibha's mind. Blocking her uncle's path as he turned to leave, she pleaded, "I fall at your feet, tell me what has happened before you go."

Ramapati looked around fearfully and whispered, "Don't make a fuss, Vibha. Keep quiet, I will tell you everything."

As Ramapati recounted the entire sequence of events, Vibha almost let out a scream. Ramapati quickly clamped a hand over her mouth. "Quiet, quiet, don't invite disaster!" Breathing heavily, her voice choked, Vibha slumped to the floor right there.

"What do I do now?" Ramchandra pleaded desperately. "Which way can I escape? I don't know the way at all."

"The guards are on high alert everywhere tonight," Ramapati said. "Let me scout the area and see if there is any way out."

He prepared to leave. Vibha grabbed hold of him. "Uncle, where are you going? Don't go, stay with us."

"Vibha, have you lost your mind?" Ramapati said. "My staying here won't do you any good. Let me go check the situation outside."

Vibha forcefully stood up. Her hands and legs were trembling violently. "Uncle, stay here a little longer. I will go to my brother." With that, Vibha sprinted toward Udayaditya's bedchamber.

The waning moon was about to set. Darkness was closing in from all sides. There was no sound anywhere. Standing at the door of his room, Ramchandra Ray looked down the corridor; the doors to the long row of rooms in the royal *antahpur* were firmly shut. Everyone was sleeping soundly, completely unaware of the looming terror. In the courtyard ahead, the shadows of the surrounding walls stretched long, with only a tiny patch of moonlight remaining in one corner. Gradually, even that faded away. Step by step, darkness claimed the entire world. It gathered and settled among the rows of coconut trees in the distant garden. The darkness crept closer, pressing intimately against him.

Ramchandra Ray's imagination ran wild; he wondered where in this surrounding darkness a knife was waiting for him. To the right or the left? In front or behind? Among those shadowy corners scattered about, wasn't someone sitting with their face buried, wrapped entirely in a dark shawl, waiting in absolute silence? What if someone was already inside the room? Under the bed, or hiding against a wall? A shudder ran through his entire body, and sweat broke out on his forehead. Suddenly, he thought: what if his uncle was up to something? What if he had some sinister ulterior motive? He slowly backed away a little. A gust of wind blew in, and the lamp in the room was extinguished. Ramchandra thought someone had deliberately blown it out—that someone else was in the room. He sidled up close to Ramapati and whispered, "Uncle." "What is it, my boy?" Ramapati replied. *It would have been better if Vibha had stayed*, Ramchandra thought to himself. He didn't fully trust his uncle.

Vibha practically collapsed in tears the moment she reached Udayaditya; she couldn't utter a single word. Surama helped her sit up and asked, "What has happened, Vibha?" Clinging tightly to Surama with both arms, Vibha remained speechless. Udayaditya affectionately placed a hand on Vibha's head and asked,

"Why, Vibha, what is the matter?" Grabbing both of her brother's hands, Vibha said, "Brother, come with me, you will hear everything."

The three of them hurried to the door of Vibha's bedchamber. In the darkness, Ramchandra was sitting, and Ramapati was standing. Udayaditya urgently asked, "Uncle, what has happened?" Ramapati recounted the whole story piece by piece. His large eyes widening in horror, Udayaditya looked at Surama and declared, "I am going to Father right now—I will absolutely not let him do this. Absolutely not."

"Will that achieve anything?" Surama reasoned. "Instead, send Grandfather to him; let's see if that helps."

"Alright," the Crown Prince agreed.

Basanta Ray was in a deep slumber. Waking up to see Udayaditya, he assumed it was dawn. He instantly prepared to sing a morning raga:

"The flowers in the hair have wilted, the forest flowers bloom in the woods, The light of day is revealed, but the heart's desires remain in the heart."

"Grandfather, disaster has struck," Udayaditya interrupted.

Basanta Ray's song abruptly halted. He scrambled up, hurried to Udayaditya, and asked anxiously, "Eh? What is it, my boy? What has happened? What disaster?"

Udayaditya explained everything. Basanta Ray sank back onto the bed. Staring at Udayaditya's face and shaking his head, he murmured, "No, my boy, no. Can this ever be? Is this even possible?"

"There is no time; go to Father at once," Udayaditya urged.

Basanta Ray got up and set off. As he walked, he asked over and over, "My boy, can this ever happen? Is this even possible?"

The moment he entered Pratapaditya's room, he demanded, "Pratap, my son, is this ever possible?"

Pratapaditya had not yet retired to his bedchamber; he was sitting in his council room. For a fleeting second, he had considered calling Lachhman Sardar back. But that thought had vanished instantly. Did Pratapaditya ever issue an order twice? To

give an order with one breath and retract it with the next? Playing games with royal decrees was not his way. But what about Vibha? Vibha would become a widow. If Ramchandra Ray had voluntarily thrown himself into a fire, Vibha would still become a widow. Ramchandra Ray had voluntarily thrown himself into the raging fire of Pratapaditya Ray's wrath; as an inevitable consequence, Vibha would become a widow. How was Pratapaditya responsible for that? But even these thoughts hadn't fully formed in his mind. Whenever the sheer reality of the situation flashed brightly before his eyes, he grew incredibly restless, wondering: *When will the night finally end?* It was precisely at this moment that the elderly Basanta Ray rushed into the room, desperately grabbed both of Pratapaditya's hands, and cried, "Pratap, my son, is this ever possible?"

Pratapaditya flared up instantly. "Why isn't it possible?"

"He is but a boy, foolish and shortsighted," Basanta Ray pleaded. "Is he a worthy target of your wrath?"

"A boy!" Pratapaditya exploded. "He hasn't reached an age where he understands that putting a hand in the fire burns it! A boy! Some wretched, foolish Brahmin buffoon who makes a living baring his teeth to idiots—he dresses him up as a woman and brings him in to mock my Queen! A man who possesses the intellect to concoct such a scheme simply lacked the intellect to foresee its consequences. The pity is, by the time that intellect dawns on him, his head will no longer be attached to his body!"

The more he spoke, the more his body trembled with rage, his resolve hardening, his impatience growing.

Shaking his head, Basanta Ray said gently, "Alas, he is just a boy. He understands nothing."

This was unbearable for Pratapaditya. "Look here, Uncle," he sneered, "if you possessed the slightest understanding of what constitutes honor and insult for the Ray family of Jashore, you wouldn't parade around with the Mughal Emperor's turban wrapped over your gray hair. Because you walk around with your head held high, swollen with the pride of the Emperor's favor, Pratapaditya's head hangs low in shame. You wear the dust of the Yavana's feet on your forehead like a sacred mark. It was my fervent desire to see your utterly worthless, Yavana-dust-covered head roll in the dust; it is only by a twist of fate that I was thwarted. I am telling you

this plainly. Because you are who you are, you failed to comprehend the magnitude of the insult the Ray family suffered today, and because you are who you are, you have come to beg mercy for the very man who insulted us."

Basanta Ray spoke slowly then. "Pratap, I understand now. Once you raise a knife, it demands to fall upon someone. Because I slipped away from its target, someone else has taken my place. Very well, Pratap. If you have no pity in your heart, if your starving wrath simply must consume someone, then let it consume me. Here is your uncle's head." Basanta Ray bowed his head low. "If taking this brings you satisfaction, then take it. Bring the knife. This head has no hair; this face has lost the beauty of youth. The Lord of Death has already sent his invitation, and I am fully dressed for his assembly." A faint, tragic smile touched Basanta Ray's lips. "But think about it, Pratap. Vibha is our innocent little girl. When tears stream from her two eyes..."

Overcome with emotion, Basanta Ray broke down sobbing. "Finish me off, Pratap. I have no joy left in living. Finish me before I have to see the tears in her eyes."

Pratapaditya had remained silent throughout. When Basanta Ray finished speaking, he slowly stood up and walked away. He realized the secret was out. Going downstairs, he summoned the guards and ordered that the canal adjoining the royal palace be blocked immediately with massive *sal* wood logs. Ramchandra Ray's boat was anchored in that canal. He also strictly cautioned the guards to ensure that no one from the inner chambers was allowed to leave the palace that night.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

When Basanta Ray returned to the inner chambers, Vibha burst into tears at the sight of him. Basanta Ray could no longer hold back his own tears. Taking Udayaditya by the hand, he pleaded, "My boy, you must find a way out of this."

Ramchandra Ray had grown completely restless. Udayaditya drew his sword and said, "Come, follow me."

Everyone began to follow him. Udayaditya stopped and said, "Vibha, you stay here. Do not come."

But Vibha refused to listen. Ramchandra Ray also added, "No, let Vibha come along."

In the dead of night, they all walked on tiptoe. It felt as if terror was stretching out its invisible hands from all directions. Ramchandra Ray kept glancing nervously to his front, back, and sides. Every now and then, suspicions about his uncle arose in his mind.

Reaching the exit door that led out of the inner chambers, Udayaditya found it locked. In a trembling, choked voice, Vibha suggested, "Brother, maybe they haven't locked the door leading downstairs. Let's go there."

They all headed in that direction, carefully descending the long, dark staircase. To Ramchandra Ray, it felt as though anyone who descended these stairs would never climb back up; it was as if this was the burrow of the mythical serpent Vasuki, the staircase descending straight into the underworld. Reaching the bottom, they found the door there locked as well.

Slowly, they all climbed back up. Every single exit from the inner chambers was bolted shut. Together, they wandered from door to door, returning to check each one two or three times. They were all locked.

When Vibha realized there was no way out, she wiped her tears. Taking her husband by the hand, she led him to her bedchamber. Standing firmly at the door, she declared in an unwavering voice, "I will see who dares to drag you out of this

room. Wherever you go, I will walk ahead of you, and I will see who tries to stop me."

Udayaditya stood by the door and proclaimed, "No one shall enter this room without killing me first."

Without a word, Surama went and stood beside her husband. The elderly Basanta Ray stepped forward to stand in front of them all. The uncle silently slipped away.

But Ramchandra Ray found absolutely no comfort in these arrangements. *'From what I've seen of Pratapaditya,' he thought, 'there's nothing he isn't capable of doing. I have no faith that Vibha and Udayaditya stepping in will achieve anything. If I can just escape this house alive, that will be enough.'*

After a while, Surama whispered to Udayaditya, "I don't think our standing here will yield any good results; quite the opposite, in fact. The more resistance Father meets, the firmer his resolve will become. You must find a way to smuggle him out of the palace tonight."

Looking at Surama thoughtfully for a moment, Udayaditya nodded. "Then I will go and see if force works."

Surama nodded firmly in agreement and said, "Go."

Udayaditya cast off his outer garment and set forth. Surama walked with him for a short distance. In a secluded spot, she embraced him tightly. Bowing his head, Udayaditya gave her a long, deep kiss, and in an instant, he was gone.

Surama returned to her bedchamber. Tears streamed continuously from her eyes. Folding her hands in prayer, she wept, "O Mother Goddess, if I am a devoted and chaste wife, then save my husband from his father's hands today. I sent him into this mortal danger relying solely on You, Mother. If You destroy me now, no one in this world will ever believe in You again."

Sitting alone in the darkness, Surama silently called out to the Mother Goddess over and over. But it felt as though the Mother could not hear her. The floral offerings she mentally laid at the Goddess's feet seemed to be rejected, slipping away untouched. Crying, Surama asked, "Why, Mother? What have I done?" She received no answer. Within the surrounding darkness, she saw only the dance of

destruction. Everywhere she looked, Surama saw only an empty void. Unable to sit alone in that room any longer, she went to Vibha's room.

"The boy hasn't returned yet. What will happen?" Basanta Ray asked, his voice filled with anguish.

Leaning against the wall, Surama replied calmly, "Whatever the Creator wills."

Meanwhile, Ramchandra Ray was mentally devising the utter ruin of his old servant, Rammohan. After all, he was the root cause of this entire disaster. Ramchandra was planning every conceivable punishment for him, though occasionally, the chilling realization struck him that he might not live long enough to deliver them.

Sword in hand, Udayaditya strode to the locked outer gate of the inner chambers and delivered a powerful kick. "Who is there?" he demanded.

A voice from outside replied, "Sire, it is I, Sitaram."

"Open the door immediately," the Crown Prince ordered firmly.

Sitaram promptly unlocked the door. As Udayaditya prepared to step out, Sitaram folded his hands and pleaded, "Forgive me, Crown Prince, but there are strict orders that no one is allowed to leave the inner chambers tonight."

"Sitaram, are you going to take up arms against me too? Very well, come at me," Udayaditya said, drawing his sword.

"No, Crown Prince, I could never raise a weapon against you; you have saved my life twice," Sitaram said, taking the dust from Udayaditya's feet and placing it on his own head.

"Then do what you must, quickly. There is no time," Udayaditya urged.

"Do not destroy the life you have saved twice," Sitaram pleaded. "Disarm me. Here are my weapons. Bind me from head to toe. Otherwise, the Maharaja will not spare my life tomorrow."

The Crown Prince took his weapons and tied him up securely with his own clothes. Leaving him lying there, Udayaditya moved forward. A short distance away stood a

moderately high wall. There was only one door in that wall, and it too was locked. Beyond that door lay the world completely outside the inner quarters. Rather than knocking, the Crown Prince leapt onto the wall. He saw a guard leaning comfortably against it, fast asleep. Moving with utmost caution, Udayaditya dropped down and pounced on the sleeping guard with the speed of lightning. He snatched away the guard's weapon, tossed it aside, and bound the bewildered, groggy man from head to toe. Taking the keys from the guard, he unlocked the door.

The guard finally came to his senses and asked in a dazed voice, "Crown Prince, what are you doing?"

"I am opening the gates to the inner chambers," Udayaditya replied.

"What answer will I give the Maharaja tomorrow?" the guard lamented.

"Tell him the Crown Prince overpowered you by force and opened the gates. That will save you."

Leaving the inner chambers, Udayaditya went to the quarters where the son-in-law's entourage was staying. Only Rammohan and Ramai the jester were sleeping there; the rest had eaten and returned to the boats. The Crown Prince gently touched Rammohan.

Rammohan startled and jumped up. Shocked, he asked, "What is it? Crown Prince?"

"Come outside," Udayaditya whispered.

Rammohan stepped out, and the Crown Prince explained everything.

Wrapping his shawl tightly around his head and gripping his heavy bamboo staff (*lathi*), Rammohan swelled with fury. "Let's see how great this Lachhman Sardar really is! Crown Prince, just bring our Maharaja to me. I can chase away a hundred men single-handedly with this staff."

"I don't doubt that," Udayaditya replied, "but there are far more than a hundred men in the Jashore royal palace. Force won't work. We must think of another way."

"Alright, bring the Maharaja to me first. Once he is standing beside me, I can think of a way with a clear head," Rammohan suggested.

Udayaditya returned to the inner chambers and summoned Ramchandra. He arrived, accompanied by the rest of the group.

The moment Ramchandra saw Rammohan, he was overcome with rage. "You are fired this instant! Get out of my sight! You are an old servant, so what worse punishment can I give you? But if I survive this night, I will never look at your face again." Ramchandra's voice choked as he spoke. He truly loved Rammohan; the man had practically raised him from childhood.

Folding his hands, Rammohan replied, "Who are you to fire me, Maharaja? God gave me this job. The day the Lord of Death summons me, that is the day God will relieve me of my duties. Whether you keep me or not, I am your servant." With that, he stepped forward to shield Ramchandra.

"Rammohan, what plan have you devised?" Udayaditya asked.

"By the grace of your feet, this staff is my plan. And my faith lies at the feet of Mother Kali."

Udayaditya shook his head. "That plan is useless. Tell me, Rammohan, which direction is your boat anchored?"

"In the canal on the southern side of the palace."

"Come, let's go up to the roof," Udayaditya decided.

Suddenly, an idea struck Rammohan. "Yes, exactly! Let's go there."

They all climbed up to the palace roof. The canal was about a hundred feet below them. Ramchandra's sixty-four-oared boat was floating there. Rammohan declared he would tie Ramchandra Ray to his back and jump into the water.

In a panic, Basanta Ray quickly grabbed Rammohan. "No, no, no! How can that be? Rammohan, don't attempt something so impossible!"

Startled and terrified, Vibha cried out, "No, Mohan, what are you saying!"

"No, Rammohan, that will not do," Ramchandra agreed.

Udayaditya then hurried back to the inner chambers and gathered several large, thick bedsheets. Rammohan twisted and knotted them together to form a massive, sturdy rope. He tied one end to a small pillar on the roof, directly above where the boat was anchored. The rope dangled down, ending just a little above the boat.

Rammohan turned to Ramchandra Ray. "Maharaja, cling tightly to my back; I will climb down the rope." Reluctantly, Ramchandra agreed.

Rammohan then bowed to each of them one by one, took the dust from their feet, and declared, "Victory to Mother Kali." He hoisted Ramchandra onto his back, who squeezed his eyes shut and clung on for dear life. Looking at Vibha, Rammohan said, "Mother, I am leaving now. As long as your son is alive, fear nothing."

Rammohan grasped the makeshift rope. Leaning against the pillar, Vibha stood paralyzed, holding her breath. The elderly Basanta Ray stood on trembling legs, his eyes closed, chanting, "Durga, Durga."

Rammohan climbed down the rope until he reached the very end. Then, letting go with his hands, he clamped his teeth onto the rope to support their weight. He unhooked Ramchandra from his back, lowered him carefully into the boat with both hands, and then jumped down himself. The moment Ramchandra touched the boat, he fainted dead away. And the moment Ramchandra touched the boat, Vibha let out a long, deep sigh and collapsed into a faint on the roof.

Opening his eyes, Basanta Ray asked, "My boy, what happened?"

Udayaditya tenderly picked up the unconscious Vibha in his arms and carried her back to the inner chambers. Surama took Udayaditya's hand and asked, "What will happen to you now?"

"I do not worry for myself," Udayaditya replied.

Meanwhile, the boat traveled a short distance before hitting a snag—the canal was blocked by massive *sal* wood logs! Just then, the guards spotted the escaping boat from afar. They started throwing stones, but none reached their mark. The guards were armed with swords, not muskets. One ran off to fetch a musket. After a frantic search, a musket was found, but the flint was missing. While they were running around shouting, "Where's the gunpowder? Where's the shot?", Rammohan and his men physically dragged their boat over the wooden barricade and got away.

The guards sent a man to commandeer another boat for the pursuit. The man tasked with this errand decided to stop at Hari the grocer's shop for a quick smoke of tobacco on the way. He then rudely awakened Ramshankar from his bed to demand immediate payment for an old debt. By the time the boat finally arrived with much shouting and fanfare, the need for it had completely passed. Seeing the delay, everyone launched into a lengthy tirade against the man who had brought the boat.

"I'm not a horse, you know!" the man retorted.

By the time everyone finished scolding him, they finally realized that catching the fleeing boat was now completely impossible. The time it took to fetch the boat was tripled by the time spent arguing about it.

When Ramchandra's boat finally reached the Bhairab River, Fernandez fired a cannon in celebration.

Pratapaditya had just fallen into a light slumber in the early hours of the morning. The sound of the cannon jolted him awake. "Guards!" he shouted. No one came. The guards at his door had fled that very night.

Pratapaditya called out even louder: "Guards!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jolted awake, Pratapaditya shouted loudly, "Guards!" When no guard appeared, he instantly leapt out of bed and rushed out of the room with the speed of lightning. "Minister!" he bellowed. A servant ran off and quickly fetched the minister from the inner quarters.

"Minister, where have the guards gone?"

"The outer guards have fled," the minister replied. He could see that a grave crisis was looming over their heads. Therefore, he answered Pratapaditya's questions clearly, concisely, and rapidly. The more one delayed or beat around the bush, the more enraged the king became.

"And the guards of the inner chambers?" Pratapaditya demanded.

"When I came in, I saw them lying bound hand and foot."

The minister knew nothing of the night's events. He couldn't guess what had transpired, but he understood that something monumental had occurred. It was impossible to question the Maharaja at such a moment.

"Where is Ramchandra Ray?" Pratapaditya fired off rapidly. "Where is Udayaditya? Where is Basanta Ray?"

"I presume they are in the inner chambers," the minister replied slowly.

Annoyed, Pratapaditya snapped, "I could have *presumed* that myself. I asked you what you *know*. What one presumes is not always true."

Without another word, the minister quietly left the room. He learned the details of the night's events from Ramapati. Hearing that Ramchandra Ray had escaped, the minister grew deeply concerned. Stepping outside, he saw the dwarfish jester, Ramai, cowering in a corner.

Spotting the minister, Ramai bared his teeth and quipped, "Ah, here is the Minister Jambavan [the bear king from the Ramayana]!" Ramchandra's courtiers considered this toothy grin amusing, not terrifying.

Hearing this affectionate greeting, the minister said nothing and didn't even cast a glance his way. He simply ordered a servant, "Bring him along." *I might as well throw this worthless fool in front of Pratapaditya's wrath right now*, the minister thought. *Pratapaditya's thunderbolt has to strike someone—let it fall on this banana tree, so the larger trees are spared.*

The moment Pratapaditya laid eyes on Ramai, he exploded. And when Ramai, attempting to appease him, bared his teeth, made a grotesque face, and prepared to deliver a joke, it was more than Pratapaditya could stomach. He jumped up from his seat, waving his hands in utter disgust, and roared, "Get him out! Get him out of here right now! Who told you to bring this creature before me?" If Pratapaditya's anger hadn't been accompanied by such profound disgust, Ramai the jester would not have escaped unscathed that day. But to beat a despicable creature, one has to touch it first. Ramai was promptly thrown out.

"Maharaja, the royal son-in-law—" the minister began.

Shaking his head impatiently, Pratapaditya said, "Ramchandra Ray—"

"Yes. He left the royal palace last night."

Pratapaditya stood up. "Left! Where did the guards go?"

"The outer guards have fled," the minister repeated.

Clenching his fists, Pratapaditya sneered, "Fled? Where will they flee? Wherever they are, they must be hunted down and brought back. Bring the guards from the inner chambers to me immediately." The minister departed.

It was still dark when Ramchandra Ray boarded the boat. Udayaditya, Basanta Ray, Surama, and Vibha did not return to bed that night. Vibha lay exhausted, without uttering a word or shedding a tear, while Surama sat beside her, gently stroking her head. Udayaditya and Basanta Ray sat in silence. In the dark room, their faces were barely visible to one another. It felt as if an invisible entity—call it darkness, dread, or destiny—was sitting in the room with them; they could almost hear its breathing.

The usually jovial Basanta Ray, seeing the profound gloom around him, was completely overwhelmed. He kept rubbing his bald head, looking around, and wondering: *What just happened?* He was confused, unable to fully grasp the

enormity of the situation. The whole incident felt like a convoluted nightmare. Every so often, Basanta Ray would grasp Udayaditya's hand and say in a broken voice, "My boy." "What is it, Grandfather?" Udayaditya would ask. To which Basanta Ray had no reply. That single utterance of "My boy" struggled to express a thousand unspoken questions of a bewildered, panic-stricken heart. He had no specific question; his entire being was simply asking: *What is this?* The surrounding darkness seemed to be speaking into his ear in a chaotic, incomprehensible language. Hearing Udayaditya's voice momentarily steadied his mind.

Time and again, he grabbed Udayaditya's hand and pleaded, "My boy, did all this happen because of me?" He was constantly tormented by the thought that his own survival was the cause of this disaster.

Udayaditya was in no mood for long conversations. He answered softly, "No, Grandfather."

The room would remain silent for a long time. Then Basanta Ray would suddenly cry out, "Vibha, my dear girl, why aren't you speaking?" and move to sit beside her. A while later, he would call out, "Surama, oh Surama." Surama would look up, but say nothing. The old man sat there, rubbing his head, waiting for some unknown disaster to strike.

Surama sat still, stroking Vibha's forehead, but only the Inner Guide knew the turmoil within her heart. In that darkness, she stole a glance at Udayaditya's face. He was leaning his head against the wall, lost in deep thought. Tears rolled down Surama's eyes. She wiped them away quietly, careful not to let Vibha see.

When dawn finally broke, Basanta Ray breathed a sigh of relief. The vague sense of impending doom lifted from his mind. He calmly reviewed the night's events in his head, then got up and left Vibha's room.

He went to the door of the inner chambers where Sitaram lay bound hand and foot. "Listen, Sitaram," he instructed. "When Pratap asks you who tied you up, give him my name. Pratap knows Basanta Ray was once a strong man; he will believe you."

Sitaram had been agonizing over what answer to give Pratapaditya. He absolutely could not bring himself to implicate Udayaditya. At one point, he had considered blaming a crooked-legged, three-eyed, palm-tree-sized demon; but having found

Basanta Ray, he decided to acquit the innocent demon. He readily agreed to Basanta Ray's proposal.

Basanta Ray then went to the second guard. "Bhagabat, if Pratap asks, tell him Basanta Ray tied you up."

Suddenly, Bhagabat's sense of morality flared up intensely, and he developed a strong aversion to lying; the primary reason being that he was fiercely angry at Udayaditya.

"Do not order me to say such things," Bhagabat protested. "It would be a sin."

Placing a hand on his shoulder, Basanta Ray cajoled, "Bhagabat, listen to me; there is no sin in this. If lying to save the life of a righteous man were a sin, why would I ask you to do it?" Patting his shoulder and back, Basanta Ray tried repeatedly to convince him that it was not a sin. But when a man's moral compass suddenly points true north out of spite, no logic can sway him.

"No, Maharaja," Bhagabat insisted. "How can I lie to my master?"

Basanta Ray grew desperate. "Bhagabat, listen to me, let me explain, there is no sin in this lie! Look, my boy, I will reward you handsomely later, just do as I say. Here, take whatever I have on me right now."

Bhagabat's hand instantly shot out, and the coins found a swift haven in his waistband. Somewhat relieved, Basanta Ray turned back.

The two guards were summoned before Pratapaditya. The minister escorted them in. Pratapaditya had suppressed his raging fury and sat in grim, terrifying silence. Pronouncing each word slowly and clearly, he asked, "How was the gate to the inner chambers opened last night?"

Sitaram's soul quaked. Folding his hands, he pleaded, "Mercy, Maharaja, I am not to blame."

Knitting his brows, the king asked, "Who is asking you that?"

"No, Sire, I mean... Maharaja... the Crown Prince... the Crown Prince overpowered me, tied me up, and left the inner chambers," Sitaram blurted out. The Crown

Prince's name had somehow slipped out. Because he had focused so hard on *not* saying that name, it was the first thing that rushed to his lips in his panic. Once it was out, there was no taking it back.

At that moment, Basanta Ray, having heard the guards were summoned, rushed into Pratapaditya's chamber. Sitaram was just saying, "I forbade the Crown Prince, but he wouldn't listen."

"Hold on, Sitaram, what did you say?" Basanta Ray hurriedly interjected. "Do not commit a sin, Sitaram, God will bless you. Udayaditya had no hand in this."

Sitaram quickly backpedaled, "No, Sire, the Crown Prince is completely innocent."

"Then is it your fault?" Pratapaditya demanded sternly.

"No, Sire."

"Then whose fault is it?"

"Maharaja, I—"

When Bhagabat was questioned, he recounted the events precisely, omitting only the fact that he had been asleep on the job. The elderly Basanta Ray looked around, seeing no way out. Closing his eyes, he silently chanted, "Durga, Durga."

The two guards were dismissed from service on the spot. Their crime was simply this: if they could be so easily overpowered and tied up, what business did they have being guards? For this incompetence, they were also ordered to be flogged.

Then, staring directly at Basanta Ray, Pratapaditya declared in a voice like thunder, "There is no pardon for Udayaditya's crime!"

He spoke as if Udayaditya's crime was entirely Basanta Ray's doing. It was as though he were reprimanding Basanta Ray using Udayaditya as a proxy. Basanta Ray's true crime was loving Udayaditya more than his own life.

"Pratap, my son, Uday had no part in this," Basanta Ray quickly protested.

"No part in it?" Pratapaditya flared up. "Because *you* claim he has no part in it, I shall punish him all the more severely! Why have you come to interfere and mediate?"

Because Basanta Ray had so fervently taken Udayaditya's side, Pratapaditya's mind turned vehemently against his son. Basanta Ray realized that defending Udayaditya would only bring harsher punishment down upon the boy, simply to spite him. He fell silent and began to think.

After calming down slightly, Pratapaditya said, "If I thought Udayaditya possessed even an ounce of his own mental fortitude, if he had his own opinions, his own intentions, if anything he did came from his own volition—if I didn't know that any fool could blow that idiot away with a puff of breath, or lead him by the nose with a mere glance—he wouldn't have survived today. Whenever I see that feather floating in the wind, I look down to see who is blowing it. That is why I have no desire to punish Udayaditya. He isn't even worthy of punishment. But hear me well, Uncle: if you ever come to Jashore a second time and meet with Udayaditya, it will be very difficult to save his life."

Basanta Ray sat in silence for a long time. Then, rising slowly, he said, "Very well, Pratap. I shall leave this evening." Without another word, Basanta Ray walked out of the room, letting out a deep sigh as he crossed the threshold.

Pratapaditya had concluded that whoever loved Udayaditya, whoever Udayaditya was devoted to, had to be distanced from him. He instructed the minister, "My daughter-in-law is no longer permitted to stay in the royal palace; find an excuse to send her back to her father's house." Pratapaditya had no such apprehensions about Vibha; after all, she was a daughter of his own house.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Basanta Ray entered Udayaditya's room and said, "My boy, we will not see each other again." The old man wrapped Udayaditya in a tight embrace.

Taking Basanta Ray's hands, Udayaditya asked, "Why, Grandfather?"

Basanta Ray recounted everything. Weeping, he said, "Brother, you suffer so much precisely because I love you. So, if my leaving brings you peace, I will manage to spend my remaining days somehow."

Shaking his head, Udayaditya replied, "No, that will never happen. You and I *will* meet. No one can prevent that. If you leave, Grandfather, I will not survive."

"Pratap didn't kill me," Basanta Ray cried in anguish, "but he tore you away from me! My boy, when I leave, do not look back at me. Just assume that Basanta Ray has died."

Udayaditya went into the bedchamber to see Surama. Basanta Ray went to Vibha, held her chin, and said, "Vibha, my little sister, sit up for a moment. Run your hands over this old man's head one last time."

Vibha sat up, took her grandfather's head in her lap, and began plucking out the white hairs.

Udayaditya told Surama everything. "Surama," he said, "it seems there is a conspiracy afoot to strip away every last thing I have left in this world." Taking her hand, he asked, "Surama, what if someone tears you away from me?"

Embracing him tightly, Surama declared in a voice of steel, "Only the Lord of Death can do that, no one else."

Such a fear had been brewing in Surama's own mind for quite some time. She felt as if she could see a cruel hand reaching out to snatch her Udayaditya away from her. Mentally, she clung to him with all her might, vowing, *'I will not let go, no one will be able to tear me away.'*

"I have known for a long time that no one can take me from you," Surama repeated.

She repeated those words over and over. She was trying to gather strength within her soul—a strength that would allow her to wrap her arms around Udayaditya so fiercely that no earthly power could separate them. By repeating this vow, she was fortifying her heart with the strength of a thunderbolt.

Looking into Surama's face, Udayaditya sighed, "Surama, I will never see Grandfather again."

Surama echoed his sigh.

"I don't worry about my own pain, Surama," Udayaditya continued, "but it will break Grandfather's heart. Let us see what else the Creator has in store. Let us see what else He desires."

Udayaditya spoke endlessly of Basanta Ray.

He recalled every word Basanta Ray had ever spoken, every little thing he had ever done. The countless small acts and quiet words of Basanta Ray's compassionate heart, which Udayaditya had hoarded like precious gems in the vault of his memory, he now brought out one by one to share with Surama.

"Alas, is there anyone else in the world like Grandfather?" Surama murmured.

Surama and Udayaditya went to Vibha's room.

Vibha was plucking her grandfather's white hairs, and he sat there singing:

"Oh, the time has come to go, there is no more delay, The sun has fallen behind, your companions have all gone away. Come, finish this worldly game, the darkness is closing in, Why do you keep looking back? Who are you searching for, my friend? You came to play on the stage of life, a new game with new faces, Step away from here now, or they'll chase you from these places. Set down the burden of your soul, walk straight to another land, You'll build a new nest there, and play a new game on that strand."

Seeing Udayaditya, Basanta Ray smiled and said, "Look here, brother, Vibha refuses to let me go. I don't know why she needs me so much. The milk of my youth has curdled into the buttermilk of old age; why is Vibha trying to satisfy her craving for

milk with buttermilk? Have you ever heard of such a thing—Vibha crying because I am leaving! I cannot bear to see Vibha's tears, my boy."

He began singing again:

"My time to leave has come, Why do you hold me so tight? With bonds of weeping tears, Do not bind me in illusion's might. The holiday of life is over, Turn away those eyes so deep, Do not call my name anymore, For I have a swift appointment to keep."

"Just look, look at Vibha! Listen, Vibha, if you cry like that, I—"

Basanta Ray could speak no further. In trying to scold Vibha, he lost control of his own emotions. He quickly wiped away his tears, forced a laugh, and said, "My boy, look over there, Surama is crying too! You better do something about this quickly, or I might actually end up staying and usurping your place! I'll have her pluck white hairs with both hands, I'll whisper through these broken teeth right into her ear, and if something untoward happens so close to her ear, I won't be held responsible!"

When Basanta Ray saw that no one said a word in reply, he felt a deep pang of sorrow. He picked up his sitar and began to strum it with fierce, frantic energy. But the sight of Vibha's tears severely hindered his playing; his own eyes kept blurring with tears. Every now and then, a fierce desire arose within him to unleash a torrent of words upon Vibha and everyone present under the guise of scolding, but the words refused to come. His throat choked up. He had to stop playing and set the sitar down.

Finally, the moment of departure arrived.

He embraced Udayaditya for a long time. His final words were, "I leave this sitar behind, my boy. I shall not play the sitar ever again. Be happy, Surama, my sister. Vibha—" The sentence remained unfinished. Wiping his tears, he climbed into the palanquin.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Mangala's hut was situated on the outskirts of Jashore. She was sitting there, counting her prayer beads, when Matangini, a maidservant from the royal palace, arrived carrying a basket of vegetables.

"I came to the market today," Matangini announced, "and I thought, I haven't seen Sister Mangala in so long, let me go and pay her a visit. I have a lot of work today, sister, so I can't stay long." Saying this, she set down her basket and settled comfortably on the floor. "So, sister, you know everything anyway. That brute used to love me a lot, and he still does, but I've found out his heart has strayed to another woman... can you do something to make that wretched woman drop dead within three days?"

Mangala possessed remedies for every kind of misfortune, from finding a lost cow to recovering a lost husband. Furthermore, she knew such potent love spells that dozens of the highest-ranking royal servants practically rolled at her feet. The "wretched woman" whose death within three days would save Matangini's life was none other than Mangala herself.

Mangala laughed inwardly and thought, *'That wretched woman is in no hurry to die; she'll only die after she's given the Lord of Death plenty of work to do.'* Aloud, she laughed and said, "Is there really such a tasteless fool in the world who would abandon a beauty like you for someone else? Don't you worry, granddaughter. You will win his heart back. The remedy lies right in your own eyes—try applying it a bit more intensely. If even that fails, feed him this root with his betel leaf." She brought out a dried root and handed it to her.

Mangala then asked, "So, what is the news from the royal palace?"

Matangini flipped her hand dismissively. "What business is it of ours, sister?"

"True. Very true," Mangala agreed.

Matangini hadn't expected Mangala to agree so readily. Slightly flustered, she backtracked, "Well, there's no harm in telling *you*. But I don't have much time today, I'll tell you everything another day." Having said that, she remained firmly seated.

"Very well, we'll hear it another day," Mangala said.

Matangini grew impatient. "I really must go now, sister. I'll get scolded for being late. But listen, the royal son-in-law came to visit the other day, and the very night he arrived, he left without telling a soul!"

"Is that so? Really? Why, tell me? That's what I say, no one but Matang can give me the real inside scoop."

Beaming with pride, Matangini leaned in. "Do you want to know the real reason? Our Crown Princess—the eldest daughter-in-law—she simply cannot bear to see anyone else happy. She knows some dark magic, I tell you! She keeps her husband on a tight leash, like a pet sheep. She... no, sister, never mind. Who knows who might overhear, and then they'll say Matang goes around blabbing royal secrets!"

Mangala couldn't contain her curiosity any longer. Although she knew Matangini would spill everything on her own if she just stayed quiet for another minute, she couldn't wait. "There's no one else here, granddaughter. And between us, what's the harm? So, what did your Crown Princess do?"

"She poisoned the son-in-law's mind with lies about our Princess Vibha! That's why the son-in-law abandoned our Princess in the middle of the night and fled. Our Princess is absolutely devastated, crying her eyes out. The Maharaja is furious; he wants to send the Crown Princess back to her father's house in Sripur. Look at you, sister, you find everything funny! What is so amusing about this? You just can't stop laughing!"

Every maid and servant in the royal household claimed to know the 'exact' reason for Ramchandra Ray's flight, but no two stories ever matched.

"Tell your Queen Mother not to be in such a hurry to send the daughter-in-law back to her father's house," Mangala advised, chuckling maliciously. "Mangala can provide a potion that will turn the Crown Prince's heart completely away from her."

"That sounds like a fine idea," Matangini agreed.

"Does the Crown Prince love your daughter-in-law very much?" Mangala asked.

"Don't even ask! He can't bear to be away from her for a single moment. If she even whistles for him, he comes running."

"Alright, I'll give you a potion. Does the Crown Prince stay with her even during the day?"

"Yes."

"Oh my, what is to be done? Have you seen what she says or does to him?"

"No, sister, I haven't seen that."

"If you could sneak me into the royal palace just once, I could go and see for myself."

"Why, sister, why are you so bothered about this?" Matangini asked suspiciously.

"It's not that," Mangala explained quickly. "If I see her just once, I'll understand exactly what spell she's used to bewitch him, and I'll know if my own spells will work against it."

"Alright then, I'll be going today," Matangini said, picking up her basket and leaving.

Once Matangini was gone, Mangala seemed to swell with dark energy. Clenching her teeth and widening her eyes, she began muttering incomprehensible incantations under her breath.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Basanta Ray had departed. Evening was falling. Vibha went up to the palace roof. From there, she watched the palanquin disappear into the distance. She saw Basanta Ray poke his head out of the palanquin and look back one last time. In the gathering dusk, through the veil of her tears, she saw the long, harsh, unyielding stone walls of the royal palace appear blurry and indistinct. The palanquin vanished, but Vibha remained standing there. She kept staring down the empty road. The stars came out, the lamps were lit, the road lay deserted. Vibha stood still, gazing out in silence.

Surama searched the entire palace for her and finally found her on the roof. Wrapping her arms around Vibha's neck, she asked tenderly, "What are you looking at, Vibha?"

With a heavy sigh, Vibha replied, "Who knows, sister."

Vibha saw only emptiness everywhere; there was no joy left in her soul. She couldn't understand why she went into a room, why she came out of it, why she lay down, why she got up, or why she wandered aimlessly from room to room in the blazing heat of midday. It felt as if her true 'home' had packed up and left the royal palace; as if she no longer had a place in this grand edifice. All the games, the shared joys and sorrows, the laughter and tears of her childhood had built a cherished little 'home' for her within this palace—who had destroyed it in a single day? This house was no longer her home. She was now homeless within her own house. She had a grandfather, but he was gone. And when would they send an escort from Chandradwip to take her back? Perhaps Rammohan Mal had already set off; who knew where they were by now.

Vibha still had a few fragments of happiness left. She had her wonderful brother, she had her beloved Surama, but even over them, a dark menace seemed to shadow their every step. When a dark, terrible, and invisible mystery constantly smolders right through the foundations of a house, can one still call it a home?

Udayaditya heard about Sitaram's miserable plight after being dismissed from service. Not only was the man completely penniless, but he also had several dependents clinging to his neck. Back when Sitaram earned a handsome salary from the royal treasury, his uncle had suddenly experienced an overwhelming surge of

affection for him; the uncle had quit his own job, claiming he couldn't bear the pain of separation from his beloved nephew. Having secured this 'reunion', the uncle tearfully declared that merely looking at Sitaram banished all his hunger and thirst. There was ample evidence that his hunger and thirst were indeed banished, but absolutely no proof that it was solely due to looking at Sitaram.

Sitaram also had a distantly related widowed sister who had been trying to find employment for her son. However, it suddenly dawned on her that putting her precious boy to work in a menial job would be a grave insult to his 'honorable' uncle Sitaram. To protect her brother's 'prestige', she simply couldn't allow her son to work. Thus, by safeguarding his honor, she made Sitaram eternally indebted to her, effectively securing lifelong maintenance for herself and her son in exchange.

On top of this, Sitaram had a widowed mother and an unmarried young daughter to support. Furthermore, Sitaram was a man of expensive tastes; he simply couldn't survive without his daily dose of luxury and entertainment. Sitaram's financial circumstances had drastically changed, yet none of his associated expenses had followed suit. His uncle's 'hunger and thirst' remained exactly the same; as his nephew grew older, the capacity of his stomach expanded proportionately, as did his fierce vigilance over his uncle's 'prestige'. The only thing showing any signs of shrinking was Sitaram's money pouch. Alongside Sitaram's dependents, his expensive tastes remained intact, fueled entirely by borrowing; and as the loans grew, the interest grew just as robustly.

Hearing of Sitaram's destitution, Udayaditya arranged a monthly allowance for both him and Bhagabat. Receiving the money, Sitaram was overcome with shame. Ever since he had uttered Udayaditya's name before the Maharaja, he had felt like a profound criminal in his own eyes and before Udayaditya. Receiving the Crown Prince's money made him burst into tears. One day, catching sight of the Crown Prince, he threw himself at his feet, addressing him as 'God,' 'Lord of the Universe,' and 'The Merciful One,' begging profusely for forgiveness.

Bhagabat, on the other hand, was an incredibly cold-blooded individual. He played chess, smoked tobacco, and spent his days passing judgment on which of his neighbors were destined for heaven or hell. When he received Udayaditya's money, he twisted his face into various expressions, conveying that this paltry sum could never compensate for the utter ruin the Crown Prince had brought upon him. He did not, however, raise the slightest objection to actually taking the money.

Word reached Pratapaditya's ears that the Crown Prince was providing a monthly allowance to the dismissed guards. In the past, such news wouldn't have reached him. Previously, he had neglected Udayaditya to such an extent that not everything concerning the prince was brought to his attention. The Maharaja knew that Udayaditya mingled with the subjects and often took their side in opposition to his own policies; but these acts of defiance were usually so trivial and happened so gradually that Pratapaditya had grown accustomed to them. Unless something major occurred, Udayaditya's very existence rarely commanded his attention. But this time, Pratapaditya was paying special attention to Udayaditya, so the news reached him immediately.

Hearing this, Pratapaditya was enraged. He summoned Udayaditya and demanded, "Did I dismiss Sitaram and Bhagabat simply because the royal treasury couldn't afford their salaries? Is that why you have taken it upon yourself to grant them a monthly pension from your own pocket?"

Udayaditya replied softly, "I am the guilty one. By punishing them, you have punished me. According to your judgment, I pay them my penalty every month."

Never before had Pratapaditya truly listened to Udayaditya's words. The quiet, solemn, humble tone, and the carefully measured words didn't entirely displease the king.

Choosing not to argue the point, Pratapaditya simply commanded, "I order you, Uday, that no further financial assistance is to be given to them in the future."

"Then an even harsher punishment has been decreed for me," Udayaditya said. Folding his hands, he continued, "But what crime have I committed that I must bear such a heavy penalty? How can I watch eight or nine hungry mouths go without food because of me? How can I watch eight or nine wretched, helpless souls wander the streets in tears, while my own plate overflows with food? Father, whatever I have is entirely by your grace. You provide me with more food than I need. But if you place eight or nine starving, suffering people before me while I eat, and forbid me from offering them a single morsel, then that food turns to poison in my mouth."

Pratapaditya did not interrupt the agitated Udayaditya even once. When he had finished, Pratapaditya said slowly, "I have heard what you have to say. Now hear what I have to say. I have stopped the pensions of Bhagabat and Sitaram. If anyone

else attempts to provide them with a pension, they will be considered an enemy of my will."

A particular kind of resentment had flared up in Pratapaditya's mind. He probably didn't fully understand the reason for it himself, but it stemmed from this thought: *'He acts as if I have committed some monstrous cruelty, and he, the embodiment of compassion, Udayaditya, has swooped in to rectify it! Let's see what his compassion can actually achieve. Where I choose to be cruel, how dare anyone else choose to be kind! Such insolence!'*

Udayaditya went to Surama and told her everything.

Surama said, "They hadn't had a bite to eat all day. Yesterday evening, Sitaram's mother came to me with his little daughter and fell at my feet weeping. When I give them something in the evening, only then does the whole family get to eat. Sitaram's daughter is just a little child; she hadn't eaten a thing all day. How can anyone look at her face and do nothing? If we don't give them a little something, where will they go?"

"Especially since they've been banished from the royal palace," Udayaditya agreed. "Out of fear of Father, no one else will dare to give them work or help them. If we turn our backs on them now, they will have absolutely no one left in this world. I *will* help them, do not worry about that, Surama. But needlessly angering Father is not wise. We must find a way to do this discreetly."

Surama took Udayaditya's hand and said, "You don't need to do anything else. I will handle it all. Leave it to me."

Surama wanted to shield Udayaditya with her own being. This was a dark, unfortunate year for Udayaditya. Fate seemed to be pushing him into actions that directly opposed his father; yet, these were actions that a wife like Surama could not, in good conscience, try to prevent her husband from taking. Surama was not that kind of wife. When her husband rode off to a righteous war, Surama was the kind of wife who would fasten his armor with her own hands, and only then return to her room to weep. Surama's heart was gripped with terror at every step, yet she offered Udayaditya courage at every turn. In times of dire peril, Udayaditya looked at Surama's face and saw tears in her eyes, but her hands never trembled, and her steps never faltered.

Surama arranged for the allowance to be delivered to Sitaram's mother and Bhagabat's wife through one of her trusted maids. The maid was indeed trusted, but she saw absolutely no reason to keep this a secret from Mangala. Because of this, no one outside the palace knew about it, except for Mangala.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When the news of the secret allowance reached Pratapaditya's ears, he simply sent an order to the inner chambers without uttering another word: Surama must be sent back to her father's house. Udayaditya braced his heart with firm resolve. Weeping, Vibha threw her arms around Surama's neck and cried, "If you go, what will I do in this palace of death?"

Surama held Vibha's chin, kissed her face, and said, "Why would I leave, Vibha? Everything I hold dear is right here."

When Surama heard Pratapaditya's order, she declared, "I see no reason to return to my father's house. No one has come from there to fetch me, and my husband does not consent to this. Therefore, I see no necessity to suddenly leave for my father's house without cause."

Hearing this, Pratapaditya was enraged. But upon reflection, he realized he had no other recourse. He couldn't physically drag Surama out of the house; brute physical force had no place within the inner chambers (*antahpur*). Pratapaditya was utterly inept when it came to dealing with women. He knew how to meet force with force, but he simply couldn't fathom the strategies required to handle these delicate creatures. He could snap thick ropes with a mighty heave, but his thick fingers could not untie the intricate knot of a fine silken thread. In his eyes, these women were utterly incomprehensible and unworthy of his understanding. Whenever any trouble arose concerning them, he hastily dumped the responsibility onto the Queen. He had neither the time, the desire, nor the aptitude to sit and ponder over their affairs. It was a task entirely beneath him.

This time too, Pratapaditya summoned the Queen and said, "Send Surama back to her father's house."

"If we do that, what will happen to my boy Uday?" the Queen asked.

Annoyed, Pratapaditya snapped, "Uday is not a child anymore. I need Surama sent away from the royal palace for the sake of state affairs. That is my command."

The Queen called for Udayaditya and said, "Uday, my boy, let Surama go back to her father's house."

"Why, Mother?" Udayaditya asked. "What crime has Surama committed?"

"Who knows, my child," the Queen sighed. "We are but women, we understand nothing of these matters. Only the Maharaja knows how sending the daughter-in-law to her father's house will benefit his state affairs."

Udayaditya replied, "Mother, how does hurting me and making me miserable improve the affairs of the state? I have endured as much pain as one can endure; what happiness do I even have left? It's not as if Surama lives here in great luxury. She has endured scoldings day and night, she has worn 'get out' and 'go away' like ornaments on her body, and ultimately, is there not even a tiny corner left for her in this entire royal palace? Does she have no relationship with you at all, Mother? Is she a beggar, a passing guest, that you can keep her when you please and drive her away when you wish? If that is the case, Mother, then there is no place for me in this royal palace either. Banish me as well."

The Queen began to cry. "I don't know, my boy. I can never understand what the Maharaja does or why he does it. But I must say this, child—our daughter-in-law isn't exactly a saint either. Ever since she entered this royal house, there has been no peace. She's been a constant thorn in my side. So let her go to her father's house for a few days, let's see what happens. What do you say, my boy? Once she's gone for a while, we'll see if the fortune of this house improves or not."

Udayaditya gave no reply. He sat in silence for a while, then got up and left.

Weeping, the Queen threw herself at Pratapaditya's feet. "Maharaja, save us! If you send Surama away, Uday will not survive. My boy is innocent; that Surama, that witch, has cast some dark spell on him!" The Queen sobbed uncontrollably.

Furious, Pratapaditya bellowed, "If Surama does not leave, I will throw Udayaditya in the dungeons!"

Returning from the Maharaja, the Queen went straight to Surama and screamed, "You wretched woman, what have you done to my boy? Give my son back to me! What haven't you ruined since the day you arrived? Will you not be satisfied until you've slapped iron shackles on a prince's wrists?"

Surama shuddered. "Shackles will be put on his wrists because of me? What are you saying, Mother? I will leave right this instant."

Surama went to Vibha and told her everything. Embracing Vibha's neck, she said, "Vibha, I am leaving now. I don't think they will ever let me return here."

Vibha clung to Surama, weeping bitterly. Surama slumped to the floor right there. From the infinite expanse of an endless future, a single phrase echoed and struck her heart: "*Never again.*" I will never be allowed to return, nothing will remain! Such a vast, empty void of a future stretched out before her—a future without his face, without his smile, without his affection. No meeting of eyes, no embrace of hearts, no merging of souls. No sharing of joys and sorrows. Even if her heart broke, there wouldn't be a single drop of love, a single moment of affection. Nothing. What a terrifying future! Surama's heart began to shatter, her head spun, and the tears in her eyes dried up completely.

The moment Udayaditya entered, Surama threw herself at his feet, clutching them tightly to her chest, and let out a heart-wrenching wail. Surama had never cried like this before. Her strong, resilient heart was splintering into a hundred pieces today.

Udayaditya lifted Surama's head onto his lap and asked softly, "What is it, Surama?"

Looking into Udayaditya's face, what could Surama possibly say? She looked at his face and wept louder. "Will I never see this face again?" she sobbed. "When evening falls and you come to sit by the window, will I not be beside you? When you light the lamp in the room and stand by the door, will I not come smiling to take your hand? When you are here, where will I be?"

In that single word "where" that Surama uttered, lay such boundless despair, such a profound sense of immeasurable separation! Even when two people can only meet each other's gaze, there is still a vast distance between them! When even that is impossible, how much greater the distance! When news takes an eternity to arrive, the distance grows further still! When, despite a desperate, dying wish, they cannot see each other even for a single moment... then... then the only happiness left is to die right now, clutching these feet to her chest.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

At the beginning of this tale, a woman named Rukmini was mentioned. Perhaps the readers have not forgotten her. This Mangala was, in fact, Rukmini. Having left Raygarh, she had changed her name and settled on the outskirts of Jashore.

There was nothing extraordinary about Rukmini. Like any common woman of base nature, she was sensual, jealous, and hungry for dominion over the minds of others. Laughter and tears were completely at her command; she brought them out when necessary and tucked them away when not. When she was angry, she was terrifying; it seemed as if she would tear the object of her wrath apart with her teeth and nails. At such times, she spoke little; fire seemed to shoot from her eyes, she trembled violently, and rage boiled within the cauldron of her heart like molten iron. Jealousy hissed within her mind like a venomous snake, swelling its hood and thrashing its tail. Meanwhile, she observed various fasts and performed numerous tantric rituals. She had an uncanny ability to understand the minds of the class of people she associated with. She nurtured a dream—both waking and sleeping—that when the Crown Prince ascended the throne, she would place her own throne upon his heart and rule both his heart and the kingdom of Jashore together. There was nothing she wouldn't do to achieve this.

Through relentless effort over a long period, she had befriended all the maids and servants of the royal household. She kept track of every trivial piece of news from the palace. She heard about it the day Surama's face looked pale, and even Pratapaditya's slightest illness reached her ears, making her think, *'Perhaps the nuisance will finally die this time.'* She had performed various dark rituals aiming for the deaths of Pratapaditya and Surama, but so far, none had succeeded. Every morning she woke up hoping, *'Maybe today I'll hear that Pratapaditya or Surama died in their sleep.'* Her impatience grew by the day. She thought, *'To hell with spells and rituals! If I could just get my hands on them once, I'd satisfy my heart's desire.'* Thinking such thoughts, she would bite her lip so hard it would almost draw blood.

Rukmini saw that the King and Queen's resentment towards Surama was increasing daily. Eventually, it escalated to the point where a proposal was made to banish Surama from the royal palace. Rukmini's joy knew no bounds. When she saw that Surama still hadn't left, she resorted to the simplest method of getting rid of her.

When the Queen heard that a widow named Mangala was proficient in tantric spells, incantations, and various potions, she decided it would be wise to win back the Crown Prince's heart from Surama before banishing her from the palace. She secretly sent Matangini to fetch a potion from Mangala.

Using various roots, Mangala spent the entire night chopping, soaking, grinding, mixing, and chanting incantations to prepare a deadly poison.

In the dead of that silent night, within the hidden hut on the deserted outskirts of the city, the rhythmic pounding of a mortar and pestle echoed. That sound was her only companion. The ceaseless, monotonous grinding seemed to clap along to the beat of her dancing, wicked enthusiasm. Her excitement danced with redoubled vigor, and sleep entirely vanished from her eyes.

It took five days to prepare the 'potion.' It doesn't take five days to make a poison. But to ensure that the Crown Prince felt absolutely no pity for Surama at the time of her death, a great deal of time was spent chanting specific dark mantras and performing sinister rituals.

With Pratapaditya's consent, the Queen allowed Surama to stay in the royal palace for a few more days. The knowledge that Surama was leaving left Vibha feeling as if she were adrift in a shoreless ocean. These past few days, she had sat continuously by Surama's side. She followed Surama around silently, like a faded shadow. As each day passed and evening fell, Vibha sought to embrace Surama even tighter, as if trying to hold onto her. It felt as though someone were violently tearing the days away from her desperate grasp.

Darkness closed in around Vibha. To Surama's eyes, too, everything appeared empty. She had lost all sense of north, south, east, and west; the directions of her world had all blurred into one. She would lie at Udayaditya's feet, rest her head on his lap, and stare silently into his face, doing nothing else. She would say to Vibha, "Vibha, I leave everything of mine in your care," and then, covering her face with her hands, she would burst into tears.

Afternoon arrived; tomorrow morning was the day of Surama's departure. One by one, she handed over all her household responsibilities and possessions to Vibha. Udayaditya sat there, calm and resolute. He had decided that either Surama would stay in the royal palace, or he would leave with her.

When evening fell, Surama could no longer stand. Her legs trembled, and her head spun dizzily. She went into the bedchamber, lay down, and called out, "Vibha, Vibha, call him here quickly! There is no time left!"

As soon as Udayaditya reached the door, Surama cried out, "Come, come, my heart is failing me!" She reached out both her arms.

When Udayaditya came near, she clung to his feet. Udayaditya sat down. Surama was breathing with great difficulty; her hands and feet were turning icy cold. Terrified, Udayaditya called out, "Surama!"

Lifting her head very slowly and looking into Udayaditya's face, Surama whispered, "Yes, my lord."

"What has happened to you, Surama?" Udayaditya asked frantically.

"I think my time has come," Surama replied. She tried to raise her arms to embrace Udayaditya's neck, but her arms wouldn't lift. She simply kept gazing at his face.

Taking Surama's face in both his hands, Udayaditya cried, "Surama, Surama, where are you going, Surama? Who else do I have left?"

Tears streamed from Surama's eyes. She only looked at Vibha's face. Vibha stood there, petrified, staring at Surama with senseless, uncomprehending eyes.

The window where Surama and Udayaditya used to sit every evening was wide open before them. The stars were visible in the sky, a gentle breeze was blowing, and everything was silent. The lamps in the rooms were lit; the conch shells and bells for the evening prayer rang out in the royal palace and then slowly faded away.

Surama whispered faintly to Udayaditya, "Say something... my eyes are failing, I cannot see clearly."

Gradually, the news spread throughout the royal palace that Surama was dying, having taken poison by her own hand. The Queen came running, everyone came running. Seeing Surama's face, the Queen burst into tears and cried, "Surama, my child, you stay right here, you don't have to go anywhere! You are the Goddess Lakshmi of our house, who is telling you to leave?"

Surama mentally took the dust from her mother-in-law's feet and placed it on her head.

Weeping even harder, the Queen cried, "My child, are you leaving us in anger?"

By then, Surama's voice had failed. She tried to say something, but no words came out.

With four *dandas* (about an hour and a half) of the night remaining, the physician announced, "It is over!"

"Brother, what has happened?" Vibha wailed, throwing herself onto Surama's chest and clinging to her.

Dawn broke. Udayaditya remained sitting there, Surama's lifeless head resting in his lap.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Is Surama truly gone? Vibha simply couldn't bring herself to believe it. It felt as if she might catch a glimpse of Surama at any moment, as if Surama was just over there, somewhere in the house! Vibha wandered aimlessly from room to room; her soul seemed to be constantly searching for Surama.

When it was time to braid her hair, she sat quietly, waiting, feeling as though Surama would arrive at any second to braid it for her. *No, alas, no.* Evening descended, night approached, and Surama did not come. Her hair remained unbraided. Today, Vibha's face was so pale, she was crying so much, yet why didn't Surama come? Surama never acted like this. If Vibha's face looked even slightly downcast, Surama would immediately rush to her side, embrace her, and gaze lovingly into her face to soothe her heart. And today... oh, today, even if her heart broke into pieces, Surama would not come.

Half of Udayaditya's strength, half of his very soul, was gone. The one who gave him hope and enthusiasm in every endeavor, whose counsel was his only true support, whose smile was his only reward—she was gone.

He would go into his bedchamber, lost in thought. He would look around once, seeing no one. Slowly, he would go and sit by that window; he left the spot where Surama used to sit empty. The same moonlight bathed the sky, the same garden lay before him, the breeze blew exactly as before—he kept thinking, *'On an evening like this, could Surama really stay away?'*

Suddenly, he would think he heard a voice that sounded just like Surama's. He would startle, and even though he knew it was impossible, he would look around, he would go to the bed, just to check if anyone was there.

The Udayaditya who used to be busy all day with hundreds of small tasks; who used to receive poor subjects bringing gifts of fruits and vegetables from their fields and gardens, inquiring about their well-being and offering them advice—these days, he could do none of that. Yet, in the evening, he would grow weary and walk with heavy steps to his bedchamber, harboring a secret hope that perhaps, just perhaps, when he pushed open the door, he would see Surama sitting by that window.

Whenever Udayaditya saw Vibha wandering alone with a pale, melancholic face, his heart wept. He would call Vibha to him, caress her, and speak words of deep affection to her. Eventually, holding her brother's hand, Vibha would break down in tears, and tears would stream from Udayaditya's eyes as well.

One day, Udayaditya called Vibha and said, "Vibha, who else do you have left in this house? Let me make arrangements to send you to your father-in-law's house. What do you say? Don't be shy with me, Vibha. Who else will you share your heart's desires with?"

Vibha remained silent. She said nothing. Did he even need to ask? Did she have any desire to stay in her father's house anymore? The only place in the world where she could find solace—that Chandradwip—wouldn't her soul be restless to go there? But not a single person had come to fetch her yet! Why hadn't they come?

Udayaditya brought up the proposal of sending Vibha to her in-laws with his father once. Pratapaditya replied, "I have no objection to sending Vibha to her father-in-law's house. But if they had any respect or affection for Vibha, they would have sent someone themselves to fetch her. I see no need for us to act so desperate."

The Queen wept constantly at the sight of Vibha. How could she bear to see the sorrow of widowhood on Vibha's face while her husband was still alive? Seeing Vibha's tragic face was like a spear to her heart. Besides, the Queen loved her son-in-law dearly. She absolutely hated the fact that a seemingly childish prank of his had escalated to such disastrous consequences.

She went to the Maharaja and pleaded, "Maharaja, send Vibha to her father-in-law's house."

The Maharaja grew angry. "I have heard that same request many times. Do not irritate me further. When they come begging for Vibha, they shall have her."

"If a married daughter doesn't go to her in-laws' house for a long time, what will people say?" the Queen reasoned.

"And if Pratapaditya volunteers to send his daughter, and Ramchandra Ray turns her away from his door, what will people say then?" Pratapaditya retorted.

Weeping, the Queen thought to herself that sometimes there was simply no comprehending the Maharaja's actions.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

King Ramchandra Ray had an extremely sharp eye for honor and insult. Once, the king was traveling down a road in his palanquin. Two ignorant weavers were sitting in front of their hut, weaving on their loom. They failed to stand up when the palanquin passed by, and the king made a massive uproar over it. Another time, while at his father-in-law's house in Jashore, he had ordered a servant to do a certain task. The poor fellow misheard him and made a mistake. The incredibly haughty Ramchandra Ray immediately concluded that his in-laws' servants didn't respect him. They must have learned such insolence from their masters, otherwise, they wouldn't have dared. Especially since, just that very morning, he had seen Crown Prince Udayaditya whispering something to that same servant—they must have been plotting to insult him, what else could it be? One day, a few young boys had built a throne out of a mound of dirt and were playing at being king, minister, and courtiers, mimicking a royal court. The news reached the king's ears, and he summoned their fathers and severely reprimanded them.

Today, the Maharaja was leaning against a bolster on his royal cushion, puffing on his hookah. A terrified, impoverished culprit stood before him, undergoing trial. Somehow, this man had heard the rumors concerning the incident between Pratapaditya and Ramchandra Ray and was discussing it amongst his peers. An enemy of his overheard the conversation and brought it to the king's attention. The king was furious and summoned him. The atmosphere in the court suggested he might be hanged or exiled right then and there.

"You scoundrel, how dare you have such audacity!" the king thundered.

Weeping, the man pleaded, "Mercy, Maharaja, I did no such thing!"

"You wretch," the minister interjected, "comparing our Maharaja with Pratapaditya!"

"You fool, don't you know?" the Dewan added. "When Pratapaditya's father first became king, he appealed to our Maharaja's late grandfather to place the royal *tika* (mark) on his forehead. After much begging and crying, our late Maharaja obliged by marking his forehead with the little toe of his left foot!"

"Pratapaditya is the son of Vikramaditya," Ramai the jester chimed in. "They've only been kings for two generations! Pratapaditya's grandfather was an earthworm; the son of the earthworm became a leech. That leech bloated itself by sucking the blood of the subjects, and today, the son of that leech is desperately trying to flatten its head into a hood and learning to strike like a cobra! We have been jesters in the royal court for generations, we are snake charmers! Do you think we don't recognize a venomous snake when we see one?"

King Ramchandra Ray was immensely pleased by this. Smiling broadly, he continued puffing on his hookah. These days, Pratapaditya was verbally attacked in the court every single day. Only when the courtiers had exhausted their quivers, firing endless verbal arrows at Pratapaditya's back, would the court be adjourned.

In any case, during today's trial, the culprit wept and begged so profusely that the fiercely mighty Ramchandra Ray finally declared, "Alright, go. You survive this time, but be careful in the future."

The other courtiers left, leaving only the minister and Ramai the jester with the king. The conversation naturally returned to Pratapaditya.

"You managed to escape, Your Majesty," Ramai said, "but Crown Prince Udayaditya got caught in a terrible mess. The King's intention was that if his daughter became a widow, he could sell her iron bangle and her two gold bracelets to add a little something to the royal treasury! The Crown Prince ruined that plan. Oh, the uproar it caused!"

The king laughed. "Is that so!"

"Maharaja," the minister said, "I hear Pratapaditya is consumed with regret these days. He's losing sleep and his appetite trying to figure out how to send his daughter to her father-in-law's house."

"Really now!" the king laughed, taking a drag from his hookah, feeling thoroughly delighted.

"I said to myself," the minister continued, "There's no need to send the daughter to her in-laws anymore. The very fact that our Maharaja married into your family has brought salvation to seven generations of your ancestors! But to bring your

daughter into our house and lower our prestige... you haven't earned enough good karma for that yet.' Isn't that right, Thakur?"

"Is there any doubt about it!" Ramai exclaimed. "Maharaja, the fact that you stepped into their mud is incredibly lucky for the father of that mud. But that doesn't mean you shouldn't wash your feet before entering your own house!"

And so the mockery and jesting continued. Conjuring up imaginary effigies of Pratapaditya and Udayaditya in their minds, they verbally slashed them to ribbons. It's hard to fathom exactly what Udayaditya's crime was. The fact that he risked his own life and braved grave danger to save Ramchandra Ray's life was completely ignored. Simply because he was Pratapaditya's son, Ramchandra Ray callously made him the butt of his jokes. It wasn't that Ramchandra Ray was inherently cruel; rather, he was a man of a superficial, narrow mind. He felt no genuine gratitude towards Udayaditya for saving his life. He believed it was exactly what was *supposed* to happen; anything less would have been unjust. If Ramchandra Ray was in danger, shouldn't everyone band together to save him? He genuinely felt that if a thorn pricked Ramchandra Ray's foot, the entire universe should feel the pain. He couldn't conceive that the personal tragedy of a lowly subject meant absolutely nothing when compared to the grand existence of the King of Kings, Ramchandra Ray. Day and night, weighed on the scales of hundreds of sycophants—with the world on one side and himself on the other—he always found himself the heavier, the more important one. Because of this, genuine gratitude rarely arose in his heart for anyone.

Another reason he felt no gratitude towards Udayaditya was his belief that Udayaditya had only saved him for the sake of his sister; saving Ramchandra Ray's life wasn't his primary goal. Furthermore, even if a sliver of gratitude had managed to penetrate Ramchandra's heart, he still wouldn't have refrained from mocking Udayaditya. When a group of people gang up to ridicule someone—especially when Ramai the jester is leading the charge—Ramchandra lacked the moral courage to shut them up or refuse to join in. He constantly worried, *'What will everyone think if I don't?'*

Yet, Ramchandra Ray still harbored something akin to infatuation for Vibha. Vibha was beautiful; she had just stepped into the bloom of youth. Ramchandra Ray had spent very little time with her. He had shown disregard towards Pratapaditya—but on that fateful night, when he first woke up and suddenly saw Vibha sitting on the

bed crying, bathed in moonlight... her partially uncovered chest heaving... tears streaming from her sweet, melancholic eyes... her delicate lips trembling like tender new leaves... a sudden wave of emotion had washed over him. He had taken Vibha's head in his lap and wiped away her tears. A fierce desire to kiss her sorrowful lips had overwhelmed him. That was the first time a spark of electricity had coursed through his veins; that was the first time he truly saw the radiant beauty of Vibha's newly blossomed youth. His breathing had quickened, tears had gathered on his half-closed eyelashes, and his heart had pounded wildly. He was just leaning in to kiss Vibha when the knock came at the door, bringing news of grave danger.

Because that first blossoming of emotion, that first surge of desire, that mesmerized gaze of love had remained unfulfilled, it lingered in Ramchandra Ray's memory, starving and desperate. This was not a profound, enduring love, for such a thing was impossible for Ramchandra Ray's shallow heart. Just as a superficial man might suddenly develop a strong craving for a luxury item, the superficial Ramchandra Ray had developed a similar craving for Vibha. Whatever the reason, Vibha haunted Ramchandra Ray's youthful dreams. A strong desire to possess Vibha had awakened within him.

But if he sent for Vibha, what would everyone think? His courtiers would think him henpecked! The minister would be secretly displeased! Ramai the jester would mock him behind his back! Besides, what kind of punishment would that be for Pratapaditya? Where was the revenge on his father-in-law? Plagued by all these conflicting thoughts, he couldn't muster the courage or the inclination to send for Vibha. In fact, he didn't even have the courage to stop the mockery aimed at Vibha in his court, and when he thought of Pratapaditya, he didn't even *want* to stop it.

After Ramai the jester and the minister had left, Rammohan Mal approached with folded hands and said, "Maharaja."

"What is it, Rammohan?" the king asked.

"Maharaja, give me the order. I will go and bring the Queen Mother here."

"What are you talking about!" the king exclaimed.

"Yes, Sire. The inner chambers are completely empty, and I cannot bear to see it. I go into the *antahpur*, I don't see anyone in the Maharaja's rooms, and my heart

aches. Let our Mother Lakshmi return to illuminate this house, so that our eyes may be blessed by the sight of her."

"Rammohan, have you lost your mind?" the king retorted. "You expect me to bring that girl into my house?"

His eyes widening in shock, Rammohan asked, "Why, Maharaja? What crime has my Queen Mother committed?"

"What are you saying, Rammohan! You want me to bring Pratapaditya's daughter into my house?"

"Why shouldn't you bring her? What relationship does she have with Pratapaditya anymore? Until a girl is married, she belongs to her father; after marriage, the father has no claim over her. Now, she is your Queen, she is yours. If you don't bring her into your home, if you don't treat her with respect and affection, who will?"

"The fact that I married Pratapaditya's daughter is honor enough for them," the king argued. "To bring her into my house on top of that? How would I maintain my dignity?"

"Maintain your dignity?" Rammohan challenged. "You leave your own Queen languishing in someone else's house, where you have no authority over her, where anyone can lord over her however they please—do you think *this* maintains your dignity?"

"What if Pratapaditya refuses to send his daughter?" the king countered.

Puffing out his massive chest, Rammohan roared, "What did you say, Maharaja? What if he refuses? Who has the power to refuse? My Mother, the Goddess Lakshmi of our house—who dares keep her away from us? I don't care how great Pratapaditya is, I will snatch her right out of his hands! I am telling you this right now. I *will* bring my Mother here, and who are you to stop me?" With that, Rammohan turned to leave.

"Rammohan, don't go! Listen, listen to me," the king called out hastily. "Alright, I have no objection to you going to fetch the Queen. But... see that no one hears of this. Make sure this doesn't reach the ears of Ramai or the minister."

"As you command, Maharaja," Rammohan replied, and walked away.

Even though everyone would eventually find out when the Queen actually arrived at the palace, that would take a long time. There was plenty of time to prepare for that. For now, Ramchandra Ray was just relieved to have avoided immediate embarrassment.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Day and night, Vibha's sole focus was on keeping Udayaditya happy. She did all his chores with her own hands. She personally brought him his meals, sat before him while he ate, and didn't allow even the slightest negligence in his care. When Udayaditya came to his room in the evening, covered his eyes with his hands, and sat in absolute silence—likely weeping quietly—Vibha would softly approach and sit at his feet. She would try to start a conversation, but no words would come to her. The two of them would sit there, frozen, neither speaking a word. The dim light of the lamp flickered intermittently, casting a trembling shadow on the wall. Vibha would stare at that shadow for a long time, until her heart felt ready to burst, and she would release a heavy sigh and cry out, "Brother, where did she go?"

Udayaditya would startle, remove his hands from his eyes, and stare at Vibha's face, as if he hadn't fully understood what she said, as if he were trying to comprehend it. Then, suddenly regaining his senses, he would quickly wipe his tears, move closer to Vibha, and say, "Come, Vibha, let me tell you a story."

It was a heavily overcast monsoon day. It had been pouring rain relentlessly since morning. The day was gloomy and dark; the trees and plants in the garden stood motionless, soaking in the downpour. Occasionally, a gust of wind would blow, driving the rain into the room. Udayaditya sat in silence. Thunder rumbled in the sky, lightning flashed on the horizon. The ceaseless drumming of the rain seemed to repeat only one phrase: "*Surama is gone—she is gone.*" The damp wind would howl through, seemingly whispering, "*Where is Surama!*" Vibha slowly approached Udayaditya and said softly, "Brother."

Her brother couldn't answer. Seeing Vibha, he hid his face, resting his head on the windowsill as the rain fell on his hair. Thus the day passed, evening descended, and night fell. Vibha arranged Udayaditya's meal, returned, and said, "Brother, the food is here, come and eat." Udayaditya made no reply. The night deepened. Weeping, Vibha pleaded, "Brother, get up, it's late." Udayaditya looked up to see Vibha crying. He quickly got up, wiped Vibha's eyes, and went to eat. He barely ate anything. Seeing this, Vibha sighed and went to bed without touching her own food.

Vibha tried to speak, tried to tell stories, but she couldn't talk much. She couldn't figure out how to keep Udayaditya happy. She only thought, '*Alas, if only Grandfather were here!*'

These days, a strange fear had taken root in Udayaditya's mind. He had grown intensely terrified of Pratapaditya. His former courage was completely gone. He could no longer disregard danger and risk his life to stand up against tyranny. He hesitated in every action; doubts plagued his every thought.

One day, Udayaditya heard that an order had been given to send armed thugs (*lathials*) at night to loot and burn down the revenue office (*kachari*) of the Zamindar of Chhapra. Udayaditya instantly ordered his horse to be saddled and went to the inner chambers. Entering his bedchamber, he looked around. He fell deep into thought. Lost in his musings, he absentmindedly began changing his clothes. He stepped outside.

A servant approached and said, "Crown Prince, the horse is ready. Where are we going?"

The Crown Prince stared blankly at the servant's face for a moment, then finally said, "Nowhere. Take the horse away."

Another day, hearing the sound of crying, Udayaditya rushed out and saw a royal official tying up and beating a peasant. Weeping, the peasant looked up at the Crown Prince's face and begged, "Mercy, Crown Prince!"

Udayaditya couldn't bear to watch his suffering. He quickly turned and ran back into his room. In the past, he would have stopped the official without a second thought for the consequences and tried to protect the subject.

The pensions of Bhagabat and Sitaram had been stopped! The Crown Prince no longer had the courage to offer them financial help, either openly or in secret. Whenever he heard of their hardships, he would think to himself, '*I will send the money today.*' But then he would begin to hesitate, and the money was never sent.

Let no one think Udayaditya was acting this way out of a fear for his own life. It wasn't as if he had suddenly developed a stronger attachment to living than before. A blind, paralyzing terror had gripped his mind. He viewed Pratapaditya as some terrifying, mystical force. It felt as though his destiny, every day and every moment of his future, was clenched tightly in Pratapaditya's fist. It felt as if, even if Udayaditya were embracing death, standing at the very precipice of life's final moment, if Pratapaditya knitted his brows and commanded him to live, he would have no choice but to return from the jaws of death.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The widow Rukmini (Mangala) had a small stash of ready cash. She made her living by lending it out and collecting interest. Armed with both beauty and bounty, she kept many under her spell. Sitaram was a man of expensive tastes, yet he didn't have a single penny to his name. Because of this, he felt a deep, heartfelt attraction to both Rukmini's beauty and her bounty. Even on days when there was nothing to eat at home, you could see Sitaram strolling down the street without a care in the world—twirling his staff, his thin shawl fluttering in the wind, chest puffed out—heading straight for Mangala's house. If someone on the street asked, "So, Sitaram, how are things going at home?" he would reply without batting an eye, "Going wonderfully! Consider yourself invited to our place tomorrow." Sitaram's big talk hadn't diminished in the slightest; in fact, the worse his financial situation became, the taller and wider his tales grew.

Sitaram's situation was becoming dire. It had reached a point where his uncle, weary of his 'honorary' role, was contemplating returning to his home village.

Today, in desperate need of money, Sitaram arrived at Rukmini's house. Edging closer to her with a smile, he recited a teasing rhyme:

"If you must give alms, O Radha, I have no need for silver or gold. To save my life, I've come to you, It's the jewel of your honor I wish to hold!"

He quickly added, "No, sister, that rhyme doesn't quite fit. I don't really have much use for the 'jewel of your honor' right now; if I need it later, we'll see. For the moment, a little silver or gold would be quite useful."

Rukmini suddenly feigned immense affection and replied, "Well, if you're in need, who else would I give it to?"

"Oh, it's not a *dire* need," Sitaram backpedaled hastily. "But you know how it is, sister—my mother keeps the money; I never keep cash on me. This morning, she went to visit her son-in-law in Jora-ghata and forgot to leave any money out for me. Don't worry, I'll pay you back tomorrow."

Mangala chuckled inwardly and thought, *'Why the rush? Pay it back whenever it's convenient. I'm handing it to you; it's not like I'm throwing it into the water.'*

Actually, if she threw it into the water, there was still a slight chance of getting it back. Giving it to Sitaram eliminated even that remote possibility—that was the only difference.

Seeing these signs of affection from Mangala, Sitaram's love overflowed. He decided it was time to be witty. Acting like a lord without any money and acting like a comedian without any humor were Sitaram's defining traits. He said whatever came to his mind and then laughed uproariously at his own jokes, regardless of whether anyone else joined in. Watching him laugh made others laugh out of sheer pity or absurdity. Back when he was a royal guard, Sitaram often narrowly avoided starting brawls with his fellow guards, primarily because what Sitaram found hilarious, no one else did. Once, while Hanuman Prasad Tewari was dozing off on duty, Sitaram sneaked up behind him and delivered such a sudden, bone-crushing thump to his back that both Hanuman's back and his temper flared up simultaneously. Sitaram had howled with laughter, but Hanuman Prasad, refusing to join in the merriment, made the distinction between physical assault and actual humor very clear to Sitaram through a practical demonstration. Hundreds of such tales of Sitaram's 'wit' could be recounted here.

As mentioned, Sitaram's affection suddenly surged. He moved closer to Rukmini and said lovingly, "You are my Subhadra, and I am your Jagannath!"

"Die, you brute!" Rukmini snapped. "Subhadra is Jagannath's sister!"

"How can that be?" Sitaram argued. "If that were true, how could 'The Abduction of Subhadra' happen?"

Rukmini burst out laughing. Sitaram puffed out his chest and demanded, "No, that won't do! Laughing won't work, give me an answer. If Subhadra was really his sister, how could she be abducted by him?"

Sitaram was convinced he had presented an ironclad argument that left no room for debate.

In a sickly-sweet voice, Rukmini said, "Get away, you fool."

Melting completely, Sitaram replied, "A fool indeed! I always lose to you, sister; in front of you, I'll always be a fool." *'I gave her a good answer,'* Sitaram thought to himself. *'That was a clever retort.'*

He tried again, "Alright, sister, if you didn't like that name, tell me what you'd like me to call you."

Smiling, Rukmini said, "Call me 'Life'."

"Life," Sitaram repeated.

"Call me 'Beloved'."

"Beloved."

"Call me 'Dearest'."

"Dearest."

"Call me 'Dearer than Life'."

"Dearer than Life. Alright, sister, 'Dearer than Life,' how much interest will you charge on the money you just gave me?"

Rukmini feigned anger, twisting her face. "Go away! So this is your love? How could you even bring up interest with that mouth?"

Overjoyed, Sitaram gushed, "No, no, how could I mean that? Was I speaking the truth? Couldn't you tell I was just joking? Oh, Dearest, for shame!"

We do not know what mysterious illness afflicted Sitaram's mother, but she began visiting her son-in-law's house quite frequently these days, and her memory regarding leaving money behind seemed to have completely vanished. As a result, Sitaram found himself visiting Rukmini quite often. Lately, Sitaram and Rukmini had been seen putting their heads together, holding deep, highly secretive consultations.

After days of plotting, Sitaram finally admitted, "I can't come up with these intricate schemes, sister. We won't succeed without Bhagabat's help."

There was a terrible storm that evening. Doors slammed wildly throughout the royal palace. The wind howled with such force that the thick branches of the large trees in the garden bent down to touch the ground. Like fragments of a ruined

village swept away by a flood, torn shreds of clouds raced frantically before the gale. Frequent lightning, frequent thunder.

Udayaditya had bolted all the doors and sat in the dark with a little girl in his lap. He had extinguished the lamp. The room was pitch black. The girl had fallen asleep in his arms. When Surama was alive, she loved this little girl dearly. After Surama's death, the girl's mother hadn't sent her to the royal palace. Today, after a long time, she had come to visit. Suddenly catching sight of Udayaditya, she had cried out, "Uncle! Uncle!" and thrown herself into his arms. Pressing her tightly to his chest, Udayaditya had brought her into his bedchamber.

Udayaditya harbored a fragile hope: *'What if Surama comes to see this girl just once? She loved her so much. She was so fond of her... could she really stay away?'*

At one point, the girl had asked, "Uncle, where is Auntie?"

With a choked voice, Udayaditya replied, "Call her once, won't you?"

The little girl began calling, "Auntie! Auntie!" To Udayaditya, it felt as though someone answered from afar. As if someone called out, *"I'm coming!"* It was as though the loving mother couldn't ignore the plaintive call of her beloved child and was rushing to sweep her up in her arms.

Then the child fell asleep. Udayaditya extinguished the lamp and sat alone in the dark room with the sleeping girl. Outside, the wind howled furiously. Doors rattled and banged everywhere.

Was that a footstep? Yes, it was a footstep. His heart was pounding so loudly he couldn't hear it clearly. The door opened, and the light of a lamp spilled into the room. *Could it really be possible?* A woman entered silently, lamp in hand.

Closing his eyes, Udayaditya whispered, "Is that Surama?" He closed his eyes, terrified that if he looked and saw Surama, she might vanish. He was terrified it *might not* be Surama.

Setting the lamp down, the woman said, "Well, don't you remember me anymore?"

It was as if a thunderclap had shattered his dream. Udayaditya started and opened his eyes. The little girl woke up, cried "Uncle," and began to weep. Laying her on

the bed, Udayaditya stood up. He looked completely lost, as if he didn't know what to do or where to go.

Rukmini stepped closer, her face twisted in a sneer. "I suppose you don't remember now. Then why did you raise my hopes to the sky back then?"

Udayaditya stood in silence; he simply couldn't utter a word.

Then Rukmini unleashed her ultimate weapon. Weeping, she cried, "What crime did I commit that made me such an eyesore to you? You are the one who ruined me! The woman who once surrendered her body and soul to the Crown Prince now wanders the streets like a beggar! Is this what fate had written on my cursed forehead?"

This time, the blow struck Udayaditya's heart. He suddenly felt, *'Perhaps I really am the cause of her ruin.'* He forgot the past. He forgot how, in the reckless days of his youth, Rukmini had laid traps for him at every turn; how she had sat in his path every day; how, like a whirlpool, she had entangled him in her bewitching arms and dragged him down into the darkest depths in an instant. He forgot it all. He saw only that Rukmini's clothes were soiled and torn. Rukmini was crying.

The compassionate Udayaditya asked, "What do you want?"

"I want nothing else, I only want your love," Rukmini pleaded. "I want to sit by that window, rest my head on your chest, and feel your caress. Tell me, is my face darker than Surama's? And if it is dark, it is only because I've wandered the streets for your sake! It wasn't dark before!"

With that, Rukmini moved to sit on Udayaditya's bed.

Udayaditya could bear it no longer. In sheer agony, he cried out, "Do not sit on that bed! Do not sit there!"

Like a wounded cobra raising its hood, Rukmini snapped, "Why shouldn't I?"

Blocking her path, Udayaditya pleaded, "No, do not go near that bed. Tell me what you want, I will give it to you right now."

"Alright," Rukmini said, "give me that ring on your finger."

Udayaditya instantly pulled the ring from his finger and tossed it to her. Rukmini picked it up and walked out. She thought to herself, '*The witch's spell hasn't worn off yet. Let a few more days pass, then my magic will work.*' Once Rukmini left, Udayaditya collapsed onto the bed. Burying his face in his arms, he wept, "Where are you, Surama? Where are you? Who will bring peace to my scorched, lightning-struck heart today?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bhagabat's situation was quite dire. He had been sitting quietly for days, puffing endlessly on his hookah. When Bhagabat puffed on his hookah with such intense concentration, it gave his neighbors cause for concern. For, just as the thick, black smoke coiled out of his mouth, a similarly dark, convoluted scheme was surely brewing in the factory of his mind.

Yet, Bhagabat was known as a highly pious man. His only 'flaw' was that he didn't socialize; he kept to his rosary of the Lord's name, spoke little, and avoided gossip. But when someone was in deep trouble, no one could offer sounder advice than Bhagabat. He never intentionally harmed anyone, but if someone harmed *him*, Bhagabat never forgot it in this lifetime; he wouldn't set his hookah down until he had exacted his revenge. In short, Bhagabat was exactly what society deemed a 'good man.' Even the neighbors respected him. During his hard times, he had taken loans, but he had paid them all back by selling his brass pots and pans.

One morning, Sitaram approached him and asked, "How are you doing, brother?"

"Not well," Bhagabat replied.

"Why, what's wrong?"

Taking a long drag from his hookah and handing it to Sitaram, Bhagabat said, "Things are very tight."

"Really? How did that happen?"

Feeling slightly annoyed, Bhagabat snapped, "How did it happen? Do I really have to explain that to you? I thought you were in the exact same boat as me."

A bit embarrassed, Sitaram replied, "No, brother, that's not what I meant. I'm asking, why don't you take a loan?"

"If I take a loan, I have to repay it," Bhagabat reasoned. "How will I repay it? I don't have much left to sell or pawn."

Puffing out his chest, Sitaram declared, "How much money do you need? I'll lend it to you."

"Is that so? Well, if you have so much money that throwing a handful into the water means nothing to you, then go ahead and toss me ten rupees. But I'm warning you upfront: I have no way of repaying it!"

"You don't need to worry about that, brother," Sitaram assured him.

Bhagabat wasn't exactly overwhelmed with a surge of friendly affection at the prospect of this financial aid. He quietly prepared another bowl of tobacco and continued puffing in silence.

Sitaram slowly brought up his actual agenda. "Brother, the King's unjust judgment has stolen our livelihood."

"Well, you certainly don't look like you're starving!" Bhagabat remarked drily. Sitaram's sudden 'generosity' hadn't sat well with him; he was secretly quite irritated.

"No, brother, I'm just speaking generally!" Sitaram clarified. "If we don't starve today, we will in ten days."

"Well, if the King makes an unjust judgment, what can we do about it?"

"Ah, when the Crown Prince becomes King, Jashore will see the golden age of Ram Rajya! Let's just pray we live to see that day."

Losing his temper, Bhagabat snapped, "What business is that of ours, brother? You're a rich man, you can sit in your house and plot the downfall of kings and ministers—it suits you. I'm a poor man; I don't have the stomach for such things."

"Why are you getting angry, brother? Just listen carefully to what I have to say," Sitaram whispered, and began speaking in hushed tones.

Furious, Bhagabat cut him off. "Listen, Sitaram, I'm telling you plainly: do not ever utter such words in my presence again."

Sitaram left for the day. Bhagabat spent the rest of the day in deep, concentrated thought.

The next morning, he went to Sitaram himself. "That thing you mentioned yesterday," Bhagabat said, "was a very solid plan."

Sitaram swelled with pride. "Didn't I tell you, brother!"

"I've come to consult with you about it today," Bhagabat announced.

Sitaram swelled even further. For the next few days, continuous, secret consultations took place.

The plan they finally hatched was this: they would forge a petition, seemingly from the Crown Prince, addressed to the Mughal Emperor. In it, the Prince would accuse Pratapaditya of rebellion against the Empire and request the throne for himself. The petition would bear the Crown Prince's official seal. Since Rukmini had secured the ring bearing the Prince's seal, the hardest part of the job was already done.

They executed the plan flawlessly. A forged petition was written and stamped with the Crown Prince's seal. Since the foolish Sitaram couldn't be trusted, it was decided that Bhagabat himself would carry the petition to the Emperor in Delhi.

However, Bhagabat didn't head towards Delhi. He took the petition straight to Pratapaditya.

"Maharaja," he reported, "I discovered through certain channels that a servant of Udayaditya was heading towards Delhi with this petition. The servant has fled the country, so I have brought the petition directly to Your Majesty."

Bhagabat did not mention Sitaram's name.

It is unnecessary to describe Pratapaditya's reaction upon reading the petition. Bhagabat was immediately reinstated to his position in the royal guard.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Darkness had descended upon Vibha's soul. It felt as if a heartbreaking sorrow, a desert-like despair, the relinquishment of all life's joys lay in wait for her in the future, creeping closer with every passing moment. The shadow of that life-draining, all-consuming, barren, boundless dread had fallen directly over her heart. She felt a sickening unease within.

Vibha lay alone on her bed. There was no one with her now. Sighing and weeping, Vibha cried out in anguish, "Have you truly abandoned me? What crime did I commit against you?" Weeping uncontrollably, she repeated, "What crime did I commit?" Covering her face with her hands and clutching a pillow to her chest, she sobbed, "What did I do? Not a single letter, not a single messenger has come; I hear no news of you from anyone. What am I to do? My heart is breaking, I wander aimlessly from room to room all day, no one brings me news of you, no one even speaks your name! O Mother Goddess, how will I survive these days?"

Many such days passed. Through countless afternoons, evenings, and nights, the companionless Vibha wandered like a frail, withered shadow through the empty rooms of the royal palace.

Then, one morning, Rammohan appeared, bowed, and said, "Victory to you, Mother!"

Vibha was so startled it felt as if a thunderbolt of joy had struck her head. Tears sprang to her eyes. Startled and thrilled, she cried out, "Mohan, you've come!"

"Yes, Mother. I saw that our Mother had forgotten us, so I came to remind her."

Vibha wanted to ask a thousand questions, but shyness held her tongue. The words hovered on her lips but refused to be spoken, even though her heart was desperate to hear the answers.

Looking at Vibha's face, Rammohan said, "Why, Mother, why is your face so pale? There are dark circles under your eyes. There is no smile on your lips. Your hair is unkempt. Come, Mother, come to our home. It seems there is no one here to care for you."

Vibha smiled a sad, faint smile, but said nothing. The smile didn't reach her eyes. Tears began to stream down her face, washing over her thin, pale cheeks; the tears simply wouldn't stop. When one receives a touch of affection after a long period of neglect, a deep sense of wounded pride wells up; Vibha wept from that incredibly tender, gentle, and infinitely loving sense of wounded pride. *'So, you finally remembered me after all this time?'* she thought to herself.

Rammohan couldn't hold back his own tears. "What a bad omen this is! Mother Lakshmi, you must enter our house with a smiling face. Dry your tears on this auspicious day."

The Queen had secretly feared that her son-in-law might refuse to accept her daughter back. Hearing that Rammohan had come to fetch Vibha, she was overjoyed. She summoned Rammohan, inquired about the well-being of the son-in-law's household, fed him with great care, and listened to his stories. The day passed in sheer delight. Tomorrow was an auspicious day for travel; it was decided Vibha would depart at dawn. Pratapaditya raised no further objections.

When all the preparations for the journey were complete, Vibha went to see Udayaditya one last time. He was sitting alone, lost in thought.

Seeing Vibha, he startled slightly and said, "So, Vibha, you are leaving? That is for the best. You will be happy there. I bless you; may you live as the Goddess Lakshmi and illuminate your husband's home."

Vibha fell at Udayaditya's feet and began to cry. Tears welled up in Udayaditya's eyes as well. Placing a hand on her head, he said, "Why are you crying? What happiness did you have here, Vibha? There is nothing but sorrow, suffering, and grief all around. You have escaped this prison—you are saved."

When Vibha stood up, Udayaditya said, "You are going? Come. Do not forget us entirely when you go to your husband's house. Think of us sometimes; let me hear from you now and then."

Vibha went straight to Rammohan and said, "I cannot go now."

Astonished, Rammohan asked, "What are you saying, Mother?"

"No, I cannot go," Vibha insisted. "I cannot leave my brother alone right now. He is suffering so much because of me; how can I leave him here and go to enjoy my own happiness? As long as there is even a shred of pain in his heart, I will stay by his side. Who will care for him here the way I do?" Weeping, Vibha walked away.

Uproar broke out in the inner chambers. The Queen came and scolded Vibha, threatened her, and tried to reason with her. Vibha only repeated, "No, Mother, I cannot."

Tears of anger and frustration springing to her eyes, the Queen cried, "I have never seen such a stubborn girl!" She went to the Maharaja and told him everything.

The Maharaja replied calmly, "That is perfectly fine. If Vibha doesn't wish to go, why should she?"

Dumbfounded, the Queen threw up her hands in defeat. "Do whatever you all want! I wash my hands of this entire affair."

Udayaditya was stunned when he heard the news. He went to Vibha and tried desperately to make her understand. Vibha simply cried in silence; she couldn't see the logic in his words.

Dejected, Rammohan arrived with a long face. "Mother, I am leaving then. What shall I tell the Maharaja?"

Vibha couldn't speak; she remained silent for a long time.

"Then I bid you farewell, Mother," Rammohan said, bowing, and turned to leave.

Vibha broke down completely. "Mohan!" she cried out in anguish.

Rammohan turned back. "Yes, Mother?"

"Tell the Maharaja to forgive me. He called for me himself, yet I could not go. It is simply my terrible misfortune."

"As you command," Rammohan replied coldly. He bowed again and left.

Vibha realized that Rammohan hadn't understood her feelings at all; he was thoroughly confused. On one hand, Vibha's soul desperately wanted to go, yet she

couldn't. On top of that, Rammohan, whom she loved dearly, had left in anger today. Only Vibha knew the agony tearing through her heart.

Vibha stayed. Wiping her tears and bearing a heart heavy as stone, she remained by her brother's side. Like a pale, withered shadow, she silently performed all the chores around the house. If Udayaditya spoke to her with love and affection, she would lower her eyes and offer a faint smile. In the evenings, she would sit at his feet and try to make conversation. When the Queen scolded her, she stood quietly and listened, and eventually floated away like a dark, melancholic cloud. When someone lifted her chin and asked, "Vibha, why are you getting so thin?" Vibha said nothing; she merely smiled.

It was around this time that Bhagabat presented the forged petition to Pratapaditya. Pratapaditya erupted in fury, and after much deliberation, ordered Udayaditya to be thrown into the dungeons.

The minister protested, "Maharaja, it is absolutely unbelievable that the Crown Prince would do such a thing. Anyone who hears of this bites their tongue and says it's unspeakable. It is simply not believable that the Crown Prince would commit such an act."

"I find it hard to believe myself," Pratapaditya admitted. "But what is the harm in keeping him in the dungeons? As long as he isn't subjected to any physical hardship, it's fine. Guards will be posted simply to ensure he cannot plot anything in secret."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

When Rammohan returned alone to Chandradwip and stood before the King with folded hands, looking like a condemned criminal, Ramchandra Ray's blood boiled. He had planned to exact revenge on his father-in-law by delivering a few razor-sharp insults regarding Pratapaditya and his lineage the moment Vibha arrived. He had mentally rehearsed exactly what he would say, how he would say it, and when. Ramchandra Ray was not a cruel brute; it wasn't his intention to physically or emotionally torture Vibha. He simply eagerly anticipated the satisfaction of frequently making Vibha feel ashamed of her father. In fact, intoxicated by this anticipated pleasure, it hadn't even crossed his mind that there might be any obstacle to Vibha's arrival. Seeing Rammohan return empty-handed, Ramchandra Ray was thoroughly bewildered. "What happened, Rammohan?" he demanded.

"It was all in vain," Rammohan replied.

The king startled. "You couldn't bring her?"

"No, Maharaja! I must have set out at an inauspicious hour."

Furious, the king exploded, "Who told you to go, you wretch? I forbade you time and again, but you puffed out your chest and marched off, and now—"

Clutching his forehead, Rammohan said dejectedly, "Maharaja, it is the fault of my destiny."

Ramchandra Ray's anger intensified. "An insult to Ramchandra Ray! You went begging using my name, and Pratapaditya refused! Such an insult has never been suffered by our lineage!"

Lifting his bowed head, Rammohan said with a touch of pride, "Do not say that. If Pratapaditya had refused, I would have dragged her away by force. I told you as much before I left. Maharaja, when I go to execute your orders, do you think I fear Pratapaditya? He may be a king, but he is not *my* king."

"Then why didn't she come?" the king asked.

Rammohan remained silent for a long time; tears welled up in his eyes.

"Speak quickly, Rammohan!" the king demanded impatiently.

With folded hands, Rammohan began, "Maharaja—"

"What? Speak!"

"Maharaja, the Queen Mother did not wish to come." Tears streamed down Rammohan's face as he spoke. These were the tears of a child's wounded pride. They seemed to say: *"I had such faith in my Mother that I went to fetch her with my chest puffed out in joy, and she refused to come. My Mother did not uphold my honor."* For whatever reason, the old man couldn't hold back his tears.

Hearing this, the king shot to his feet, his eyes glaring. "Is that so!" He was so stunned he couldn't speak for a long time.

"Did not wish to come! Indeed! Get out, you wretch! Get out of my sight right now!"

Without a word, Rammohan left. He knew he was entirely to blame, so receiving a fitting punishment was only fair.

The king couldn't figure out how to exact his revenge. He couldn't touch Pratapaditya, and he couldn't get his hands on Vibha either. He paced around restlessly.

Within a couple of days, the news spread in various distorted forms in all directions. It reached a point where failing to take revenge would mean losing face completely. Even the subjects became eager for retaliation. They muttered, "An insult to our Maharaja!" It felt as though the insult was a personal affront to them all. Ramchandra Ray already possessed a strong vindictive streak, and on top of that, he began to worry: *'What will the subjects think if I don't take revenge? What will the servants think? What will Ramai the jester think?'* The mere imagination of Ramai mocking him behind his back made him incredibly anxious.

One day in court, the minister proposed, "Maharaja, you should marry again."

"Let Pratapaditya's daughter rot with her brother!" Ramai the jester added.

Looking at Ramai, the king smiled and said, "You are absolutely right, Ramai." Seeing the king smile, all the courtiers joined in the laughter. Only Fernandez was

disgusted; he did not smile. Men like Ramchandra Ray are constantly obsessed with maintaining their prestige, but they lack any understanding of what true prestige is or how to uphold it.

"The honorable minister speaks the truth," the Dewanji agreed. "That will teach Pratapaditya and his daughter a severe lesson."

"And when this auspicious event takes place, do not forget to send an invitation to your current father-in-law, lest he feel hurt!" Ramai quipped, winking at the crowd. The entire court erupted in laughter. Even those sitting too far away to hear the joke couldn't resist laughing along.

"To welcome the new bride," Ramai continued, "send for your mother-in-law in Jashore! And as for the custom of sending sweets—when you send a platter of sweets to Pratapaditya's daughter, make sure to include two unripe plantains [a crude gesture of insult]!"

The king laughed uncontrollably. The courtiers covered their mouths with their shawls, their faces contorted with laughter. Fernandez quietly slipped out of the court.

The Dewanji decided to try his hand at a joke. "Sending sweets... if the commoners are destined to get sweets too, then all the sweets will be sent to Jashore, and there won't be any left for the people of Chandradwip to eat!"

No one found this funny. The king puffed on his hookah in silence, the courtiers remained serious, Ramai stared blankly at the Dewan, and one official even asked earnestly, "What do you mean, Dewanji? Will there be a shortage of sweets at the King's wedding?" The Dewanji nervously scratched his head.

The decision for the king to remarry was finalized.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The place where Udayaditya was confined was not a true dungeon; it was a small outbuilding attached to the palace. Directly to the right of the building was a public road, and to the east stood a wide, high wall where guards patrolled back and forth. The room had one tiny window, through which a patch of sky, a bamboo grove, and a Shiva temple could be seen.

When Udayaditya first entered the prison, evening had already passed. He sat on the floor, resting his face against the window bars. It was the monsoon season. Thick clouds blanketed the sky. Puddles covered the road. In the silent night, the occasional footsteps of a lone traveler splashed through the mud. From the east came the ceaseless, rhythmic pacing of the guards, sounding like the very heartbeat of the prison. The watches of the night ticked by; the distant calls of the sentries echoed through the dark. Not a single star was visible in the sky. The bamboo grove Udayaditya stared at was completely swarming with fireflies. Udayaditya did not sleep that night; he sat by the window, listening to the relentless footsteps of the guards.

That same evening, Vibha had gone out into the palace gardens. The palace was likely full of people. Maids and servants everywhere; aunts and older relatives constantly asking, "What happened? What's the story?" Every teardrop had to be accounted for, every sigh subjected to detailed commentary and critique. Vibha simply couldn't bear it anymore. She had fled to the garden.

The sun had risen behind the clouds today, and set behind the clouds as well. No one noticed when the day ended and the evening began. Towards the afternoon, a sliver of golden light had peeked through in the west, but it vanished before the day was out. Darkness layered upon darkness. Horizon to horizon was swallowed in gloom. The darkness settled so thickly over the tops of the dense row of casuarina trees that the gaps between them disappeared; it looked as if a colossal, sprawling, silent darkness was standing on thousands of tall legs. Night deepened, and the lamps in the royal palace were extinguished one by one.

Vibha sat beneath the casuarina trees. She was naturally timid, but today she felt no fear. Only, as the darkness deepened, she felt as if someone were violently snatching the world away from her; as if someone had shoved her off the shores of happiness, peace, and the very world of the living, plunging her into a bottomless,

pitch-black ocean. She was sinking deeper and deeper, the darkness above her growing heavier; there was no ground beneath her feet, nothing around her. The shores of refuge, the world itself, were receding further and further away. It felt as though a massive, insurmountable wall was slowly rising up to the sky right in front of her. So much was left behind on the other side! Her heart cried out in agony. She could see everything on that other side—the sunlight, the games, the festivals—but it was as if someone were holding her back with a cruel, iron grip. Even if her heartstrings snapped, they wouldn't let her cross over.

Vibha seemed to have gained a divine vision today; it was as if the Creator had written Vibha's future destiny across this all-encompassing, terrifying darkness, and sitting alone in the infinite universe, Vibha was reading it. That is why there were no tears in her eyes, her body was motionless, her gaze unblinking.

Past midnight, a wind picked up, howling wildly through the trees in the dark. The wind sounded like a child crying pitifully in the far distance. To Vibha, it felt as if, on a shore infinitely far away, her own beloved, cherished children were reaching out their little arms and crying for her. They were desperately calling for her, they wanted to be in her lap, but they couldn't see the path in the darkness; it was as if their cries had pierced through millions of miles of thick, silent darkness to reach her ears. Vibha's agonizing heart cried out, "Who is it? Who are you? Who is crying? Where are you?"

In her mind, Vibha set off alone down that path of darkness, millions of miles long. It felt as if she wandered ceaselessly for a thousand years, but the path never ended, and she saw no one. Standing alone in that great void—devoid of wind, sound, day, night, people, stars, or horizons—she only heard occasional weeping from all sides, while the distant wind continued its mournful howl.

She spent the entire night sleepless. The next day, Vibha tried desperately to visit Udayaditya in the prison, but her entry was forbidden. She spent the whole day crying and pleading. She even went to Pratapaditya himself and clung to his feet. After much effort, she finally secured permission.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, Vibha left her bed and entered the prison. She saw that Udayaditya hadn't slept on the bed. He had fallen asleep sitting on the floor, his head resting against the window bars. Seeing this, Vibha felt as if her

heart would burst with grief. With great difficulty, she held back her tears. She walked over slowly and sat silently beside him.

Gradually, the morning light cleared. Birds began to sing in the nearby woods. Travelers on the adjacent road struck up a tune; a couple of guards, exhausted from the night watch, began humming softly upon seeing the light. The sound of conch shells and bells rang out from the nearby temple.

Udayaditya suddenly startled awake. Seeing Vibha, he exclaimed, "Vibha! So early?" He looked around the room and asked, "What is this? Where am I?" In a flash, he remembered where he was. Looking at Vibha, he sighed, "Ah! Vibha, you've come? I didn't see you all day yesterday; I thought I might never see any of you again."

Wiping her eyes, Vibha moved closer and said, "Brother, why are you sitting on the floor? The bed is made right there. It looks like you haven't even sat on it once. Have you spent these two days sitting on the floor?" Vibha began to cry.

Udayaditya replied softly, "If I sit on the bed, I cannot see the sky, Vibha. When I look up at the sky through this window and see the birds flying, I feel that one day my cage will break too, and I will swim freely in that infinite sky like those birds. When I step away from this window, I see only darkness all around; I forget that I will ever be free, that I will ever be delivered. I forget that the shackles of life will break one day, that I will be released from this prison. Vibha, within this prison, this two-foot patch of floor is the only place where I can remember that I am inherently free; no king or emperor can truly imprison me. But over there, in that room, on that soft bed—that is where my true prison lies."

Seeing Vibha so suddenly today brought Udayaditya immense joy. When he laid eyes on her, it felt as if all the doors of his prison had swung open. He sat Vibha down beside him and spoke to her with such unbridled joy that he had probably never spoken so much before entering the prison. Vibha understood his joy perfectly. Who knows how a message travels from one soul to another, or by what law a wave in one heart creates a wave in another? Vibha's heart filled with elation. Her long-held desire was fulfilled today. Vibha was just an ordinary girl, but today she suddenly realized the sheer joy she could bring to Udayaditya. She found strength within herself. For so long, she had seen only darkness around her, finding no shore, utterly crushed by the heavy burden of despair. She had no faith in

herself; she constantly served Udayaditya, but never believed she could truly make him happy. Today, she suddenly saw a path forward; she forgot all her exhaustion. Tears, fresh as morning dew, appeared in her eyes, and a pure smile, bright as the morning sun, bloomed on her lips.

Vibha practically became a prisoner herself. The moment the morning light entered through the window, the prison doors would open, and Vibha's radiant figure would appear. She wouldn't let the paid servants do a thing; she did all the chores with her own hands. She brought him his meals, she made his bed. She brought a pet parrot and hung its cage in the room, and every morning, she picked fresh flowers from the palace gardens for him. There was a copy of the Mahabharata in the room; Udayaditya would sit Vibha down and read it aloud to her.

But a deep sorrow gnawed at Udayaditya's mind. He was already sinking, so why was he clinging to this delicate, unfulfilled, yearning Vibha as his anchor, dragging her down with him? Every day he resolved to tell her, "Go away, Vibha." But when Vibha entered the prison, bringing with her the morning breeze and the morning light, holding the very hand of Dawn; when she sat beside him with that sweet, affectionate face; when she looked at him with such tender care and asked him a hundred questions in her sweet voice—he simply couldn't bring himself to say, "Vibha, go away. Don't come back. I don't want to see you anymore." Every day he thought, *'I will tell her tomorrow.'* But that tomorrow never seemed to arrive.

Finally, one day, he made a firm resolve. When Vibha arrived, he said, "Vibha, you must not stay here anymore. Unless you leave, I will find no peace. Every evening, in the darkness of this prison, it feels as if someone comes and whispers to me that danger is approaching Vibha. Vibha, run far away from me. I am a cursed star; wherever I go, disaster follows. Go to your father-in-law's house. As long as I get news of you from time to time, I will be happy."

Vibha remained silent.

Udayaditya lowered his head and stared at Vibha's face for a long time. Tears streamed down his face. Udayaditya understood: *"Unless I am freed from this prison, Vibha will never leave my side. How can I be free?"*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Ramchandra Ray concluded that Vibha hadn't come to Chandradwip simply due to Pratapaditya's strict orders and Udayaditya's counsel. The thought that Vibha might not have come of her own free will dealt a severe blow to his pride. He reasoned, *'Pratapaditya wants to humiliate me; therefore, he will never send Vibha to me. But why don't I turn this insult right back at him? Why don't I write him a letter declaring that I have abandoned his daughter and that she need never be sent to Chandradwip?'* Pondering over this and consulting with his inner circle, a letter to that effect was drafted and addressed to Pratapaditya. Writing such a letter to Pratapaditya required no ordinary courage. Deep down, Ramchandra Ray was quite terrified. However, just as one cannot always stop midway while hurtling down a steep mountain, no matter how great the fear, Ramchandra Ray felt a similar compulsion. Having suddenly embarked on a reckless venture, he felt unable to stop until he reached the very end.

Summoning Rammohan, he commanded, "Take this letter to Jashore."

Folding his hands, Rammohan replied, "No, Maharaja, I cannot. I have decided never to go to Jashore again. If you order me to go and bring the Queen Mother back once more, I might go; but I cannot take this letter."

Without saying another word to Rammohan, the king handed the letter to the elderly Nayanchand. He departed for Jashore with the letter.

Nayanchand carried the letter, but his heart was filled with dread. If this letter fell into Pratapaditya's hands, who knew what he might do? After much fearful deliberation, he resolved to deliver the letter into the Queen's hands instead.

The Queen's state of mind was deeply troubled. On one side, she worried for Vibha; on the other, her heart ached for Udayaditya. The constant turmoil in the household had left her completely exhausted. She was often found weeping. She had lost all interest in running the household. It was in this state that she received the letter—and she had absolutely no idea what to do with it. She couldn't tell Vibha; the fragile girl wouldn't survive the shock. If the Maharaja caught wind of this letter, there was no telling what disaster would ensue. Yet, in such a crisis, the Queen couldn't bear the burden alone without seeking counsel from someone. Seeing a shoreless sea of trouble on all sides, she went to Pratapaditya, weeping.

"Maharaja," she began, "we must do something about Vibha."

"Why do you say that?" Pratapaditya asked.

"No, it's not that anything specific has happened... but eventually, we have to send Vibha to her father-in-law's house."

"I understand that, but why did you suddenly remember this today, after all this time?"

Terrified, the Queen stammered, "There you go again! Did I say anything has happened? But if something *were* to happen—"

Annoyed, Pratapaditya cut her off, "What else could happen?"

"Well... for instance, what if our son-in-law abandons Vibha entirely?" the Queen choked out, and began to sob.

Pratapaditya flared up in sudden, intense fury. Sparks seemed to fly from his eyes.

Seeing the Maharaja's terrifying expression, the Queen quickly wiped her tears and backpedaled, "I don't mean that our son-in-law has actually written saying, 'Look here, I have abandoned your Vibha, do not send her to Chandradwip.' Not at all! But the point is, what if he writes something like that someday?"

"When he does, I will deal with it," Pratapaditya snapped. "I have no time to worry about that now."

Weeping, the Queen pleaded, "Maharaja, I fall at your feet, grant me this one request. Think for a moment about what will happen to Vibha. Because my heart is made of stone, I am still alive today; otherwise, you have inflicted as much torment on me as humanly possible. Uday—my poor boy—a prince, you have locked him up like a common criminal! He never harms anyone, he never gets involved in anything; his only fault is that he doesn't understand the ways of the world. He hasn't learned statecraft, he doesn't know how to rule subjects, he lacks that kind of cunning. If God made him that way, how is it his fault?" The Queen sobbed even harder.

Slightly irritated, Pratapaditya said, "We have been over this many times. Stick to what we were actually discussing."

Striking her forehead, the Queen lamented, "It is my cursed fate! What more can I say? Do you ever listen to anything I say? Look at Vibha's face just once, Maharaja! She never complains to anyone—she simply withers away day by day, fading like a shadow, but she doesn't know how to speak up for herself. Please, find a solution for her."

Pratapaditya grew increasingly annoyed. Without saying another word, the Queen turned and left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Meanwhile, an incident had occurred. When Sitaram saw that Udayaditya had been imprisoned, he could no longer contain himself. First, he marched straight to Rukmini's house. He unleashed every foul word that came to his mouth. He looked ready to strike her.

"You ruinous witch!" he roared. "I'll set your house on fire, I'll turn your home into a graveyard, and I will free the Crown Prince, or my name isn't Sitaram! I'm leaving for Raygarh today. When I return from Raygarh, I'll grind your blackened face into the stone floor, I'll smear you with tar and drive you out of the city! Only then will I take a sip of water!"

For a moment, Rukmini stared at Sitaram's face without blinking. Gradually, her teeth clenched, her lips pressed tightly together, and her hands curled into tight fists. A dark cloud gathered over her thick, black eyebrows; lightning seemed to accumulate in her dark pupils, and her entire body went rigid. Slowly, her thick lips began to tremble, her eyebrows twitched, sparks danced in her dark eyes, her hair seemed to bristle, and her hands and feet began to shake violently. A demonic curse, a full-body tremor of consuming malice seemed poised to fall upon Sitaram's head. At that very moment, Sitaram stormed out of the hut.

Gradually, as Rukmini's fists loosened, her teeth unclenched, her lips parted, and her furrowed brow relaxed, she sank to the floor. "So!" she hissed. "The Crown Prince is *yours*, is he! The Crown Prince is in danger, and it pains you so deeply—as if the Crown Prince means nothing to *me*! You burnt-faced fool, don't you know he is *my* Crown Prince? I am the one who can bring him good fortune, and I am the one who can bring him ruin. You want to free *my* Crown Prince from prison? We shall see how you manage that."

Sitaram left for Raygarh that very day.

It was late afternoon. Basanta Ray was sitting on the veranda of his palace in Raygarh. A vast expanse of fields stretched out before him. At the edge of the fields, beyond a canal, the sun was setting behind a mango orchard. Basanta Ray no longer held his constant companion, his sitar. Staring at the setting sun, the old man hummed softly to himself:

I alone am left behind. What I had has slipped away, what remains is but an illusion. Those I called my own No longer answer my call, Where are they? Where have they gone? Crying, who do I call? Tell me, Mother, I ask of thee, Did you leave nothing for me? With only myself for company, what reason have I to live?

Who knows what thoughts prompted the old man to sing this song. Perhaps he was thinking, *'I sing, but those I used to sing for are no longer here. The songs come on their own, but there is no joy in singing them anymore. I haven't forgotten how to be joyful, but whenever joy arises, where are those I long to embrace? The day clouds gathered over that palm tree in Raygarh at dawn, my heart would dance with joy, and I would set off for Jashore to see them—will I never see them again? My heart still leaps with that same joy sometimes, but alas...'*

Perhaps pondering all this while watching the setting sun this afternoon, the song rose to the elderly Basanta Ray's lips unbidden—*I alone am left behind.*

Just then, Khan Sahib arrived and offered a deep salute. Seeing him, Basanta Ray perked up and said, "Khan Sahib, come in, come in!" Stepping closer, he asked anxiously, "Sahib, why does your face look so gloomy? Are you in good spirits?"

"Do not ask about my spirits, Maharaja," Khan Sahib replied. "Seeing you so melancholic drains all the joy from our hearts. There is a verse: *The night says, 'I am nothing; I only hold the moon upon my head. It is with the moon I smile, and with the moon I fade!'* Maharaja, who are we? If you do not smile, what power do we have to smile? We have no joy left, Huzoor."

"What are you saying, Sahib?" Basanta Ray said earnestly. "I am not sad at all. I look at myself and smile, I dwell in my own joy. What sorrow do I have, Khan Sahib?"

"Maharaja, we don't hear your songs or your music like we used to."

Basanta Ray turned slightly serious. "Do you want to hear me sing, Sahib?"

I alone am left behind. What I had has slipped away, What remains is but an illusion."

"But where is your sitar?" Khan Sahib asked. "Where is the sitar you used to play?"

With a faint smile, Basanta Ray replied, "It's not that the sitar is gone. The sitar is here, but its strings are broken; it can no longer hold a tune." He gazed towards the mango orchard and absentmindedly rubbed his head.

After a while, Basanta Ray suddenly exclaimed, "Khan Sahib, sing a song! Sing a song! Sing, *Tazbe taz nawbe naw* (Fresh and new, ever renewed)."

Khan Sahib began to sing:

Tazbe taz nawbe naw.

Before long, Basanta Ray was swept up in the music; he could sit still no longer. He stood up and began singing along: *Tazbe taz nawbe naw*. He clapped out the rhythm vigorously, singing the line over and over. As they sang, the sun set, darkness fell, and the cowherds struck up their own songs as they headed home.

At that moment, Sitaram arrived, bowed, and declared, "Victory to the Maharaja."

Basanta Ray was utterly startled. He stopped singing instantly, hurried over to Sitaram, and touching his arm, asked, "Why, it's Sitaram! Are you well? How is my boy? Where is my little girl? Is all well?"

Khan Sahib discreetly withdrew.

"I shall report everything one by one, Maharaja," Sitaram said, and proceeded to narrate the news of the Crown Prince's imprisonment. Sitaram did not tell the whole truth. He didn't clearly state the actual reason behind Udayaditya's imprisonment.

To Basanta Ray, it felt as though the sky had fallen on his head. He gripped Sitaram's arm tightly. His eyebrows shot up, his eyes widened, his lips parted—staring unblinkingly into Sitaram's face, he whispered, "What?"

"Yes, Maharaja," Sitaram confirmed.

After a long silence, Basanta Ray said, "Sitaram!"

"Maharaja."

"So, where is my boy now?"

"He is in the prison, Sire."

Basanta Ray began to rub his head. The concept of Udayaditya in prison simply refused to register in his mind; he couldn't visualize it no matter how hard he tried. After another pause, holding Sitaram's hand, he said, "Sitaram!"

"Yes, Maharaja."

"So, what is my boy doing now?"

"What else would he be doing? He is in the prison."

"Has everyone locked him up?"

"Yes, Maharaja."

"Does no one ever let him out?"

"No, Sire."

"He is sitting alone in the prison?"

Basanta Ray wasn't asking these questions to anyone in particular; he was muttering to himself. Sitaram didn't realize this and replied, "Yes, Maharaja."

Basanta Ray cried out, "My boy, come to me! No one there understood you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Basanta Ray set out for Jashore the very next day. He listened to no one's objections. Upon reaching Jashore, he went straight to the inner chambers of the royal palace.

Seeing her grandfather so suddenly, Vibha was overwhelmed. For a moment, she couldn't figure out what to do. Her eyes filled with wonder, her lips parted in joy, but no words came. Her body stood motionless. She stood there for a few seconds, then fell at his feet, touched them, and placed the dust on her head.

When Vibha stood up, Basanta Ray stared intently at her face and simply asked, "Vibha?" He said nothing else, only, "Vibha?" It was as if a faint hope flickered within him that what Sitaram had said might not be true. He was terrified to ask the full question clearly, fearing Vibha's answer. He didn't *want* Vibha to answer his question immediately. That is why, with immense trepidation, he merely asked her sweet face, "Vibha?" That is why he stared at her face so intently.

Vibha understood, and she could not answer. The initial surge of joy had vanished. She remembered the days when Grandfather used to visit before. What days of celebration those had been! His arrival would ignite a festival of joy. Surama would laugh and tease, Vibha would laugh but couldn't tease back, and her brother would listen to Grandfather's songs with a serene, joyful expression. Grandfather had come today, but no one else came to him; only Vibha, alone in this dark household—like the sole surviving relic of a happy family—stood alone before her Grandfather. The room that used to echo with joyous laughter whenever Grandfather arrived—Surama's room—why was it like this today? Today it was silent, dark, and empty. It felt as if the room itself would burst into tears at the very sight of Grandfather.

Driven by some desperate hope, Basanta Ray walked over and stood before that room. Standing at the door, he leaned his head in and looked around, then instantly turned away and asked in a heartbreaking voice, "My little girl, is there no one in the room?"

Weeping, Vibha replied, "No, Grandfather, there is no one."

The silent room seemed to echo with a hollow wail: *"Those who were here before are all gone."*

Basanta Ray stood in silence for a long time. Finally, holding Vibha's hand, he began to sing softly:

I alone am left behind.

Basanta Ray went to Pratapaditya and pleaded earnestly, "Pratap, my son, why do you torment Uday so? What has he done to you? If you do not love him, if he offends you at every step, then give him to this old man. I will take him away—I will keep him. You won't have to look at him anymore—he will stay with me!"

Pratapaditya sat quietly and listened to Basanta Ray with practiced patience for a long time. Finally, he said, "Uncle, whatever I have done, I have done after much deliberation. You obviously know far less about this matter than I do, yet you have come to offer advice. I cannot entertain these requests of yours."

Basanta Ray stood up, walked over to Pratapaditya, and taking his hand, pleaded, "Pratap, my son, have you forgotten? Have you forgotten how I carried you on my lap and back when you were a child, how I raised you? From the day my late brother entrusted you to my care, have I ever caused you an ounce of pain, even for a moment? When you were helpless in my hands, did you ever feel fatherless, even for a single day? Tell me, Pratap, what crime did I commit against you that you can inflict such agony on me in my old age? I am not saying you owe me a debt because I raised you—by raising you, I was only trying to repay the debt of love I owed my brother. Therefore, Pratap, I ask nothing of you as my rightful due, I never have. I am merely begging for alms—will you not even grant me that?"

Tears streamed down Basanta Ray's face. Pratapaditya sat as still and unyielding as a stone statue.

"Will you not listen to me, then?" Basanta Ray asked again. "Will you not grant my plea? Will you not answer me, Pratap?" He let out a long sigh. "Very well. I have one other small request. I wish to see Uday, just once. Give the order so that no one stops me from entering his prison."

Pratapaditya refused even that. Seeing Basanta Ray display such profound affection for Udayaditya—in direct opposition to him—deeply irritated Pratapaditya. The

more he felt that people were painting him as the villain, the more stubborn and unyielding he became.

With a deeply melancholic face, Basanta Ray returned to the inner chambers. Seeing his face, Vibha felt a sharp pang of sorrow. Taking his hand, she said, "Grandfather, come to my room."

Silently, Basanta Ray followed Vibha into her room. When he sat down, Vibha gently ruffled his white hair with her soft fingers and said, "Come, Grandfather, let me pluck your white hairs."

"My dear girl, do I even have those white hairs left?" Basanta Ray sighed. "When I wasn't so old, I had them, and I'd ask you girls to pluck them. Today, I have grown truly old; I no longer have white hairs."

Noticing Vibha's face fall and her eyes fill with tears, Basanta Ray quickly added, "Come, Vibha, come; pluck a few out for me. I just can't seem to supply enough white hairs for you girls anymore! I'm getting on in years, going bald by the day. You'd better start looking for another head to practice on, I surrender!" With that, Basanta Ray forced a laugh.

A maid approached and informed Basanta Ray, "The Queen Mother wishes to pay her respects to you."

Basanta Ray went to the Queen's room, while Vibha headed to the prison.

The Queen bowed before Basanta Ray. He blessed her, "May you live long, Mother."

"Uncle, please do not give me that blessing," the Queen replied bitterly. "I would be better off dead right now."

Alarmed, Basanta Ray said, "Ram, Ram. You must not speak such words."

"What else can I say, Uncle?" the Queen lamented. "It feels as though the evil eye of Saturn has fallen upon my household."

Basanta Ray grew even more anxious.

"Looking at Vibha's face, I cannot even swallow my food or water," the Queen continued. "If you ask her, she says nothing, but she is wasting away day by day. I simply don't know what to do with her."

Basanta Ray was deeply distressed.

"Look at this, Uncle. A disastrous letter has arrived," the Queen said, handing a letter to Basanta Ray.

Before Basanta Ray could even read the letter, the Queen began to weep. "What happiness do I have? Uday—my poor boy—he knows nothing of the world. He may not be like a true king... but I carried him in my womb, he is my own flesh and blood. I don't know how my child is surviving in there; he doesn't even let me see him." Whatever topic the Queen started these days, it inevitably circled back to Udayaditya. That agony was constantly awake in her heart, day and night.

Reading the letter, Basanta Ray was utterly stunned. He sat in silence, rubbing his head. After a while, he asked the Queen, "You haven't shown this letter to anyone else, have you, Mother?"

"If the Maharaja hears of this letter, will he spare anyone?" the Queen replied. "And would Vibha survive if she knew?"

"You have done well," Basanta Ray commended. "Do not show this letter to anyone else, my daughter. You must send Vibha to her father-in-law's house immediately. Do not worry about honor or insult!"

"I was thinking the same thing," the Queen agreed. "I have no use for honor; as long as my Vibha is happy, that is enough. My only fear is that they might mistreat Vibha."

"Mistreat Vibha!" Basanta Ray exclaimed. "Is Vibha someone to be mistreated? Wherever Vibha goes, she will be loved and cherished. Where else will they find such a Goddess Lakshmi, such a golden idol? Ramchandra only wrote this letter because he was angry with you all. If you send her back, his anger will cool." This is what Basanta Ray deduced with his simple heart and simple mind. The Queen understood it the same way.

"Spread the word in the household," Basanta Ray advised, "that Ramchandra has written a letter requesting Vibha be sent to Chandradwip. That way, she surely won't object to going."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

After evening had fallen, Basanta Ray sat alone in the outer courtyard. Sitaram approached and offered his respects.

"What is it, Sitaram? What's the news?" Basanta Ray asked.

"I will tell you later," Sitaram whispered urgently. "You must come with me."

"Why? Where to, Sitaram?"

Sitaram leaned in close and whispered something in his ear.

Basanta Ray's eyes widened in shock. "Is that true?"

"Yes, Maharaja."

Basanta Ray hesitated deeply. "Do we have to go right now?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Can't I go see Vibha just once?"

"No, Sire. There is no time."

"Where are we going?"

"Come with me, I am taking you there."

Basanta Ray stood up. "Why can't I just go and see Vibha once?"

"No, Maharaja. If we delay, everything will be ruined."

"Never mind then—never mind," Basanta Ray quickly conceded. They both set off.

After walking a short distance, he asked again, "Can't we delay just a little?"

"No, Maharaja. It will be dangerous."

Muttering "Durga, Durga," Basanta Ray exited the palace gates.

Udayaditya had no idea Basanta Ray had arrived. Vibha hadn't told him. Since there was no possibility of them meeting, the news would only have caused him pain. Taking her leave after evening, Vibha had departed from the prison.

Udayaditya was reading a Sanskrit manuscript by the light of a single lamp. The wind blew through the window, making the faint flame flicker; the letters were hard to read. Insects flew in and fell upon the lamp. Every now and then, the lamp threatened to go out. A strong gust of wind blew in—and the lamp died.

Udayaditya closed the manuscript and went to sit on his bed. Countless thoughts crowded his mind one by one. Thoughts of Vibha surfaced. Today, Vibha had arrived a little late and left a little early. He had noticed Vibha looking particularly melancholic today; he was analyzing this in his mind. It felt as if he had no one else in the world. He saw no one but Vibha all day. Vibha was his only subject of thought. Every smile of Vibha's, every word she spoke, was hoarded in his mind. Just as a thirsty man savors every single drop of water, he savored even the slightest sign of Vibha's affection with all his heart and soul. That is why, lying alone in this small, dark, isolated room today, he was thinking of the pale face of his beloved Vibha, the idol of his affection.

Sitting in that darkness, a thought suddenly struck him: *'Is Vibha growing increasingly weary? Does she no longer find joy in serving a gloomy, dark figure within this joyless prison? Will she increasingly view me as an obstacle to her happiness, a thorn in the path of her worldly life? Today she came late; tomorrow she might come even later. Then, perhaps one day, I'll be sitting here all day waiting for Vibha—afternoon will pass, evening will fall, night will descend, and Vibha will not come. And from then on... perhaps Vibha will never come again.'* The more this thought took hold of Udayaditya's mind, the more his heart wept in despair—he saw the entirety of his imaginary world turning terrifyingly empty. The mere shadow of that distant, imagined day—when Vibha would look at him with loveless eyes, seeing him as the thorn in her happiness—left his heart completely distraught.

He thought, *'How terribly selfish I am. Because I love Vibha, I am acting as her worst enemy; perhaps no enemy could do worse.'* He resolved over and over again that he would no longer depend on Vibha. But whenever he imagined losing Vibha, that resolve vanished instantly, and he felt as if he were drowning in a shoreless sea—

desperately clinging to the imaginary image of Vibha like a drowning man grasping at straws.

Suddenly, a deafening uproar erupted outside: "Fire! Fire!" Udayaditya's heart leaped. Hundreds of voices joined in a chaotic roar, and the rapid sound of hundreds of footsteps echoed in the air. Udayaditya realized a fire had broken out somewhere near the palace. The commotion continued for a long time—his mind grew incredibly restless.

Suddenly, the door to his prison swung open violently. Someone entered his dark room. Startled, he asked, "Who is it?"

"It is me, Sitaram," the voice replied. "Come outside."

"Why?" Udayaditya asked.

"Crown Prince, the prison is on fire! Come out quickly," Sitaram urged. He grabbed Udayaditya—practically carrying him—and dragged him out of the prison.

For the first time in ages, Udayaditya stepped into an open space. Suddenly seeing the vast expanse of the sky above him, it felt as if the wind opened its broad chest to embrace him. The barriers fell away from his eyes. Standing on the soft grass in the middle of a wide field on that dark night, beneath the gaze of countless stars, an immense, indescribable joy suddenly bloomed in his heart.

He stood in silent awe of that joy for a moment, then asked Sitaram, "What should I do? Where should I go?" Having been confined in a narrow space for so long, unable to walk freely, standing in this vast field today, he asked Sitaram helplessly, "What should I do? Where should I go?"

"Come, come with me," Sitaram instructed.

Meanwhile, the fire was raging. In the afternoon, a group of subjects had come to submit a petition to the chief officials. They were sitting together in the palace courtyard; they were the first to raise the alarm about the fire. There was a long row of huts near the prison serving as barracks for the guards—that was where they kept their cots, utensils, clothes, and all their belongings. Hearing news of the fire, every guard who could run bolted towards their barracks; those who absolutely couldn't just flailed their arms and legs in panic. There were a couple of

guards stationed at Udayaditya's door, but there was no real need for strict surveillance there. They were only there as a matter of protocol. Udayaditya sat in his room so peacefully that it never seemed he would try to escape, or even had the desire to do so. Because of this, the guards at his door had been the first to run off.

The night deepened, but the fire wouldn't die down. Some people were moving belongings out of harm's way, others were pouring water. Some did nothing at all except run around shouting; ironically, once the fire was put out, they were the ones who received the most praise.

While everyone was busy like this, a woman suddenly rushed into their midst, trying to say something. But who would listen to her? Some cursed at her, some shoved her aside, no one paid her any heed. The one person who did hear her retorted, "The Crown Prince escaped? What's that to me, woman? Or to you? That's Dayal Singh's problem. I can't leave my house to burn and go anywhere right now!" He then disappeared into the crowd.

Rebuffed time and again, the woman grew utterly ferocious. She grabbed the first person she saw and shook him violently. "You burnt-faced fool! Have you lost your eyes? Don't you know you work for the King? I'll tell the King tomorrow and have you buried alive with thorns, then I'll let you go! The Crown Prince has escaped!"

"Good riddance! What's it to you?" the man replied, and gave her a sound beating. This man was one of those who had actually set the fire.

Receiving the beating, the woman's appearance turned absolutely terrifying. Her eyes burned like an enraged tigress, her hair stood on end; she ground her teeth, and with the glow of the flames dancing on her face, she looked like a demonic ghoul. A piece of burning wood lay nearby. She picked it up; it burned her hand, but she didn't drop it. She chased after the man with the burning brand. Unable to catch him, she hurled the flaming wood at him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sitaram led the Crown Prince to the banks of the canal. A large boat was moored there. The two of them stood before it. Seeing them, a man hurriedly emerged from the boat and said, "My boy, you've come!"

Udayaditya was utterly stunned—it was that ever-familiar voice, the voice entwined with memories of his childhood, with the joys and sorrows of his youth, the voice connected to whatever little happiness and joy he had in this world. It was the same voice he sometimes heard like a sudden flute melody in his dreams, waking him with a start while sitting sleepless in his prison on dark nights.

Before his shock could even fade, Basanta Ray came and wrapped him in a tight embrace. Both their eyes brimmed with tears. They collapsed onto the grass right there.

After a long time, Udayaditya whispered, "Grandfather."

"Yes, my boy," Basanta Ray replied.

No other words were spoken. After another long pause, Udayaditya looked around, looked at the sky, looked into Basanta Ray's face, and said in a voice choked with emotion, "Grandfather, today I have gained my freedom, I have found you; what other happiness is left for me? How long will this moment last?"

A moment later, Sitaram folded his hands and urged, "Crown Prince, please board the boat."

Snapping out of his reverie, the Crown Prince asked, "Why? Why the boat?"

"Otherwise the guards will be here any minute," Sitaram warned.

Astonished, Udayaditya turned to Basanta Ray and asked, "Grandfather, are we running away?"

Holding Udayaditya's hand, Basanta Ray replied, "Yes, brother, I am stealing you away. This is a land of stone hearts—they do not love you here. You are a fawn living in the kingdom of hunters; I will hide you within my heart, where you will be

safe." With that, he pulled Udayaditya close to his chest, as if wanting to snatch him away from the harsh world and lock him safely within the realm of his affection.

After thinking for a long time, Udayaditya said, "No, Grandfather. I cannot run away."

"Why, my boy?" Basanta Ray pleaded. "Have you forgotten this old man?"

"I will go... I will fall at Father's feet, weep, and beg for his mercy. Perhaps he will consent to let me go to Raygarh."

Basanta Ray grew frantic. "My boy, listen to me—do not go there. It is a futile effort."

Udayaditya sighed. "Then I will go. I will return to the prison."

Gripping his arm tightly, Basanta Ray challenged, "Let's see how you go. I will not let you."

"Grandfather," Udayaditya reasoned, "why are you inviting disaster for the sake of this unfortunate wretch? Is there even an ounce of peace possible wherever I am?"

"Brother, because of you, even Vibha has practically become a prisoner," Basanta Ray pointed out. "Will she sacrifice all the joy of her life in her youth?" Tears streamed from Basanta Ray's eyes.

Udayaditya quickly relented. "Then let us go, Grandfather, let us go." Turning to Sitaram, he asked, "Sitaram, I wish to send three letters to the palace."

"There is paper and ink on the boat; I will bring them," Sitaram replied. "Write quickly, there isn't much time."

Udayaditya begged his father for forgiveness. To his mother, he wrote, "Mother, you never found happiness in bearing me in your womb. Be at peace now, Mother—I am going to Grandfather; I will be happy there, I will be loved, and you will have no cause for worry." To Vibha, he wrote, "To my long-lived one—what else can I write to you? May you be happy lifetime after lifetime. Go to your husband's house, build a happy family, and forget all these sorrows and pains."

As he wrote, Udayaditya's eyes filled with tears. Sitaram handed the three letters to an oarsman and sent him off to the palace.

Just as they were all boarding the boat, they saw someone sprinting towards them. Startled, Sitaram cried out, "Oh no—it's that witch coming!"

In the blink of an eye, Rukmini reached them. Her hair was wild and unkempt, her sari slipping from her shoulders, her eyes spitting fire like burning coals. Driven mad by the agony of repeatedly thwarted desires and unquenched thirst for revenge, she seemed ready to tear anyone she encountered to shreds just to appease her rage. Having been repeatedly shoved away by the guards extinguishing the fire, she had burst into the palace like a madwoman, making frantic, futile attempts to force her way into Pratapaditya's room. The guards, assuming she was insane, beat her and chased her away. Writhing in agony, she had bolted from the palace.

Like a tigress, she tried to leap upon Udayaditya. Sitaram threw himself in the middle. With a piercing shriek, she lunged at Sitaram, wrapping her arms tightly around him with all her might. Suddenly, Sitaram screamed in pain. The oarsmen and boatmen rushed over and forcibly pried Rukmini off him.

Like a suicidal scorpion stinging its own body, she frantically clawed at her own chest, tore at her hair, and screamed, "Nothing happened! Nothing happened! Now I die, and the sin of killing a woman will be upon your heads!"

On that dark night, her curse echoed in every direction. In a flash, with the speed of lightning, Rukmini threw herself into the water. The canal waters were swollen high from the monsoons—she sank, and no trace of her remained.

Blood was seeping from Sitaram's shoulder. He soaked his shawl in the water and tied it around the wound. Moving closer, he saw beads of sweat on Udayaditya's forehead; his hands and feet had turned ice cold, and he had nearly fainted. Basanta Ray also seemed completely bewildered and stunned. The boatmen supported both of them, hauled them onto the boat, and immediately cast off.

Terrified, Sitaram muttered, "What an evil omen at the start of a journey."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Once Udayaditya's boat crossed the canal and reached the river, Sitaram disembarked and returned to the city. Before leaving, he asked for and took the Crown Prince's sword.

Sitaram had indeed dispatched the three letters Udayaditya had written with a messenger, but he had strictly forbidden the man from handing them over to anyone. Upon returning to the palace from the boat, Sitaram retrieved all three letters. He kept only the letters addressed to the Queen and Vibha, and destroyed the third.

By then, the fire had spread further. Many people had left their beds in the middle of the night and gathered to watch the spectacle. This hindered the firefighting efforts far more than it helped.

It goes without saying that Sitaram had a hand in this conflagration. He had executed this feat with the help of a few loyal subjects and palace servants devoted to the Crown Prince. For five or six huts to suddenly catch fire at the same time in the evening for no reason is never an act of fate; and there was a reason why the fire wasn't dying down despite so much effort. Sitaram's men were scattered among those pretending to extinguish the fire. They poured water where there were no flames, went to fetch water and never returned, deliberately smashed the water pots, and created chaos by bumping into others. The fire simply would not go out.

While this commotion was ongoing, Sitaram's accomplices set fire to Udayaditya's empty prison cell. One by one, they ignited the windows, doors, ceiling beams, doorframes, and wooden partitions. It was beyond anyone's wildest dreams that a fire could start in that prison cell, so no one had paid any attention to that area. When Sitaram returned, he saw the fire had caught hold quite nicely. He somehow managed to toss a few animal bones, a skull, and Udayaditya's sword into the burning room.

Meanwhile, the people trying to extinguish the fire at the guard barracks suddenly heard a scream coming from the direction of the prison. Startled, everyone cried out in unison, "What was that!"

A man came running and shouted, "The Crown Prince's room is on fire!"

The guards' blood ran cold; Dayal Singh's head spun. Water pots fell from hands, belongings were dropped to the ground. Just then, another man came running from that direction and yelled, "I heard the Crown Prince screaming from inside the prison!"

Before he could finish, Sitaram rushed in, shouting, "Come quickly, all of you! The roof of the Crown Prince's room has caved in, and I can't hear him anymore!"

Everyone sprinted towards the Crown Prince's prison. They arrived to find the roof had indeed collapsed—fire was raging everywhere—there was no way to enter the room. Standing there, they began to blame one another. Everyone set about trying to determine whose negligence had caused this disaster. A fierce argument broke out; they hurled insults at each other. It even escalated to the brink of a physical brawl.

Sitaram thought, *'I'll spread the rumor that the Crown Prince died in the fire; that will buy me some peace of mind for a few days.'* Seeing that the room was burning fiercely, he wrapped a shawl around his head and happily set off toward his own hut.

He had walked quite a distance from the palace. It was late at night, the streets were deserted, and everything was silent. The bamboo leaves rustled gently in the occasional southern breeze. Sitaram's frivolous heart leaped with joy, and he broke into a bawdy song. He walked alone down the empty, silent road, singing merrily.

After a while, a thought struck him. *'I have to flee Jashore with my family anyway,'* he mused. *'Why not secure some funds without any hard work? That burnt-faced witch Mangala is dead, good riddance. Let's pay her house a visit. She has plenty of money, and not a single soul in the world to claim it. If I don't take it, someone else will. Might as well try my luck.'* Pondering this, Sitaram headed towards Rukmini's house, cheerfully resuming his song. Along the way, he spotted a woman hurrying to a secret rendezvous. Nothing escaped Sitaram's notice. An irresistible urge to crack a couple of jokes bubbled up inside him, but realizing he was short on time, he suppressed the urge and hurried on.

Reaching Rukmini's hut, Sitaram saw the door was wide open. Delighted, he stepped inside and peered around. It was pitch black—he couldn't see a thing. He

felt his way around for a bit. He tripped over a chest and fell, banging his head against the wall a couple of times. A chill ran down his spine. It felt as if someone was in the room. He thought he could hear someone breathing. He crept into the next room.

He saw light coming from Rukmini's bedroom. Relieved to find a lamp still burning, Sitaram hurried towards the room.

What was that? Who was sitting in the room? A woman sat there in absolute silence, her eyes wide open, trembling violently! She was half-covered in a wet sari, water dripping incessantly from her disheveled hair. She was shivering so hard her teeth were chattering. A single lamp burned in the room. Its dim light fell upon her deathly pale face, casting a massive, looming shadow on the wall behind her. There was nothing else in the room—only that ashen face, that long shadow, and a terrifying silence.

The moment Sitaram entered the room, his blood turned to ice. In the dim light, he saw Mangala sitting there with her loose hair and wet clothes. Seeing her so suddenly, he thought she was a ghost. Sitaram lacked the courage to step forward, nor could he muster the strength to turn and run. Sitaram was not entirely a coward; after standing frozen for a moment, he summoned a façade of bravery and said in a mock-teasing tone, "Where did you come from, woman? Are you immortal or what?"

Rukmini glared at him with unblinking eyes for a long time. Sitaram's heart leaped into his throat, pounding fiercely.

Suddenly, Rukmini hissed, "So! You still haven't met your ruin, but I am to die!" She stood up, waving her arms, and shrieked, "I returned from the gates of Death! First, I'll lay you and your Crown Prince on the funeral pyre, then I'll smear two handfuls of your ashes on my body to bless my life—only then will I satisfy Death's desire! Until then, there is no place for me in the underworld."

Hearing Rukmini's voice, Sitaram's courage returned. He suddenly feigned immense affection, trying to make peace with her. He didn't get too close, but moving slightly nearer, he said in a sweet voice, "Honestly, sister, this is why I get angry with you. I never know what's going on in your head. Tell me, Mangala, what have I done to you? Why are you so displeased with your humble servant? Are you nursing a wounded pride, sister? Shall I sing that song again?"

The more affection Sitaram feigned, the more Rukmini swelled with rage. She burned with anger from head to toe. If Sitaram had been the hair on her own head, she would have ripped it out by the handfuls. If he had been her own eyes, she would have gouged them out with her nails and stomped on them. She looked around but found nothing within reach. Clenching her teeth, she hissed, "Just you wait; I'm going to chop your head off." Trembling violently, she stormed into the next room to find her cutting blade (*bonti*).

This gave Sitaram a moment. Earlier, he had playfully suggested dying with his shawl wrapped around his neck as a metaphor for his love; but seeing Rukmini's face, his appreciation for metaphors vanished, and he realized he wasn't quite ready to die from the blows of a real *bonti*. Seizing the opportunity, he immediately slipped out of the hut. Returning to the empty room with the blade, Rukmini repeatedly struck the floor where Sitaram had stood.

Rukmini had become desperate. Udayaditya's actions had utterly shattered her wicked hopes—all her schemes, all her ambitions were ground into the dust. Rukmini no longer possessed that sharp, biting laugh, those lightning-like glances, that overflowing, intoxicating exuberance of the monsoon Ganges. She had picked fights with all the royal servants who used to visit her, cursing them out and driving them away. Just the other day, the Dewanji's eldest son had come chewing betel leaf to flirt with her; Rukmini had chased him off with a broom. Now, no one dared to go near her. The entire neighborhood was terrified of her.

Having escaped the hut, Sitaram thought, *'Mangala knows everything about the Crown Prince's escape; she'll blab the whole thing. Why didn't I just strangle the wretched woman while I had the chance? Regardless, it's not safe for me to stay in Jashore for another minute. I must flee immediately.'* That very night, Sitaram fled Jashore with his family and headed for Raygarh.

Towards the end of the night, clouds gathered, and a torrential downpour began; the fire eventually died out. Rumors of the Crown Prince's death reached Pratapaditya's ears. Hearing this, Pratapaditya immediately went to his outer council chamber and took his seat. He summoned the guards; the minister arrived, along with a couple of other courtiers.

One guard testified that when the fire was blazing fiercely, he had seen the Crown Prince through the window. A few others claimed they had heard the Crown Prince

screaming. Another presented the charred, melted remains of the Crown Prince's sword, retrieved from the burnt room.

Pratapaditya asked, "Where is my Uncle?"

They searched the royal palace but couldn't find him. Someone said, "When the fire broke out, he was also in the prison." Someone else claimed, "No, he received news during the night that the Crown Prince died in the fire, and upon hearing that, he immediately left Jashore."

While Pratapaditya sat in the council, listening to these testimonies, an uproar broke out at the door. A woman was trying to force her way in, but the guards were stopping her. Hearing the commotion, Pratapaditya ordered her to be brought inside. A guard escorted Rukmini in.

The king asked her, "What do you want?"

Waving her arms, she shouted at the top of her lungs, "I want nothing else—I just want to see you lock every single one of these guards of yours in the dungeon to rot for six months, and then feed them to the hounds! I want to see if they actually respect you, or if they fear you at all!"

Hearing this, the guards erupted in an uproar from all sides.

Rukmini turned around, glared at them, and snapped fiercely, "Shut up, you brutes! Yesterday, when I fell at your feet and begged, telling you that your Crown Prince was escaping with the old king of Raygarh, did you burnt-faced fools listen to a word I said? You work in the King's palace, so you've grown arrogant! You think you've seen a snake with five legs! You're like ants growing wings right before they die!"

Pratapaditya commanded, "Tell me exactly what happened."

"What more is there to tell?" Rukmini said. "Your Crown Prince ran away last night with the old king!"

Pratapaditya asked, "Do you know who set the fire?"

"How should I know!" Rukmini sneered. "It was that Sitaram of yours. The one your Crown Prince was so fond of, as if no one else mattered but him. This is all Sitaram's doing. The old king, Sitaram, and your Crown Prince—the three of them plotted this together. I'm telling you this plainly."

Pratapaditya remained silent for a long time. He then asked, "How did you come to know all this?"

"What does that matter to you?" Rukmini retorted. "Give me some men, and I will personally go and find them for you. The servants in your royal palace are all sheep; they won't get the job done."

Pratapaditya ordered men to accompany Rukmini and decreed appropriate punishments for the guards. One by one, the council chamber emptied. Only the minister and the Maharaja remained. The minister assumed the Maharaja would surely say something to him. But Pratapaditya said nothing; he sat frozen in silence. Hoping to prompt him, the minister said very softly, "Maharaja." The Maharaja gave no reply. The minister slowly got up and left.

That same day, before evening, Pratapaditya received news of Udayaditya's escape from a fisherman. He had seen Udayaditya traveling down the river in a boat. Gradually, more reports trickled in from various sources. The men who had gone with Rukmini returned a week later and reported that they had seen the Crown Prince in Raygarh.

The king asked, "Where is that woman?"

"She didn't come back; she stayed there," they replied.

Pratapaditya then summoned a Pathan general of his named Muktiar Khan, gave him a secret order, and dismissed him. He saluted and left.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The Queen and Vibha had learned of Udayaditya's escape even before Pratapaditya did. Both were overwhelmed with fear, wondering what the Maharaja would do when he found out. Every day, as the Maharaja received pieces of news, their hearts pounded with growing dread. A week passed like this, and finally, the Maharaja received confirmed, reliable news. But he did nothing. He didn't even show a hint of anger.

Unable to bear the suspense any longer, the Queen went to Pratapaditya. For a long time, she didn't dare ask anything about Udayaditya. The Maharaja didn't bring it up either. Finally, unable to hold back, the Queen blurted out, "Maharaja, grant me one plea: forgive Uday this time. If you cause my boy any more pain, I will drink poison and die."

With slight annoyance, Pratapaditya replied, "You've started crying before anything has even happened! I haven't done anything."

Fearing Pratapaditya might suddenly turn stubborn again, the Queen didn't dare bring the topic up a second time. She slowly withdrew, her heart filled with fear.

One day, two days, three days passed, and no change was observed in the Maharaja's demeanor. Seeing this, the Queen and Vibha felt relieved. They assumed the Maharaja was secretly pleased that Udayaditya had relocated. For a while, the Queen felt somewhat at peace.

Earlier, the Queen had told Vibha, and spread the rumor throughout the household, that Ramchandra Ray had written a letter requesting Vibha be sent to her father-in-law's house. Vibha's joy knew no bounds. Since sending Rammohan away, Vibha hadn't known a moment's peace. Whenever she had a free moment, she thought, *'What is he thinking? Did he truly understand my situation? Perhaps he is angry. If I explain it to him, will he forgive me? Oh Lord, when will I get to explain? When will we meet again?'* Vibha constantly turned these thoughts over in her mind. A heavy dread weighed on her heart day and night.

Hearing her mother's words, Vibha felt an immeasurable joy; a terrifying, heavy burden was instantly lifted from her mind. Casting aside all shyness and shame, she buried her face in her mother's chest, laughing and crying, and stayed there silently

for a long time. Her mother wept. When Vibha realized her husband hadn't misunderstood her, that he truly understood her heart—the whole world turned into a paradise in her eyes. How vast and magnanimous her husband's heart seemed! How much faith, how much trust she placed in her husband's love! She believed her husband's love was her unshakable refuge in this world. She felt like a delicate, tender vine wrapping its arms around the broad shoulders of a strong, noble man, resting upon him with fearless, boundless faith—a reliance she would never let go of.

Vibha blossomed. Her soul became expansive and pure, like a cloudless autumn sky. Now she played all sorts of childish games with her brother Samaraditya. Like an affectionate little girl, she made all sorts of demands on her mother and helped her with household chores. The silent, melancholic shadow she used to be had vanished—now her joyous heart radiated from her entire being, like a fully blossomed morning. Her former hesitation, shyness, sadness, wounded pride, and silence were gone. She now spoke so joyfully and trustingly with her mother that she would have been ashamed—or simply unwilling—to speak so much before. Seeing her daughter's happiness, the mother's boundless affection overflowed. A deep worry still gnawed at the Queen's heart, but she never even hinted at it to Vibha. As a mother, how could she bear to dim Vibha's pure, serene smile by even a fraction? That is why the daughter laughed and played before her eyes every day, and the mother watched with a smiling face and insatiable eyes.

Because of the fear and doubt lurking in the Queen's mind, she kept procrastinating and couldn't bring herself to actually send Vibha to her in-laws. A week or two passed. Everyone felt somewhat assured regarding Udayaditya. But the Queen still couldn't decide what to do about Vibha. A few more days went by.

The longer the delay, the more impatient Vibha grew. Vibha felt that with every passing day, she was becoming more guilty in her husband's eyes. When he had sent for her, why the delay? He had forgiven her once, but would he again? For a few days, Vibha said nothing, but finally, one day, she couldn't hold back. Going to her mother, she put her arms around her neck, looked into her face, and simply said, "Mother."

That one word told her mother everything. Pulling Vibha close, she said, "What is it, my child?"

Vibha remained silent for a moment, then finally asked, "Mother, when will you send me, Mother?" Vibha's face and ears turned red as she spoke.

The mother smiled faintly and asked, "Send you where, Vibhu?"

"Don't tease me, Mother," Vibha pleaded.

"Wait just a few more days, my child," the Queen said. "I will send you very soon." As she spoke, tears filled her eyes.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Udayaditya arrived in Raygarh after a long time, but he didn't feel the same joy he used to. A heavy worry weighed on his mind, making everything seem dull. He kept thinking, *'Who knows what will happen because of what Grandfather did? It's highly unlikely Father will let this go easily. Under what cursed star was I born?'* He went to Basanta Ray and said, "Grandfather, I must go. I must return to Jashore."

At first, Basanta Ray laughed it off and sang a song:

Will I ever let you go? Even if I don't win your heart, I'll hold you here by force. If you've stolen my soul, leaving my heart empty, Then you must stay here, To fill this empty heart of mine.

But when Udayaditya repeatedly insisted, Basanta Ray felt hurt. Stopping his song, he looked melancholy and asked, "Why, my boy? What discomfort do you feel staying with me?" Udayaditya couldn't find an answer.

Seeing Udayaditya so distracted, Basanta Ray tried with all his might, day and night, to keep him happy. He played the sitar, he sang, he took him out for walks; Basanta Ray practically suspended his royal duties for Udayaditya's sake. Basanta Ray was terrified he might not be able to keep Udayaditya, that Udayaditya might return to Jashore. He kept him in sight day and night, telling him, "Brother, I will never let you return to that land of stone hearts."

After staying for a few days, Udayaditya's anxieties began to ease somewhat. Having gained his freedom after so long, freed from the narrow confines of his stone prison, he was living within the boundless affection of Basanta Ray's gentle heart. For the first time in ages, he saw trees and nature, he saw the sky, he witnessed the morning light spreading across the horizon. He heard the songs of birds, felt the wind rushing against his body from distant horizons. At night, he could see the sky filled with stars, bathe in the moonlight, and dwell in the heart of sleeping silence. He could go wherever he wished, do whatever he wanted; there were no more barriers.

The subjects who had known Udayaditya since childhood came from far and wide to see him. Gangadhar came, Fatik came, Habi-chacha and Karimulla came. Mathur brought his three sons; Paran and Hari, the two brothers, came. Shital Sardar

brought five *lathials* (staff-wielders) to demonstrate their martial skills. Every day, subjects flocked to the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince asked them countless questions. Seeing that Udayaditya still remembered them, the subjects were overjoyed and amazed.

Mathur said, "Maharaja, this son of mine was born the very month you last visited Raygarh. You saw him then; since then, by your blessing, I've had two more children." Bringing his three sons before the Crown Prince, he ordered, "Bow to him." They prostrated themselves on the ground.

Paran stepped forward and said, "When Your Highness traveled by boat from here to Jashore, I was the boatman on that vessel, Maharaja."

Shital Sardar said, "Maharaja, when you were in Raygarh, you gave me a reward after seeing my staff-fighting skills. Today, I wish to show you my sons' skills. Come on, boys, step forward!" he called to his sons.

Thus, every morning, crowds of subjects came to Udayaditya, and they would all talk together.

Surrounded by this affection, nature, joy, and the exuberance of songs, the heavy worry naturally began to fade from Udayaditya's mind. He closed his eyes and convinced himself, *'Perhaps Father isn't angry; perhaps he's pleased, otherwise he surely would have done something by now.'*

But he couldn't deceive himself with such blind faith for long. A creeping fear for his Grandfather began to take hold. It was useless telling his Grandfather about returning to Jashore; he decided, *'I will sneak away and flee to Jashore one day.'* Then he remembered the prison again. What a stark contrast between this joyous freedom and the monotonous life in that narrow, tiny cell. Every moment in that prison felt like a year in his memory. He could vividly picture that dark, lonely, airless, confined room, and a shudder ran through his body. Yet, he resolved that he must flee from here towards that prison one day. He couldn't bring himself to say, *'I will flee today.'* But telling himself, *'I will flee one day,'* brought him some measure of peace.

Today was Thursday, an inauspicious time (*barbela*); travel was forbidden today, so it would have to be tomorrow. Today was a very bad day. A light drizzle had been

falling continuously since morning. Clouds blanketed the entire sky. Udayaditya had firmly decided he must leave Raygarh this evening.

When he met Basanta Ray in the morning, Basanta Ray embraced him and said, "Brother, I had a terrible nightmare last night. I can't remember the exact details, but I remember that you and I... it felt as if we were parting forever."

Taking Basanta Ray's hand, Udayaditya said, "No, Grandfather. Even if we part, why would it be forever?"

Looking away thoughtfully, Basanta Ray replied, "If not that, then what? How much longer will I live, tell me? I've grown old."

The final notes of last night's nightmare were still echoing in the caverns of Basanta Ray's mind, making him distracted and pensive.

After a moment of silence, Udayaditya asked, "Grandfather, what will happen if we part again?"

Wrapping his arms around Udayaditya's neck, Basanta Ray cried, "Why, brother, why should we part? Don't leave me. Don't abandon me in my old age and run away, brother!"

Tears welled up in Udayaditya's eyes. He was amazed; it felt as if Basanta Ray had somehow divined his secret intention. With a sigh, he said, "If I stay near you, disaster will strike you, Grandfather."

Basanta Ray laughed. "What disaster, brother? Do you think I fear danger at this age? There is no danger greater than death. And death is my neighbor. He sends his regards every day; I do not fear him. If a man manages to survive all the perils of life into old age, what does it matter if his boat sinks right as it reaches the shore!"

Udayaditya stayed with Basanta Ray the entire day. The light drizzle continued relentlessly.

In the afternoon, the rain finally stopped, and Udayaditya got up to leave. "Brother, where are you going?" Basanta Ray asked.

"Just going for a little walk."

"Why not stay in today?"

"Why, Grandfather?"

Embracing Udayaditya, Basanta Ray pleaded, "Do not leave the house today. Stay with me today, brother!"

"I won't go far, Grandfather. I'll be right back," Udayaditya promised, and stepped outside.

As he reached the outer gates of the palace, a guard asked, "Maharaja, shall I accompany you?"

"No, it's not necessary," the Crown Prince replied.

"But Maharaja, you are unarmed!" the guard pointed out.

"What need is there for weapons?" the Crown Prince countered.

Udayaditya stepped out of the palace. There was a long, wide field; he walked into it. He wandered alone. Gradually, the daylight began to fade. Countless thoughts swirled in his mind. The Crown Prince pondered his aimless, directionless life. He realized he had nothing certain, nowhere to settle—he had no idea what the very next moment held. He was still young; much of his life remained. Without building a home anywhere, without finding a permanent refuge, how would he spend this vast, stretching future? Then he thought of Vibha. Where was Vibha now? For so long, he had stood in the way of her happiness, eclipsing her sun; was she happy now? He silently showered Vibha with countless blessings.

In the middle of the field stood a grove of peepal, banyan, date, and betel-nut trees, meant to offer cowherds shade from the sun. The Crown Prince walked into it. Evening had fallen. It was dark. The Crown Prince was supposed to flee today—he was wrestling with this resolve in his mind. What would Basanta Ray's condition be when he heard Udayaditya had escaped? He could clearly picture Basanta Ray clutching his chest, his face filled with sorrow, crying out, "Ah! My boy ran away from me!"

Suddenly, a woman's harsh voice shattered his reverie. "Here! Here is your Crown Prince—right here!"

Two soldiers bearing torches approached the Crown Prince. In the blink of an eye, many more arrived and surrounded him. The woman then stepped closer and sneered, "Do you recognize me? Look at me! Look at me!" By the torchlight, the Crown Prince saw it was Rukmini.

Seeing Rukmini's behavior, the soldiers shouted at her, "Get lost, you witch!"

Ignoring them, she continued to rant, "Who did all this? I did. Who brought all these soldiers here? I did. I did so much for you, and you—!"

In utter disgust, the Crown Prince turned his back on Rukmini. The soldiers forcibly grabbed her and dragged her away.

Then, Muktiar Khan stepped forward and saluted the Crown Prince. Astonished, the Crown Prince asked, "Muktiar Khan, what is the news?"

"Huzoor, I come bearing an order from our Maharaja," Muktiar Khan replied respectfully.

"What order?"

Muktiar Khan brought out a decree signed by Pratapaditya and handed it to the Crown Prince.

Reading it, the Crown Prince said, "Why do you need so many soldiers for this? If he had just written me a letter with this order, I would have gone. I was about to go anyway; I had already decided to leave. What need is there for delay? Let us go right now. Let us return to Jashore immediately."

"I cannot return right now," Muktiar Khan said, folding his hands.

Alarmed, the Crown Prince asked, "Why?"

"There is another order. I cannot leave without executing it," Muktiar Khan explained.

"What order?" the Crown Prince asked, his voice trembling.

"The Maharaja has ordered the execution of the King of Raygarh," Muktiar Khan declared.

The Crown Prince recoiled and shouted, "No! He hasn't! That's a lie!"

"It is no lie, Crown Prince. I have a letter signed by the Maharaja himself."

Gripping the general's hand desperately, the Crown Prince pleaded, "Muktiar Khan, you have misunderstood. The Maharaja ordered that *if* you couldn't find Udayaditya, then you should take Basanta Ray. Since I am surrendering myself to you, what more is there! Take me away right now, take me away right now—take me as your prisoner, but do not delay."

"Crown Prince, I have not misunderstood. The Maharaja's orders are explicit," Muktiar Khan stated.

Frantic, the Crown Prince cried, "You must have misunderstood! This cannot be his intention. Alright, let's go, let's go to Jashore. I will explain it to you in front of the Maharaja; if he issues the order a second time, then you may carry it out."

"Forgive me, Crown Prince, I cannot do that," Muktiar Khan replied, hands folded.

Growing even more desperate, the Crown Prince reminded him, "Muktiar, do you remember that I will ascend the throne one day? Listen to me, oblige me now."

Muktiar stood in silence.

The Crown Prince's face turned ashen; sweat beaded on his forehead. Gripping the general's hand firmly, he said, "Muktiar Khan, if you murder a pious, innocent old man, there will be no place for you even in hell!"

"There is no sin in executing a master's order," Muktiar Khan replied stoically.

"That is a lie!" Udayaditya shouted. "Any scripture that says so is a lie! Know this for certain, Muktiar: executing a sinful order *is* a sin."

Muktiar stood in silence.

Looking around desperately, Udayaditya shouted, "Then let me go! I will return to the fort. Take your soldiers there; I challenge you to a battle. Defeat me on the battlefield, and *then* execute your order."

Muktiar stood in silence. The soldiers closed in tighter, surrounding the Crown Prince completely. Seeing no other way, Udayaditya screamed into the darkness with all his might, "Grandfather! Beware!"

The forest trembled, but the sound faded away at the edge of the field. The soldiers grabbed Udayaditya. He screamed once more, "Grandfather! Beware!"

A lone traveler was passing through the field. Hearing the shout, he approached and asked, "Who's there?"

"Go! Go!" Udayaditya shouted urgently. "Run to the fort, warn the Maharaja!"

In an instant, the soldiers arrested the traveler. The soldiers promptly captured anyone who happened to be walking through the field.

Leaving a few soldiers to guard Udayaditya, Muktiar Khan and the rest of the men discarded their military uniforms, concealed their weapons, and proceeded towards the fort in civilian clothes. Raygarh had over a hundred gates; they infiltrated the fort through various entrances.

It was evening, and Basanta Ray sat performing his evening prayers (*ahnik*). From the royal temple, the sounds of conch shells and bells marking the evening worship rang out. There was no commotion in the vast palace; everything was peaceful. As was Basanta Ray's custom, most of the servants had been given a short break for the evening.

While deep in prayer, Basanta Ray suddenly saw Muktiar Khan enter his room. Startled, he called out, "Khan Sahib, do not enter this room! I will finish my prayers and come out right away."

Muktiar Khan stepped back outside and stood by the door. Basanta Ray hurriedly finished his prayers, came out, and patting Muktiar Khan's arm, asked, "Khan Sahib, are you well?"

Muktiar saluted and replied curtly, "Yes, Maharaja."

"Have you eaten?" Basanta Ray asked.

"Yes, Sire."

"Then let me arrange for your stay here tonight."

"No, Sire, that won't be necessary. I must finish my work and leave immediately," Muktiar replied.

"No, I won't hear of it, Khan Sahib. I will not let you leave today; you must stay here."

"No, Maharaja, I must leave shortly."

"Why, tell me? Do you have urgent business? Is Pratap well?" Basanta Ray asked.

"The Maharaja is well."

"Then what is your business, tell me quickly. Hearing it's urgent makes me anxious. Pratap hasn't faced any danger, has he?"

"No, Sire, he is in no danger. I have come to execute an order from the Maharaja."

"What order? Tell me at once," Basanta Ray urged.

Muktiar Khan brought out a decree and handed it to Basanta Ray. Basanta Ray moved closer to the lamp and began to read. Meanwhile, one by one, all the soldiers gathered near the door and surrounded the room.

Finishing the letter, Basanta Ray slowly approached Muktiar Khan and asked, "Did Pratap write this?"

"Yes," Muktiar replied.

"Khan Sahib, did Pratap write this with his own hand?" Basanta Ray asked again.

"Yes, Maharaja," Muktiar confirmed.

Weeping, Basanta Ray cried out, "Khan Sahib, I raised Pratap with my own hands."

He remained silent for a while, then spoke again. "When Pratap was this little, I carried him day and night; he refused to leave my side even for a moment. That Pratap grew up, I got him married, I placed him on the throne, I held his children in my arms... Did *that* Pratap write this decree with his own hand today, Khan Sahib?"

Muktiar Khan's eyelids grew wet; he stood in silence, his head bowed.

"Where is my boy?" Basanta Ray asked. "Where is Uday?"

"He has been captured," Muktiar Khan replied. "He is being sent to the Maharaja to face trial."

"Uday has been captured? Captured, Khan Sahib?" Basanta Ray cried out. "Can I not see him just once?"

Folding his hands, Muktiar Khan said, "No, Huzoor. It is forbidden."

Tears streaming from his eyes, Basanta Ray grabbed Muktiar Khan's hand and pleaded, "Will you not let me see him just once, Khan Sahib?"

"I am merely a servant executing orders," Muktiar replied.

With a deep sigh, Basanta Ray said, "There is no compassion or mercy in this world. Come, Sahib, execute your order."

Muktiar then touched the ground, offered a deep salute, and said with folded hands, "Maharaja, forgive me. I am merely following my master's orders; I bear no fault in this."

"No, Sahib, what is your fault?" Basanta Ray agreed. "You bear no fault. What is there to forgive?" He stepped forward and embraced Muktiar Khan. "Tell Pratap I died blessing him. And listen, Khan Sahib, as I die, I leave Uday in your care. He is innocent—see to it that he doesn't suffer any further from unjust judgments."

With that, Basanta Ray closed his eyes, prostrated himself before his chosen deity, began counting his rosary with his right hand, and said, "Now, Sahib."

"Abdul," Muktiar Khan called out. Abdul stepped forward, a drawn sword in his hand. Muktiar turned his face away and stepped aside. A moment later, Abdul

emerged from the room with a bloody sword. A river of blood began to flow within the chamber.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Muktia Khan returned. Leaving the majority of the soldiers in Raygarh, he immediately set off for Jashore with Udayaditya. For two days during the journey, Udayaditya did not touch a morsel of food, nor did he speak a single word to anyone. He just sat in silence, lost in thought. He was as still as a stone statue—no sleep in his eyes, no blinking, no tears, no focus in his gaze—he merely thought.

He boarded the boat, leaned out, and stared into the water as the boat sailed on. He heard the rhythmic splashing of the oars, the gurgling of the water entered his ears. Yet he heard nothing, saw nothing; he only thought. Night fell, stars appeared in the sky, the boatmen moored the boat, and everyone on board went to sleep. Only the sound of the water could be heard, small ripples lapping against the hull. The Crown Prince stared blankly ahead at the vast expanse of white sandbanks, lost in thought.

At dawn, the boatmen awoke and set sail. The morning breeze blew, the eastern sky turned crimson; the Crown Prince continued to think.

On the third day, the Crown Prince's eyes finally overflowed, and tears streamed down his face. Resting his head on his hand, he stared into the water, then up at the sky. The boat sailed on—the trees on the banks passed before his eyes like drifting clouds, while a thousand streams of tears poured from his eyes.

After a long time, sensing an opportunity, Muktia Khan approached the Crown Prince with a heavy heart and sat beside him. He asked respectfully, "Crown Prince, what are you thinking?"

The Crown Prince started. He stared at Muktia's face in silent astonishment for a long time. Seeing the genuine sympathy on Muktia's face, the Crown Prince's pent-up emotions suddenly burst forth.

"I am thinking," he cried, "what have I achieved by being born into this world? What utter devastation has occurred because of me! O Creator, why are the weak born into this world? Those who cannot stand on their own two feet, who cling to others at every step—what good do they do for the world? They drag down whoever they cling to, they hinder the world's work—they cannot stand themselves, and they become a burden to everyone else. I am a weak, cowardly man; God saved *me*,

while those who were the joy and hope of the world—He destroyed them because of me! No more. I bid farewell to this world."

Udayaditya was brought before Pratapaditya as a prisoner. Pratapaditya led him into a room in the inner chambers and locked the door. As soon as he was near Pratapaditya, Udayaditya's body shuddered; his flesh seemed to crawl with an irresistible wave of revulsion. He couldn't even bring himself to look his father in the face.

In a solemn voice, Pratapaditya asked, "What punishment is fitting for you?"

Udayaditya replied calmly, "Whatever you decree."

"You are not worthy of my kingdom," Pratapaditya stated.

"No, Maharaja, I am not worthy," Udayaditya agreed. "I do not want your kingdom. Relieve me of my claim to your throne, that is all I ask."

This was exactly what Pratapaditya wanted. "How am I to know that what you say is truly what is in your heart?" he challenged.

"I may have been born weak," Udayaditya replied, "but to this day, I have never told a lie for my own selfish gain. If you do not believe me, I will touch the feet of Mother Kali today and swear an oath: I will never rule even a needle's point of your kingdom. Samaraditya alone is the heir to your throne."

Satisfied, Pratapaditya asked, "What do you want, then?"

"Maharaja, I want nothing else, only this: do not lock me in a dungeon like a caged beast. Let me go; I will leave for Kashi (Varanasi) immediately. I have one other request—grant me a small sum of money. I will establish a guesthouse and a temple there in Grandfather's name."

"Very well, I agree to this," Pratapaditya consented.

That very day, Udayaditya went to the temple and swore an oath before Pratapaditya: "Mother Kali, bear witness; touching your feet, I swear—as long as I live, I will never claim even a fraction of the Maharaja of Jashore's kingdom as my own. I will not sit on the throne of Jashore, nor will I even touch the royal scepter

of Jashore. If I ever do, may the entire sin of Grandfather's murder fall upon my head alone." He shuddered as he spoke the words.

When the Queen Mother heard that Udayaditya was leaving for Kashi, she went to him and pleaded, "Uday, my boy, take me with you."

"How can I do that, Mother?" Udayaditya reasoned. "You have Samaraditya, your entire family is here. If you leave, the Goddess of Fortune (*Rajalakshmi*) will abandon Jashore."

Weeping, the Queen cried, "My child, if you renounce the world at this young age, with what heart can I stay bound to it? You will abandon the kingdom and family to live as an ascetic; who will look after you there? Just because your father's heart is made of stone, it doesn't mean I can abandon you."

Of all her children, the Queen loved Udayaditya the most. Her heart broke for him, and she wept uncontrollably.

Taking his mother's hand, Udayaditya said tearfully, "Mother, you know perfectly well that if I stay in the royal palace, my life will be in constant danger at every step. Be at peace, Mother. I am going to the feet of Lord Vishwanath (Shiva in Kashi), where I will be safe."

Udayaditya then went to Vibha and said, "Vibha, my little sister, before I leave for Kashi, I will see you happy. I will personally escort you to your father-in-law's house; this is my one last desire."

"How is Grandfather?" Vibha asked him.

"Grandfather is well," Udayaditya replied quickly, and hurried away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Preparations for Udayaditya and Vibha's departure commenced. Vibha clung to her mother's neck and cried. Before leaving for her father-in-law's house, everyone in the inner chambers offered Vibha all sorts of good advice.

The Queen summoned Udayaditya and cautioned him, "My boy, you are taking Vibha, but what if they mistreat her?"

Startled, Udayaditya asked, "Why, Mother? Why would they mistreat her?"

"Who knows? What if they are still angry with Vibha?" the Queen worried.

"No, Mother," Udayaditya reassured her. "Vibha is just a girl; how could anyone ever be angry with Vibha?"

Weeping, the Queen warned, "Child, take her carefully. If they neglect her, Vibha will not survive."

A sudden fear awoke in Udayaditya's mind. It had never even occurred to him that Vibha could be neglected at her in-laws' house. Udayaditya thought his karmic debts had all been paid, but he realized they hadn't been. He had made Vibha his refuge; who knew what fate awaited her as a consequence?

At the time of departure, Udayaditya and Vibha went to bow to their mother. Lest she cause an inauspicious omen for the journey, the Queen held back her tears then; but the moment they left, she collapsed to the floor and wept bitterly. Udayaditya and Vibha bowed to their father, and paid their respects to the other elders of the house. Udayaditya picked up Samaraditya, kissed him, and whispered to himself, "My child, may the curse of the throne you will ascend never touch you."

The royal servants loved Udayaditya dearly; they came one by one to bow to him, all of them weeping. Finally, they went to the temple, bowed to the deity, and set out on their journey.

The arena of grief, danger, and tyranny was left behind—the prison of his life was left behind. Udayaditya vowed never to enter this house again in his life. He looked back just once. He saw the bloodthirsty, hard-hearted royal palace standing tall

against the sky like a giant demon. Left behind were the conspiracies, the despotism, the bloodlust, the oppression of the weak, and the tears of the helpless; ahead lay boundless freedom. The flawless beauty of nature, the natural affection and compassion of the human heart reached out to embrace him.

It was early morning. From the forests on the eastern bank of the river, rays of sunlight shot upwards like flames. A golden glow rested on the treetops. People were waking up. Singing joyously, the boatmen hoisted the sails and set the boat in motion. Seeing the pure, serene, and holy morning face of nature, Udayaditya's soul joined the birds in singing a song of freedom. He prayed silently, *'May I be allowed to roam freely amidst this pure, verdant nature lifetime after lifetime, and may I dwell among simple-hearted souls.'*

The boat set sail. Listening to the boatmen's songs and the gurgling of the water, they journeyed onward. The morning light of joy shone in Vibha's serene heart; the radiance of the dawn was reflected in her eyes and on her face. It was as if she had finally woken from a long nightmare and found comfort in seeing the face of the world again. Vibha was going. Who was she going to? Who had called for her? An infinite, unyielding love had called her—like a little bird tucking its wings, Vibha would hide comfortably and trustingly within the layers of that tender love. Today, she saw an ocean of affection all around the world. Udayaditya called Vibha and, in a voice as gentle as the rippling water, told her countless stories. Whatever Vibha heard, she loved.

The boat entered Ramchandra Ray's kingdom. Looking around, an unprecedented joy blossomed in Vibha's heart. What a beautiful sight! Seeing the huts and the people, Vibha felt that everyone was living in great happiness. Vibha felt an urge to call the subjects over and ask them about their King. Seeing the subjects, a strange, wonderful affection welled up in her heart. She loved everyone she saw. Occasionally, she spotted a few poor people; Vibha thought to herself, *'Ah, why are they in such a state? Once I am in the inner chambers, I will send for them. I will do whatever it takes to alleviate their suffering.'* She felt as if everything belonged to her. That there was sorrow and poverty in this kingdom was something her heart could not bear. Vibha wished the subjects would come to her, call her 'Mother' just once, pour out their sorrows to her, and she would banish all their pain.

Udayaditya moored the boat at a village near the capital. He decided they would send word of their arrival to the royal palace, and the palace would send an escort

to welcome and bring them in. By the time they moored the boat, it was afternoon. Udayaditya thought they would send a messenger the next morning. But Vibha's heart desperately wished the news could be sent today.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Today, the people were exceedingly busy. Music played all around. It seemed a festival had descended upon the village. An impatient joy was already awakening in Vibha's soul, and hearing the festive music all around made her heart swell with elation. Lest her overwhelming happiness become too obvious to Udayaditya, she suppressed her smile with great effort. Seeing the festive atmosphere on the riverbank, Udayaditya went into the village to find out what was happening.

A short while passed. From the shore, someone called out, "Whose boat is this?"

The royal servants on the boat yelled back, "Who is that? Is that Rammohan? Hey, come, come!"

Rammohan hurriedly boarded the boat. Vibha was sitting alone on the vessel; seeing Rammohan, she exclaimed in sheer delight, "Mohan!"

"Mother," Rammohan replied.

Rammohan stared at Vibha's innocent, joy-filled, smiling face for a long time. Then, with a melancholic expression, he said, "Mother, you came?"

"Yes, Mohan," Vibha replied eagerly. "Has the Maharaja already received the news? Have you come to fetch me?"

"No, Mother, do not be so eager," Rammohan said. "Let it be for today; I will take you another day."

Seeing Rammohan's demeanor, the color drained from Vibha's face. "Why, Mohan? Why shouldn't I go today?"

"Evening has already fallen today—let it be for today, Mother," Rammohan deflected.

Deeply frightened, Vibha pleaded, "Tell me the truth, Mohan, what has happened?"

Rammohan could hold back no longer. Hiding his emotions was not in his nature. He slumped to the floor right there, and weeping, cried out, "Mother, my dear

Mother, today there is no place for you in your kingdom, no home for you in your royal palace. Today, the Maharaja is taking another wife."

Vibha's face turned deathly pale. Her hands and feet turned ice cold.

Rammohan continued, "Mother, when this lowly son of yours went to call for you, why didn't you come, Mother? Why did you turn me away like a cruel stone statue? I lost all face before the Maharaja. My heart broke, yet I couldn't utter a single word in your defense!"

Vibha's vision went completely dark; her head spun, and she collapsed to the floor. Rammohan hurriedly brought water and sprinkled it on Vibha's face and eyes. After a while, Vibha sat up.

In a single blow, Vibha's entire world had shattered. Having arrived in her husband's kingdom, reaching the outskirts of the capital, arriving at the very gates of the royal palace—all the hopes and happiness of the thirsty-hearted Vibha vanished like a mirage.

"Mohan," Vibha asked desperately, "when he sent for me... did I delay too long in coming?"

"Indeed you have," Mohan replied.

Agitated, Vibha asked, "Will he not forgive me?"

"He clearly did not," Mohan answered.

"Mohan, I will just go to see him once," Vibha declared, and broke into a loud wail.

Wiping his eyes, Rammohan said, "Let it be for today, Mother."

"No, Mohan, I must go see him today, just once," Vibha insisted.

"Let the Crown Prince return from the village first," Rammohan suggested.

"No, Mohan, I must go right now," Vibha replied. She thought that if Udayaditya heard this news, fearing the humiliation, he might not let her go.

"Then let me fetch a palanquin," Rammohan offered.

"Why a palanquin?" Vibha asked. "Am I a queen to demand a palanquin? I will go like an ordinary subject, like a beggar woman; what use do I have for a palanquin?"

"As long as I have breath in my body, I cannot bear to see that," Rammohan declared.

In a pitiful voice, Vibha pleaded, "Mohan, I fall at your feet, do not stop me anymore, it is getting late."

With a heavy heart, Rammohan acquiesced, "Very well, Mother, let it be so."

Vibha stepped out of the boat dressed as an ordinary woman. The boat servants approached and asked in shock, "What is this, Mother? Where are you going dressed like this!"

"This is the Mother's kingdom; she may go wherever she pleases," Rammohan retorted.

The servants began to object, but Rammohan shooed them away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

People everywhere, crowds all around. In the past, Vibha would have died of embarrassment, but today, nothing seemed to register in her eyes. Everything she saw felt false, an illusion. It felt like a chaotic, crowded dream swirling around her—nothing felt real. She registered that there was a crowd, she heard the noise coming from all sides, but none of it seemed to hold any meaning.

Pushing through the crowd, as she reached the gates of the royal palace, a guard suddenly grabbed Vibha's arm to stop her. In that instant, Vibha was abruptly snapped back into the external world. She saw everything around her and nearly died of shame. Her veil had slipped off; she hastily pulled it back over her head.

Rammohan, who had been walking ahead, turned around and glared fiercely at the guard. Fernandez was nearby; he hurried over, grabbed the guard, and thoroughly reprimanded him. Vibha entered the palace. She entered like any other maidservant; no one showed her any respect or welcomed her.

Only the King and Ramai the jester were sitting in the room. Vibha entered, looked at the king's face, and immediately collapsed to the floor at his feet.

Flustered, the king stood up and asked, "Who are you? A beggar woman? Have you come to beg for alms?"

Lifting her bowed head, Vibha looked into the king's face with tear-filled eyes and said, "No, Maharaja, I have come to give away everything I own. I have come to surrender you to another's hands and take my leave."

Rammohan could no longer hold back. Stepping forward, he announced, "Maharaja, this is your Queen—the Princess of Jashore."

Suddenly, a sharp jolt went through Ramchandra Ray's heart. But instantly, Ramai the jester laughed, shot a sly glance at the king, and mocked in a harsh voice, "Why, does the dear brother no longer hold your fancy?"

A glimmer of compassion had awakened in Ramchandra Ray's heart, yet upon hearing Ramai's words, he let out a cruel laugh. He thought that showing affection to Vibha now might make him an object of ridicule.

A thousand thunderbolts struck Vibha's head; she died of absolute humiliation. Closing her eyes, she prayed silently, '*O Mother Earth, split open and swallow me.*' In agony, she looked around, casting a helpless, desperate glance at Rammohan's face.

Rammohan rushed forward, forcefully grabbed Ramai the jester by the scruff of his neck, and threw him out of the room.

Furious, the king shouted, "Rammohan, you dare to show such insolence in my presence!"

Trembling with rage, Rammohan retorted, "Maharaja, I showed insolence? That wretch insulted your Queen—my Queen Mother! He hasn't seen the end of this. I will shave his head, pour buttermilk over him, and drive him out of the city, or my name isn't Rammohan!"

The king snapped at Rammohan, "Who is my Queen? I do not know her."

Vibha's face turned blue. She pressed the end of her sari to her mouth, her entire body shaking violently. Finally, trembling, Vibha fainted and collapsed to the floor.

Then, with folded hands, Rammohan addressed the king: "Maharaja, for four generations we have served your lineage. I have raised you since childhood. Today, you insulted my Queen Mother, you banished the Goddess of Fortune (*Rajyalakshmi*) of your kingdom. Today, I, too, resign from your service and take my leave. I will spend the rest of my life serving my Queen Mother. I will beg for my food, but I will never again step into the shadow of this royal palace."

With that, Rammohan bowed to the king and turned to Vibha. "Come, Mother, come. Leave this place at once. We must not stay here a moment longer."

Saying this, he lifted the unconscious, exhausted Vibha up and carried her out. There were several palanquins near the door; he placed Vibha into one of them and returned to the boat.

Vibha left for Kashi with Udayaditya. There, she spent the rest of her life engaged in charity, the worship of the gods, and the service of her brother. Rammohan stayed with them for as long as he lived. Sitaram, too, came to Kashi with his family and sought refuge with Udayaditya.

THE CROWN PRINCESS'S MARKET

The marketplace in Chandradwip where Vibha's boat had moored still bears the name to this day—"Bou-Thakuranir Haat" (The Crown Princess's Market).