

THE
NIGHT
IN HER
HAIR

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HIMAL NAGRAI

A swimming dark. The waters are dense, deep blue, made darker still by a shadow moving in their depths.

Upstream, a phantom light shafts through the water like mist. A moon, silver white, up above, far above. Shining through the surface. The water darkens even more. The shadow moving upwards. Up. Further up. And the water breaks, a soft crack of glass. Droplets parting, trembling soundlessly.

It is a vast place, a pool of clear spring water enshrouded in a grove of ancient trees. Wild ferns, thick shrubs of flowers grow high, bending over the edge of the water all around. Surrounding it. Concealing it almost.

The shadow rises, the colour of night, rising from the surface of the water. Gliding up through the air, straight and smooth and steady. Rising. Then suddenly changing shape. Fanning out, like a black cloud against the moon, blotting out the light it has chased. Covering the pool of water in an eclipse.

A flapping of wings through the trees, owls scattering in flight. A frenzied rustling of creatures through the undergrowth. A dispersing, a readiness. Through the leaves, their eyes blink, sequined in the dark, watching, in fear. In reverence.

The shadow lingers through the night.

And when the red streak of daybreak cuts through the sky like a fingernail, nothing remains on the surface of the water but a great circling ripple.



A golden dawn suffused the sky. Filtering through the palace walls, the first rays of sun outlining a sleeping figure in an ornate room. A slender form, barely visible under the gold, tapestried covering; Himal woke, and rising from the bed, walked to the balcony outside her room.

She gripped the marble parapet, as if to steady her balance. It was cold to the touch, and she shook her head, pressing her hand to her eyes. A dizzying sensation.

The air was white in the early hours of morning. She breathed in slowly, only beginning to gather her thoughts when the door opened behind her. A deft, punctual click. Never a moment late. The lifeless habit of it all, the same pattern laid out for her day in, day out, making her feel more unreal. She half lifted her hand as if to say *No, not today. Please. I don't want to.* But she stopped. The gesture wouldn't have been seen, her words wouldn't have been heard. It wasn't her decision to make.

Her attendants walked inside, moving about the room, brisk and mechanical, in a routine honed to its smallest detail, whether Himal asked for it or not. The water was ready. The robe slid off her shoulders. Scented oils rubbed meticulously into her skin.

Her arms hung listlessly down her sides, her movement pinned to her body. They draped the royal silks over her skin, blue and green flashing over her limbs. They combed the wet hair down to her waist. They hung jewels in her ears, circled her neck with strings of gold, fastening bracelets of glittering stones around her wrists. She sat silent and inert, her eyes closed against the hard clasp of manacles that held more and more of her down. A mirror was tipped for her to see, but she didn't look up.

The door opened again. Her father, terse and distant, walked swiftly inside, quietly surveying Himal's appearance, her demeanour. Her mother stood behind him, anxious and obsequious, looking at her daughter once, and averting her eyes.

The king nodded approvingly. 'Are you well?' he said after a moment, his voice matter-of-fact. 'Is there anything you need?' He looked around the room, his eyes skimming the floor, the walls, as if she were a mere extension of them.

'No,' said Himal.

He nodded in response, not wondering which of his questions she had chosen to respond to.

He gave the usual orders for the day, and without another glance, walked back into the halls of the palace, the queen following close behind him.

And Himal was alone again. That was all. The purpose and conclusion of her parents' royal visit. Ensuring that she was groomed, ready, prepared to be presented to her fate any day. She rarely saw her brothers; she wondered if they were aware of her presence at all.

It was her father's decree that she be secluded and protected at all cost; hidden from the gaze of the world, a treasure to be handed over to a prince worthy of her in wealth and lineage. That was what she had been told. But she knew her marriage would only be a bargain. The ruler of a royal house would have to acknowledge the overlordship of her father, fight for him against the warring tribes of the hills and lowlands to preserve his power over the entire region.

Voices from inside the palace, echoes of a world she was sequestered from, flowed down the walls, spinning around her. She felt nauseous, the vacuous space of her room suddenly too tight. Her life nothing but a blank, unbroken illusion within those inches of pillar and marble.

The sun streamed into her room now, a day unfolding, long and splendid, offering itself to her. She stepped outside, onto the balcony.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them again, her gaze swept over the massive range of white mountain peaks, and giant black forests fringing the skyline. Her eyes hooked on the fine blade edge of snow and ice cutting into the sky — the bare point of their reach, infinite. And underneath, the dark shaggy spikes of trees, spreading wide, bearing in close to the boundary of vast green gardens surrounding the palace.

Nothing she said or wanted was ever, could ever, be a consideration. As the king's daughter her role was only to submit to a life that would be arranged and revealed to her.

Her eyes drifted to the palace grounds below, dark green shrouded within ancient trees, coming in closer, gathering within her reach, several storeys down from where she stood. A place that was her only retreat. Himal turned and descended the winding staircase from her balcony.

The steps spiralled into gardens thick with shade. Sunlight barely filtering through a foliage that hung low and dense. It was a place green with perpetual evening, black groves stretching to the outer walls of the palace.

Himal walked towards a wild growth of shrubs, flowers of every hue, that grew high and heavy, making a natural wall around a large pool of spring water. Its depth unknown, it had been part of the grounds since before the palace had been built. The fact that it happened to be in a part of the gardens that opened out beneath her room, where no one came, was a sort of compensation. And for the first time that morning, she smiled, at the thought.

She sat at the edge of the pool and looked down into it. Her hair fell forward like a mantle, framing her, and the dark waters reflected her image. Large haunted eyes in the pale oval of her face.

Oblivious to her beauty, all she saw was the reason for her confinement. She lay down on the grass, and closed her eyes, trailing her hand over the water's surface.

'Nothing should tarnish this prize,' she said, repeating her father's dictum. She smiled bitterly, 'What *prize*?' she flicked her fingers in the water, breaking the image.

A shrieking cry of birds tore through the trees. A frightened rustle in the undergrowth. Himal opened her eyes, her heart beating violently.

She looked towards the grove. There was no one there.

Slowly, she stood up, her hand on her chest, holding her breath steady. She took a step towards the parting between the trees. Bracing herself, she closed her eyes and stepped through. The space was empty.

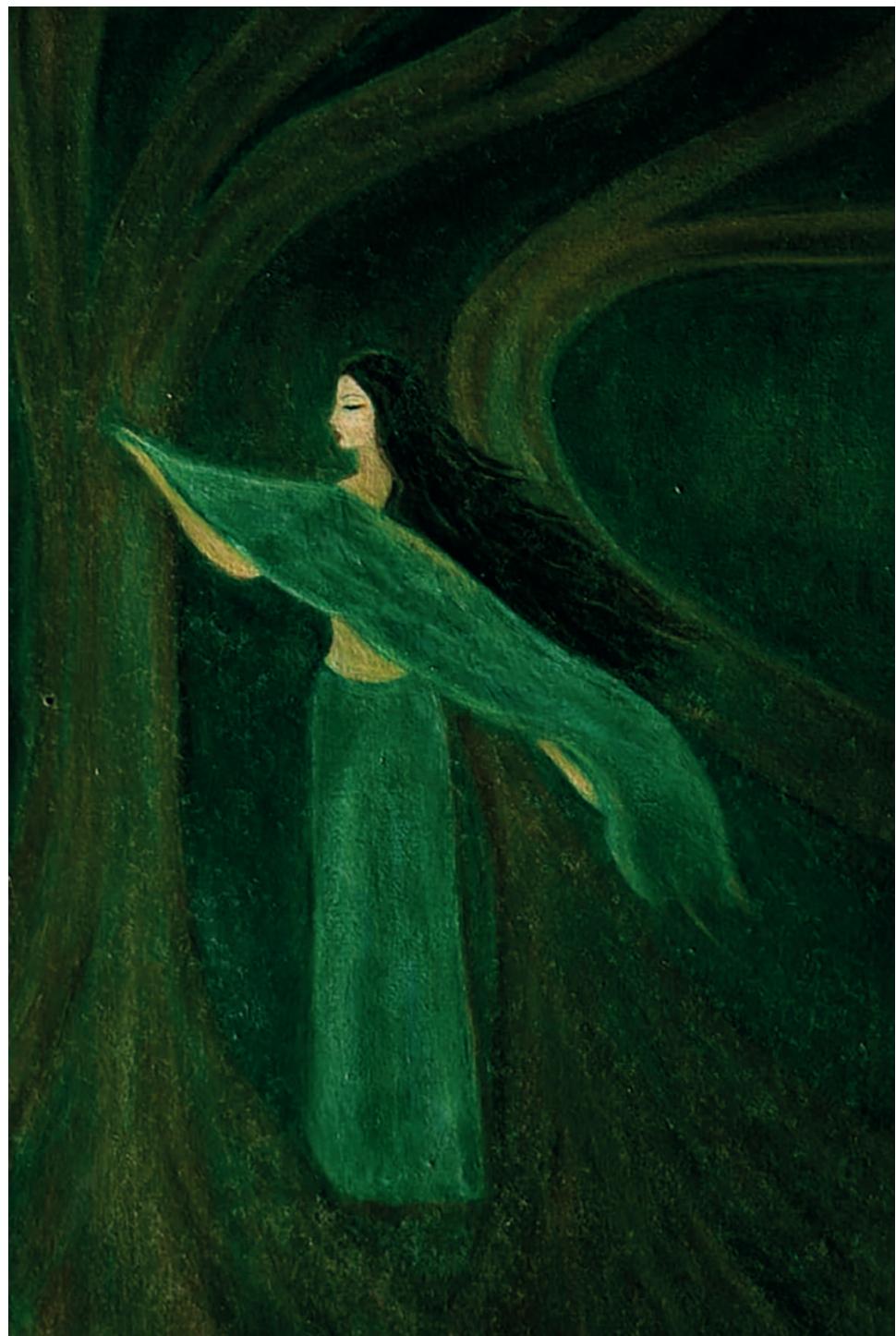
Relief plunged through her, cool and warm. She let out her breath, turning back towards the pool. She didn't notice the large, round ripple swirling quietly through the water.



Far beyond the walls of the palace, where the forests ascended into the hills, an old man, grizzled and white-bearded, sat feeding a flock of birds. He smiled as the grey flapping of wings whipped the wind against his face.

He sat gazing up at the slopes dotted with thatched huts. Men and women who worked the fields below, bent their heads to him as they passed, making their way up the hills. They didn't know his name, but they called him Vidura. *Vidura* — the wise one — for he had the gift to see the future, the ability to pass a soothing balm into their lives. They felt a nameless protection whenever he was near, whenever they walked past the land where he lived, alone as a hermit, away from their world. A hallowed place crisscrossed with rivers and mountain streams, where the people of the surrounding villages would stop and drink the pure water and fill their jars with it.

A sudden upheaval down by the rivers and the panicked cries of women startled him to his feet. The birds scattered, whipping into flight. The hermit rushed in the direction of the voices. A group of women,



white with fear, stood pointing towards a violent thrashing in the waters. Something that made the river twist into a dark coil.

They ran in terror, as the hermit leaned over the bank. Calmly, he moved back, his eyes scanning the ground. He found a large, abandoned fishing net, and cast it into the water. Mustering all his strength, he pulled it towards himself.

The thrashing stopped. The net rolled up onto the ground and fell open. And a man, young and beautiful, lay inside it, naked and wounded.

Heaving with the effort, the hermit didn't stop to think. He didn't have to. He removed the rough threadbare shawl from his shoulders and covered him with it. The man's chest rose and fell in a strong breathing, his eyes were closed, his golden skin dappled with water.

The moment stood still between them, the sun descending behind the trees. The hermit looked up at the sky, as the shadows began to fall through the forests. There was no one around. The villagers had returned to their huts. He was grateful for that. And now, all he could do was wait.

He sat on the ground, and in the gathering twilight, closed his eyes, his mind reaching out to the unconscious form beside him. Soundless words escaping his lips, enclosing them both in the deepening silence.

The sun disappeared into the trees, a dark glow lighted up the river. The wind shifted course, rustling into the forests. And the hermit breathed a prayer, and said, 'Nagrai.'

The man opened his eyes. Responding to the name. In a sudden, imperceptible movement, he lifted himself up on his arms. Then he stopped, as if unsure.

'Come,' said the hermit, reaching forward, helping him to his feet.

He led Nagrai to his hut, a thatched dwelling that stood within a clearing, away from the riverbank. A place, a refuge, where no one could intrude. The murmur of the leaves and the cadence of the wind, a constant presence. A strange peace within that small space, a far distance from the turmoil

outside, as if an entire world could be contained within those trees.

He led Nagrai to a reed bed, and brought him a bowl of milk, tilting it close for him to drink. Life seemed to revive in him, and Nagrai's eyes moved slowly around the hut.

'Tell me,' said the hermit. He sat down across from him. 'Why are you here?' It was a comforting voice. Patient and enfolding. 'Why did you leave your kingdom?'

The question flowed between them, in the words that were not said, binding the two men in a single thought. The hermit already knew the answer to his question, he had seen it all unfold in his mind, but he wanted Nagrai to say it himself, wanting him to realise what it was that he was seeking to come up against.

Nograi sat up. He felt his limbs, and rose to his feet. He looked at the hermit with his own question in his eyes. 'I need to go back to the river,' his voice was soft, grazed with a strange rasp. 'I need—I need the water on my body,' he said slowly, as if feeling the tongue in his mouth. 'After that, I will be able to answer you.'

He stepped outside. He breathed the pure air, felt the sunlight on his limbs. The hermit watched him, marvelling at his beauty: the perfect proportion of face and form, the great length of body, the amber tones of his flesh, his dark eyes gleaming with a new knowledge.

In a powerful flash of movement, Nagrai dived beneath the water, a deep ripple stirring behind him. And for a moment the hermit thought that he would not return. And part of him wished that he wouldn't—that he would change his path while there was still time.

And as the hermit stood there under the trees, wondering, waiting, something made him lift his eyes to an undulating plain that rose beyond the clearing. A raised stretch of land that led to a hillock in a dense wood. At the heart of which was a sacred grove. A place where no one had ever gone. Except for him. Long ago, where he had meditated for endless days, unending nights. He found himself thinking of it again now.

The surface of the river burst apart. As swiftly as he had disappeared, Nagrai rose out of the waters, heaving himself up. He stepped onto the bank. He picked up a dark cloth the hermit had left for him on the ground, and draped it around his waist.



'I was not at peace,' said Nagrai, tasting the sound of his words. He sat inside the hut, cross-legged on the bare floor.

'I didn't understand my need. But I would swim up towards—' he lifted his eyes, 'The habitation of your kind.'

Outside, the trees scraped against the dark.

'One day I entered a distant waterway. The stream was swift and I found myself near a flatland with grazing animals. I hid beside the water's edge. That's when it happened. I heard a melody. The music — it was piercing. It tore me inside. I could not understand it, I could not resist it. It was as if I was melting in a fire. I had to move closer to it. And I did. And there, I saw a youth sitting against a tree. He was playing the reed. The birds in the trees were hushed. All was still. The animals raised their heads, listening. I came closer to the bank. A strange trembling seized me, and I moved to the rhythm of the sound. Then the music stopped. And I saw a figure walking towards him, in the twilight. It was dark, but I could see she was a female of your race.' Nagrai paused, his eyes intent.

'I knew about the beauty of your kind, but had never seen it so close. She walked towards him and he held her, in a deep embrace. She sat with him under the tree. She looked smooth and warm. I could feel what they felt. I felt it devouring me. A pain in my whole being. But I wanted it. I wanted it more. And I swam closer to the bank. And I rose out of the water,' his eyes riveted to the floor. 'They looked up. They saw me. And they screamed. I saw my reflection in the water. I was terrifying.'

The hermit listened. Outside, the night hummed through the trees.

'I sank back into the stream and swam away from there.' Nagrai closed his eyes, as if recalling a dream, as if yearning to forget it, a prisoner to an energy lashing through his body.

A moment passed. The hermit sat across from him, watching in silence, the complete absorption on Nagrai's face.

'It kept growing inside me. I couldn't stay away. I followed it again. It took me to a secluded part of the water that swirled around in small whirlpools. I realised I was at the bottom of a spring. Above me the night was dark, and the moon whiter than it had ever been. Cautious this time, I swam to the surface.'

'I saw large grounds leading to the edges of the forest. The pool was fringed with thick shrubs. And for a while I felt at peace. And I knew I could stay. For a while. And I stayed.'

'But then I heard a voice. A face looking down through the water, as if it were looking at me. I rose to the edge of the pool. And I saw her. She lay on the grass, under the trees that glowed in the light of day as if it were night, illuminated in those green shadows, as if by moonlight. I cannot describe her. All I know is that her hair was long, dark as the night, her face a reflection of the moon and stars. She moved like the night wind. I saw her limbs outlined in her clothes. She was real, and she wasn't.'

'I watched her. I watched her as she lay on her back, her eyes closed, her body undulating through the grass, her hand trailing in the water. I could see it. She was not at peace in her world.' Nagrai paused. He looked up from the floor, gazing straight ahead. 'She was so close. In one moment I could have reached across, I could have touched her.' His dark eyes glowed with a strange light. The sound of his breath rasped through the silence. His lips were parted slightly.

'I had to leave before she could see me,' he said. 'And when she was gone, I could not bear it. I wanted her. And I wanted it to end. That suddenness. That longing. That loneliness. I lost my way in the water. I struck against jagged rocks,' he put his hand to his side, to the wound he

had forgotten, a fading scar remaining where a dark gash had been. ‘That is when you found me.’



The night was fitful with gusts of rain.

Nagrai lay on the reed bed, awake, sleepless. But the hermit, who sat deep in his meditations all night, told him to rest, and that, ‘The new day will bring the answers you seek.’

At dawn, Nagrai went to the river. Lifting his arms to the sun, the warm blood coursing through his body. He stood on the bank and looked at his reflection in the clear, flowing water.

When he returned, his skin and his hair wet from the river, he saw that the hermit had prepared a simple meal for them.

‘Come,’ said the hermit. And they sat on the floor and ate in silence.

The sun streaming inside, wet with the night’s rain, a cool yellow shade through the open door.

‘Wait till nightfall,’ the hermit said, as he rose to put the bowls away, his back turned. ‘You shouldn’t leave until then. You took a big risk before.’

He came and sat on the floor, across Nagrai. ‘I know who you are seeking. The one you want is Himal. The daughter of the ruler,’ he waved his hand in the direction of the door, indicating the region that rose up the flatlands into the mountains. He waited, for that knowledge to awaken an understanding, for it to change something.

But it didn’t. There was only one word that mattered, one word that Nagrai absorbed like air. ‘*Himal*,’ he said softly to himself.

‘It will not be as easy as you think.’

Slowly, Nagrai lifted his eyes.

‘The king is besieged by warring tribes. All he desires is wealth to protect his kingdom,’ the hermit held his gaze. ‘He keeps his daughter in seclusion, to be married to one who would pay a great treasure for her, in

exchange.'

Nagrai turned his face and looked towards the trees. The birds calling, rustling through the leaves; the day lengthening, thinning with every passing moment. The anticipation beating powerfully through him, Nagrai smiled to himself — a slash of white in the sleek amber of his face. 'You know that I command treasures, the like of which his kingdom has never seen before.'

The hermit looked down and shook his head, a half-smile on his face. *Youth*, he thought. *The same in all its forms.*

Nagrai stood, pacing the floor slowly. The sure, golden length of his body. Taming the growing restlessness inside him.

'You know no fear, because you have never felt it,' said the hermit. 'Nor will it be the test you have to face. But it will be hers,' he lifted his gaze from the floor, he looked at Nagrai. 'Endurance. Endurance is what you will come to know. And faith. You will give up your world for hers. But what will you expect from her? What will she be ready to give? What will she be *able* to give? You know that you are bound by the oath of ancestry, and you know that when she asks, when it is her time to know, you will not be able to refuse her.'

Nagrai walked. The wood inside the hut creaked like branches at his steps.

'You are aware of the cost, Nagrai. And even though you cannot know it yet, I know you are aware it will be greater to bear than what you're feeling now.'

In the distance, they heard voices echoing through the darkening air. People filling their vessels from the rushing streams, the sounds of a day folding itself, drawing to a close. And as the people's footsteps faded down the mountain path to the villages below, the hermit looked at Nagrai with his wise old eyes, telling him, despite it all, to go find his destiny.

Nagrai held his gaze a moment. Then he bowed, to receive the blessing, and turned towards the river. The proud strength of his shoulders shone

with a sinuous movement as he walked, parting the trees, drawing them to him, disappearing through the foliage.



The days lengthened. The stillness gnawing at her, Himal sought her refuge with a greater compulsion now, away from the confines of the palace walls, down between the trees where she could breathe the open air and feel free; as if that were her one act of resistance. Her one way of pushing away the inevitable.

She lay down on the grass, the ground soft and green under her body. She tried to shut her mind to it, but it persisted — the feeling that it would be any day now. The dread of an unknown future being planned for her. A stranger laying claim to everything she was and hadn't been allowed to be. And yet something inside her resisted, held on to the conviction that, even though it wasn't in her power, she would never allow it.

Her fingers dipped in the water of the pool, her eyes closed, holding on to a dream, amorphous yet so complete; the moon burning softly behind her lids. The hours drifted. She hadn't kept track of time.

Something blotted out the light. And her face was covered in darkness. A deep blue shade over her skin, the colour of her mantle spread under her body.

Slowly, Himal opened her eyes. Etched against the night, a shadow loomed, eclipsing the light of the moon. She blinked, her vision still threaded to her dream. Maybe it was a tree, bending in the breeze. But the night was still.

Suddenly, the shadow began to move. Coming around to lean over her. Or was it she that was spinning? Himal heard a voice. Or she thought she did. The sound stirring from the numbness of her reverie. A sound that seemed to rise out from inside her. An intimate sensation. She saw a face. She had grown up knowing the faces of princes, but had never

envisioned one as magnificent as the one that looked down at her now. It made her wonder if she had gone into another world; in her fevered mind, she thought him a woodland deity who had appeared to alleviate her plight. But it was a man, a man who stepped out of the darkness, and was standing over her.

Himal staggered to her feet. Her heart swelling in a violent spasm.

'Don't be afraid,' Nagrai said softly, lifting his hand. Although the look on her face told him he didn't need to.

What her heart thudded against was not fear, but disbelief. A breathless inability to trust what she was seeing.

His voice was low, hypnotic. Her eyes took in the length of his body. At his waist hung a strange jewel, a glittering red stone, darker than a ruby, bigger than a man's clenched fist. Her stunned gaze rested on the perfect angles of his face, chiselled in the moonlight. The thick, black glint of his hair. The fine, sharp peak of his forehead.

'Who are you?' she breathed.

Nagrai smiled. 'I come seeking refuge,' he said. 'I know about your father. And I know about his kingdom.' She saw the moonlight catch in his eyes. 'And I know this land well. I chose this place, because no one can enter your grove,' he looked at her, 'Because no one *can*.'

His voice held her. Its hold smooth, mesmerising. She could hardly comprehend, hardly question anything he was saying. A spell broken only when Himal's attendants stepped onto the balcony, in the distance, and called out to her; her name echoing through the trees.

She moved with a shock then, backing away, looking over her shoulder at the palace, in panic. *Protecting* him. Not wanting anyone to know he was there.

Nagrai smiled, and stepped back into the shadows.

Himal turned from him then, not realising that she too, was smiling. And then she ran, rushing towards the winding stairs. Her heart pounding through her skin, as if it existed outside of her.



She turned in her bed all night, watching the ceiling, her forehead warm and damp. She hadn't slept, restless for the hours to pass. And when a red glow streaked the blue night, she paced the floor, wringing her hands. Would he be there again? Why would he? Maybe he had realised his error, trusting her about his access into the grove. *Why* had he trusted her?

The morning rituals made her ill with impatience. She dressed in haste, pushing off the jewels, their fettered clasp unbearable to her now. When her parents entered her room, they were shocked to find her wild-eyed and unresponsive.

'I am fine,' she replied simply to their questions.

But the king looked at her uneasily, and saw that her confinement was beginning to affect her health. The cost of an irrevocable condition. He couldn't afford it, and there was nothing he could do about it. Too much rode on the value of her beauty and well-being. On his way out, he commanded her attendants to make sure she didn't linger in the gardens too late at night.

Himal sped across the grounds. Her hair flowing down her back. Her throat dry, her gaze eager and unsure.

The pool spread before her with its placid, fathomless waters. She looked at it accusingly. He wasn't there.

The early morning sun flecked the black-green leaves. She turned from tree to tree, trying to remember which way he had come. Disappointment, desperation, hope, spinning inside her.

'Himal.'

His voice came from a grove behind her. A shiver went through her, and she turned.



When he parted from her at night, she never asked him where he went. In her loneliness, in the desperate fear of losing him, all she held on to was the assurance that he would be there again. And he was.

He had entered her life, carrying the secret grove with him when he walked. He had come to her, when she had dared to dream, when she had lain beside the water, and closed her eyes and wished for her deliverance.

She didn't question him about his hidden access, didn't seek to know anything beyond what he had told her himself.

What he had told her. It was as close to the truth as it could be. It was as further from it as it had to be.

'I belong to a country beyond these mountains,' he said. 'My kingdom is besieged by unrest.'

She had found him in that one place that was solely hers, as if the groves themselves had come to life.

'We all have our own ways,' he looked at her, 'Of fighting our battles.'

She saw nothing, heard nothing, but his presence beckoning her.

The moon dappled the night.

'Until I go back, I will stay here. In your land.'

Her breath caught on the smooth rasp of his voice.

And then a smile. 'You are the only one who knows,' he said. His eyes, magnetic, burning through the dark with a light that was theirs alone. He stood beside her, under the trees. He moved closer. 'Will you guard my secret?'

He was asking her. Asking something so immense of her, whom no one had considered capable of any purpose, of any existence of her own. She who was nothing. She who was someone who had never even begun.

He made her feel like she was someone she hadn't met yet, like she was someone she wanted to know. He made her feel that she could do what he asked of her, that she could do more, so much more. She could do *anything*. And in guarding that secret, and in protecting his presence, he became for her something inextricable from her own being. As she had

become, already, for him.

When Nagrai looked into her face, what he saw was a trust she would carry wherever he would take her. *Faith*. He remembered the hermit's words.

This. This could be his life, with her. Maybe, he thought, she would never have to know.

He gave himself over to something where he had no control. Exhilarating, overpowering. He succumbed to it, he strained against it, wanting her near, as he watched her, at the end of the night, walking away towards the stairs. He braced himself against the grinding ache, the writhing turmoil that reared up in the wait. The hours he had to face until he would see her again.

And as Himal walked up the steps, wrapped in a daze, oblivious to the time that had slipped past all caution, it was Nagrai, his eyes quick to seize the faintest movement, who saw the distant lamp burning in her room, extinguished suddenly by her attendants who had glimpsed them together, from afar.

And as he stood there, in the dark between the trees, he smiled, glad for it, and waited for the day to dawn.



They took longer to come than he had expected them to. A delay caused, perhaps, by the daylong conflict of Himal's attendants, fearing the calamity that would follow their disclosure.

Nagrai heard them moments before they appeared. The king, armed with his sons and a contingent of guards, striding into the gardens; wrathful at this betrayal of his trust, the unthinkable attack on his reputation and pride by the presence of a stranger within the fortified walls of his palace grounds.

Nagrai watched them come. His eyes lifting, imperceptibly, over Himal

as she stood, unaware, her back towards them.

The blanched terror on her face when she turned, and stood facing her father, the greater agony in her eyes when she looked at Nagrai to tell him that it hadn't been her, she hadn't told anyone, how was it possible that they had found out— but he quelled it all with a gesture of his hand, drawing her closer to his side. And in the same instant, in one fluid movement, he turned towards the men and lifted his other hand, as if curbing their approach, and said, 'I'm not a danger to you.'

It was the most remarkable thing she had ever seen. A sight that made the blood drain from her face in wonder. In those green shadows of evening, it was just that angle of his body, the mere lift of his hand, the swift grace with which he spoke, with which he moved, with which he did everything, that made the air itself go still and submit to his presence. It made her father and her brothers stop in their tracks, flustered, stunned into silence, as if they were the ones who had stepped into Nagrai's territory.

'How did you get in?' were the only words they could say, gaping at the huge red stone that hung at his waist.

Until that moment, Himal had only seen him in slanting shadows, aspects of him refracted through the desperate secrecy of guarded time. But now, Nagrai stood there against the trees, blazing in the green dark, in a beauty so unreal it was almost menacing in its intensity. Standing with that seamless poise, that self assurance, he towered over them all, in a power and a bearing that was more than regal. And the men stood there, diminished in comparison. Because that was all that they looked like now. Men. *Ordinary*.

'I know this area well,' Nagrai replied, looking the king straight in the eye. 'Every part of the forest. Pathways and openings even you wouldn't know of.'

An inexplicable shiver ran through the king, as Nagrai revealed a knowledge that couldn't possibly belong to one man's understanding of a

land. A flawless detail that couldn't have been known by the most trained, the most assiduous army. He listened, as Nagrai described and drew out trails that spread around the kingdom, opening like secret arteries through the earth.

Disarmed, shaken by his vulnerability in the face of an almost subterranean grasp of the dangers, the weakness and advantage — all the power of a place he himself knew almost nothing of, the king barely understood what Nagrai said as he moved aside, gesturing towards the trees behind him.

Hidden between a small grove, were three large chests built as if from gleaming onyx. In the dark, a light seemed to lift from them, an aureate haze. Hesitant at first, the men stepped forward.

Stones, gems, resembling the largest black and white pearls they had ever seen, glistened in their smooth perfection. Jewels of every colour blazing in a wet translucence like a strange new galaxy.

It was a wealth no one could imagine, a treasure no royal lineage had been known to possess.

‘Whose are they?’ the king breathed.

‘They belong to me,’ said Nagrai. ‘And more, hidden throughout my kingdom.’

The men stared, blinded by the spilling chests, an abundance to conquer and command an empire.

‘I will offer them in return. While I stay. While I wait,’ Nagrai said. ‘But that is not why I choose to be here. Nor is it the reason I would offer my wealth to you.’

Disbelief hung over them, a palpable weight.

‘My reason is Himal,’ said Nagrai, with a resonant finality. His voice spreading into the night, impermeable, compelling.



Unable to comprehend that sudden turn of fortune, the enormity of the offer, Himal's father was at a loss for words; his sons barely able to conceal their reaction, fiercely waiting for their father to give his consent. It was a price none of them could have dreamed of gaining from any ruler, a treasure whose worth would enable them to extend their rule in the lowlands, and be safe from the savage onslaught of tribes beyond the mountains. And the sooner Himal was wed, the sooner would that sovereignty be theirs.

And just like that, the royal transaction was made. Himal's fate decided for her, as her father wanted it.

As *she* wanted it.

A stranger laying claim to everything she was, and everything she would be and could be from now on, because the stranger was Nagrai.

They were married within the quietness, within the privacy of the palace. In the few days that it took for the impossible to take place, time had streamed past in a whirling flash. She didn't get a chance to be alone with him.

And now, tonight, hours after the ceremony, as Himal stood before her mirror, in the private chambers of a pavilion away from the main palace, where she would live with Nagrai, her hand trembled as she removed the bridal veil from her hair. She was alone in the room, she hadn't seen Nagrai since the rites earlier that evening.

She stood in the dark, she hadn't lit the lamps, still seeking refuge behind sifting shadows, not knowing how to transition into the open fearless gaze of light with him. She looked at her face, at her body, in the mirror, and saw the self-doubt trapped under her skin; she saw the golden orbs of Nagrai's jewels crowning her hair, the only glow in the room.

She stepped out on the wide, marble terrace. The white of the floor shone in the moonlight. The night spread before her and she stood between the pillars, her eyes searching the dark. Where was he?

There. She saw him among the groves, walking towards her, his shadow moving through the trees. When he came up to the steps of the terrace, she saw that his hair was wet, his chest bare, the water streaking the sculpted lines of his body.

To go swimming at this hour? she smiled, tilting her head at the thought, a deflection to stifle the frenzied beating of her heart.

He was looking at her now as he stepped onto the terrace. He was smiling too, but differently. A confidence, an awareness, of the seconds that were ticking past, pulsing between them, timing the dance of it. His hair, slicked back, so black and smooth, the water dripping onto his neck. He didn't walk towards her, instead, he stood under the arch of a pillar, under its shadow, watching her. He was still, perfectly still. The kind of stillness no ordinary man was capable of. His head inclined just so, his preying eyes gleaming in the dark, unblinking, intent. Watching her. And that ineffable smile on his lips. And she, barely conscious of the breath locked inside her chest.

Then he took a step forward. And time moved again. It was strange, the way he came around her, taking slow measured steps sideways, walking around her, encircling her. She stood still, only her eyes turning in rhythm to him. A slow spinning rhythm. Round and round. She felt his gaze stroking her skin, her hair, her back, every side of her. She discovered her body through his eyes, as he walked around her. A winding, coiling heat.

And then suddenly, he closed the gap, and she was looking up into his face, her chest pressed against him. Gently, Nagrai ran his hands down her arms, feeling her for the first time, making his way back up, touch by touch, her forearms, her shoulders. He moved his fingers up the length of her neck, caressing the sides of her face. As if she were a novelty to him, a wonder to be treasured. Her delicate bones, her skin burning ivory in the moonlight.

She felt a fire bloom a trail wherever he touched her. She grew bold then, a little brave, and she lifted her hand to his face, a desire so strong it

shone a reverence in her eyes. Hesitant, shaking almost, her finger traced his mouth, stroking the shape of it, his lips parting slightly at her touch, the slight graze of his tongue against her finger.

It was strange, the way he was looking at her. His eyes staring into hers, immersed in them, she could see his heart beating through them. She could feel it, the luminous pounding, coming from every part of him.

When he bent down, he was tender at first, his lips careful, exploring that newness with her. And then, he opened himself and drew her in, as much as she poured herself to him.

Her hands on the back of his neck, she felt the power and the might of him. It was there in his mouth, in his jaw, in the way each muscle, each tendon worked to an inexhaustible energy, subsumed to the call of a single instinct. He was a world, another world. He took her through the rush and the force, the rustle and the tangle of the wild, as if the black-green forests coursed through his amber body, into her. At times, suddenly, he would stop, and look down into her face, his eyes searching hers. And Himal would look up at him, and smile, reassuring him. She had the strength to take it.



Days, nights, months went by in a whirl of ecstasy.

Armed with their newfound wealth, the king and his sons were away in the lowlands, annexing new territories, growing their name below the mountains. They built a large army of warriors, and their fame as conquerors spread far and wide.

It was understood that until his land was freed, Nagrai and Himal would continue to live within the protection of the palace. An entire compound was given to them, at a separate end of the palace grounds, where no one intruded into their space.

Everything was as they wanted it to be, and the two of them withdrew

into a world entirely of their own. Alone in their pavilion, they looked at each other, and whatever reality they had known till then, burned down like smoke, moving into a shadow land of dreams. They watched the moon set behind the trees, Nagrai's voice enveloping her, when he said her name, and in their union everything that their lives had been, awoke anew to another consciousness together.

They would sit by the water's edge in the moonlight, she would wake with him, holding him close, walking with him among the groves where they spent long hours.

While she swelled with life, blooming to a fullness, a bliss she had never thought possible, it was Nagrai who sometimes struggled with an unease that fell between them like a third presence, making him withdraw into a silence she could not reach.

He kept close to her at night. When she slept he would stay awake, watching over her with troubled eyes, as if afraid that if he looked away she wouldn't be there anymore.

'Will it always be like this?' he whispered, when he leaned over her, his skin woven with hers. That ceaseless lure of his face, suddenly so hunted. 'Will you always love me as you do now?'

Himal looked up into his eyes. He. *He* was asking her that. He who was her reason to be, he for whom she would walk to the ends of the earth. How could she respond to a question like that. How could she know how to.

She moved her hands through his hair, felt the rich black strength of them. She closed her eyes so he wouldn't see the wetness that filled them. 'Always,' she said. 'In every life.' She pressed her lips to him, and drew him down into her embrace.



The balmy months passed. Himal missed the indolence of the days, the warm moonlit nights of summer, the stars bright and glowing in the sky,

now covered with a veil of winter mist.

The forests loomed sinisterly with their shadows. The high mountain range had its snowfall, and the frozen peaks glittered under the moon with an eerie light.

Himal shivered and stayed indoors, watching that somnolent blanket of hibernation sweeping down the world outside. But Nagrai seemed more at peace. A calm passed over him as he looked at the frozen lakes and pools. Whatever his trepidation had been, that coil of worry now fell away; his eyes no longer darting to the side or over his shoulder when they stepped through the thicket.

The cold north winds came in icy blasts and rocked the palace walls. A thick sheet of snow enveloped the forests. From their open pavilion they saw the lone tracks of the Himalayan lynx come down the mountains. The stalking glint of golden eyes. The pointed ears pricked at every sound. They heard the howl of wolves seeking food. Deers and antelopes venturing to their door to escape their predators. The mountain hawk's shriek as it swooped onto an unsuspecting bird and tore it with its claws.

One morning, while he still slept, Himal rose from the bed and gazed at the white unbroken sweep of snow outside. She covered herself in thick robes and belted them at her waist. She pulled on sturdy shoes and laced them at her knees. She drew up her hair and coiled it under a warm turban of woollen drapes.

She leaned over Nagrai. 'Come, I want to walk in the snow with you.' Her face was flushed, her eyes sparkling with adventure. 'I want to feel the cold wind on my face. I want to see the creatures that have come down the mountains.'

Nograi smiled through his sleep, at the rush in her voice, the fervent pull of her hands.

He opened his eyes and gazed at her a moment. 'You know' he said slowly, his eyes on her clothes, 'You make a beautiful boy,' he laughed and gripping her hand pulled her down onto the bed.

Laughing, she dodged him, and dragged him outside with her.

It was another world beyond the palace. Foxes and mountain cats flashing behind the trees, sheltering from the falling snow.

Himal moved between great mounds of ice under the hillocks, wide-eyed and child-like in her wonder. Nagrai walked behind her, indulgent at her excitement.

He sat on a raised edge of ground, watching her wander a little further on. Her back was turned to him as she bent down, tossing feathery balls of snow into the air, shouting in delight.

She didn't see how his eyes swerved away from her, for one brief moment. How they turned towards the wild tangle of forests that spread down below. That complete stillness, that intentness coming over him again. She didn't see the flicker of a spasm that rolled beneath his skin, like the lick of a flame in a fire. She didn't see how the moment came and vanished in one blink of his eyes.

A soft thud. Soundless like the fall of velvet. Nagrai sensed it coming before he heard it. His shoulders tensed. The muscles pulling up, hard and ready. He turned his face to the right.

It came slinking down the side of the hill, like an illusion of ice and snow. Its white fur gouged with spots of black. It bent low and pounced effortlessly onto the edge of the slope, pressing down on its legs, in wait, in readiness, as it stalked Himal. The ice-green eyes of the snow leopard, focused and unblinking, in the imminent attack. Until they flicked to the left.

Oblivious to what stood behind her, Himal turned, wanting Nagrai to come to her. The words died in her throat when she saw the animal, crouched in front, one lunge away from her.

But the snow leopard's head was turned towards Nagrai. And what she saw made her forget the danger she was in.

Nagrai sat still. Utterly still. His body angled towards the snow leopard. He didn't move. He didn't blink. He didn't make a sound. But his shoulders were lifted just so, his head lowered, as if a force would strike

out of his body any second, like a flash of lightning. A heat gleamed off his skin, swift and lethal. The tight set of his mouth was as fierce as it was beautiful. His eyes were levelled, flaring with a strange light. He seemed more a predator than the animal that stared back at him.

The snow leopard opened its jaws. Not in menace, but in fear. It let out a hissing cough, shuddering into a low growl, as its body began to curl back. Pressing itself flat against the ground, it withdrew its steps back up the slope. Then it whipped around, its tail lashing the air, and bounded up the hill, disappearing through the trees.

The danger was gone, but the terror was still frozen inside Himal, like the ice in her hands.

'*Nagrai?*' her voice trembled.

He turned his face from the slope. Before she had steadied her mind, his arms were around her, her face pressed against his shoulder. And everything dissipated against his tenderness. And she closed her eyes in that heady warmth. She felt safe, she felt protected. Nothing mattered beyond each other.



Soon the thaw set in. Spring came with the rush of renewal; blossoms burst and the green of leaves pooled through the earth. The ice melted, and the great cataracts roared down the mountains.

Himal, radiant, felt the joy of nature around her, and moved like she was part of it. She never thought about that day again. Never expressed what she had felt. The power he had seemed to have over the animal. The strange movement of his body, that almost alien strength emanating from him, against the threat in front.

Without realising it, she became more attentive to the smallest change in him, the slightest flicker of a mood. She saw that the distraction had returned to his face. His eyes, clouded over with something that seemed

almost like a dark premonition, when he looked at the warm waters of the pool, opening to the turn of the season.

She observed how he never went into the water with her. Even now, as dusk lengthened into night, and she waded through the pool, Nagrai only sat at the edge, watching her.

She swam through the smooth, wide folds of water. Looking back at him over her shoulder. She saw his eyes turned towards the thicket, as if he had caught sight of an intruder, as if he were sensing one. But there was no one there.

And something made her think of how, sometimes late at night, she would feel him slip into bed beside her, his skin, his hair wet, as if he had just returned from a swim.

'Come into the water with me!' she tried to coax him. Playfully she hid behind the reeds, 'Help! I'm drowning!'

Nagrai heard the undertone of laughter in her voice, and smiling, shook his head and walked over to where she was. He reached across and pulled her in, despite her protestations. He lifted her up in his arms, and carried her back to their pavilion.

The night closing in behind them. Warm, dark, inevitable, and beyond his control.

A full spring moon cast a golden glow on everything it touched.

Nagrai was awake. Nothing, tonight, could give him the rest he was seeking. The unusual luminosity portending a night that would weave a magic to ensnare, to reveal, and to accept all that had to be.

Himal stirred in her sleep, her hair spread out under her. Her skin, diaphanous in the azure dark. Nagrai bent close to her, wanting to hold the moment forever. Absorbing her presence to still the pain, the fear in his heart.

Fear.

You know no fear, because you have never felt it. Fear won't be the test

you have to face.

You were wrong, said Nagrai.

Sleepily, Himal held out her arms to him. ‘Come close to me.’

Nograi lay down, holding her against him. But now, as Himal closed her eyes, all she saw was his apprehension outlined in the dark.

‘When will you take me home, to your kingdom?’ she said, her hand over his chest.

Home she had said.

‘Won’t you miss your life here?’ he said after a while.

‘The only life I know is with you.’

‘Anywhere?’

‘Anywhere.’



At dawn, not finding Nagrai with her, Himal went looking for him among the groves. She found him near a small cataract at the end of the palace grounds. But seeing him there, like that, made her stand back behind the trees, wondering at a side of him she had not known before. His eyes were closed, his palms together.

When he returned to the terrace, there was a weight to his silence, a weariness that made him lie down. In her anxiousness, what she saw as enervation, as a lack of sleep from the night before, was only the beginning of an endurance Nagrai himself was not aware of yet. As if a part of him knew, had sensed, resigned to an acceptance, against his will, that today would be a day of reckoning.

‘What were you praying for?’ she asked him, her fingers stroking his forehead.

Nograi looked up at her face, closing his eyes to the rhythm of her touch. ‘For you and me.’

From a distant end of the terrace, through the marble carving of the parapet, Himal glimpsed a movement near the gates.

Gently, she released her hand from Nagrai's hold as he drifted into sleep.

Down below, past an open slit of the gates, she caught sight of a group of people crowded around a large wicker basket. She recognised the rough cloth, the motley colours worn by the gypsy women who moved from village to village selling ancient wares.

It pulled her curiosity. Knowing she wouldn't be gone long, Himal stepped down the stairs.

The seller was a young woman. A sharpness to her face, the eyes hard and staring.

Himal felt unnerved by her presence, instinctively regretting allowing her inside the gates. The woman laid her basket upon the ground, at the entrance of the palace. Avoiding her gaze, Himal bent down and sifted through the wares. Clinking pieces of marble and stone shuffled against her hand, scattering like hard pieces of sand. Until her fingers swept over a smooth, hard object resting underneath. A yellow glow struck her skin. She drew it out. It was huge. A glittering stone. An amulet. Blazing in her hand, like a golden diamond. The like of which she had never seen before. But she had.

'Where did you find—'

'It belongs to him,' said the gypsy woman, cutting her. Her voice flat, her words as penetrating as they were expressionless. 'Ask him.'

Himal said nothing. Holding the amulet in her hands, her throat struck dry by the light, the shock it threw over her, blinding her to the woman who rose without asking for anything in return and walked away, turning from the gates before the guards could see her, disappearing behind the trees that led down to the pool.



Nagrai opened his eyes. He saw Himal coming towards him.

Something wasn't right. The way she walked. The slow, leaden steps. The look on her face, blank and unreadable with the questions it carried.

The sun flashed against something in her hand. It struck a gold beam, across to him. He didn't blink, he didn't shade his eyes.

She held it out in her palm. Showing it to him. He didn't say a word. He looked at it as if she were offering it to him. As if she were returning it to him. His amulet.

He placed his hand over it.

'There was a woman from the village—' she stammered, her voice fading, and she didn't know why. 'She was selling these wares and—'

His silence stilled the words inside her.

'She wasn't from the village,' was all he said.

Himal saw him press the stone into his palm, as if it would dissolve into his skin.

A large, bronze basin stood against the wall.

'Fill that vessel with milk,' Nagrai said softly. A voice so remote, so patient, Himal couldn't say anything in return, only did as he asked, her hands shaking.

Nagrai stepped towards the vessel. He looked at her then. And what she saw in his eyes was a sorrow so deep it glistened like the golden diamond in his hand. A pain that had transcended itself, going past the fear of loss, to a place where nothing remained. Nothing but the cold hard despair of acceptance. His face was calm, strangely resolute. He looked at Himal as if it were the last time he ever would, as if the only thing he wanted was to retain every memory of her, engraved into his soul.

She didn't understand. She couldn't have understood. That sense of finality rearing up from somewhere beneath her feet, till she felt she had nothing to stand on. 'Nagrai?' she said.

He turned his face from her. 'Vidura,' he said. 'His name is Vidura.' His voice coming from somewhere so far away. 'Go to the sanctuary under

the hills, where the rivers meet. To the clearing where he lives. He will tell you everything that I could not.'

He stepped into the vessel.

The moment passed in the spiral of an instant. Nagrai's form disappeared, not in the air, but as if drawn down into the surface of the milk. He was gone. And then it crashed out. Splintering the sides of the vessel. The immense black twists, whipping high into the air. Unfurling its great dizzying length, till the giant hood opened, and poised itself, looking down at Himal. And as she stood under the glistening coils of the black cobra towering over her, the shock severed her voice from her throat, and her scream rent through her mind, till her vision blacked out.



When she opened her eyes she was lying on the floor. Cracked pieces of bronze rocking silently on their edge. The smooth spill of milk pooling across the marble floor, coming up to the side of her face. Cold. Wet.

She sat up. She was alone. Her feet slipped as she stood, staggering on her balance.

She rushed from corner to corner of the pavilion. She searched inside the rooms. He was gone.

She came back out where the vessel lay broken on the floor. She shrank from it. She pressed her hands to the sides of her head and closed her eyes, shaking the nightmare out of her.

She ran towards the groves. *He will be back.* He had gone for a walk in the forests. She would wait for him near the trees, by the pool. He would be back any moment. She would wait for him, right there.

The hours dripped past her like dew. The cold, wet clamp of grass soaking her clothes. The black-green night pressing in on her like an ominous presence.

He didn't come.

He was gone.

The image returned. She squeezed her eyes shut to it, shaking her head repeatedly. She had imagined it. She had imagined it all. She pushed it as far out of her mind as she could, till the unreality of it spiralled back at her, at her own unreality — there, as she sat all alone once again, all alone, as alone as she had been before Nagrai had entered her life. All alone, as if he had never existed. All alone in that grove, that had once been her source of life, and now closed in around her till she felt she could not breathe.

She screamed into the empty air. A long, desolate cry. It struck against the trees, and echoed back to her. Startling the birds. A sound of the wild.

And in the echo, she heard a voice. And she remembered. *Vidura. His name is Vidura. Go to the sanctuary under the hills, where the rivers meet. To the clearing where he lives.*



She removed her ornaments, her ornate dress. She wrapped herself in a long dark cloak covering her down to her feet, her face half veiled.

She went down to the gates. Quietly, she left the palace grounds. No one saw her. And she took the path through the forest.

Himal ran through the tangled thicket. Her ankles beating against broken branches, the twisted roots of trees. Her eyes probing the dark tirelessly, parting it with her hands.

She came out onto the road that sloped up the hills. She had never been this far from the palace before. Alone. But she didn't hesitate.

She walked without stopping to catch her breath. Villagers, wandering men, looked at her, struck by the lone figure of a woman draped in a dark cloth, walking barefoot. There were stragglers who would come up behind her. Following her. There were times when they walked up close. And on seeing her eyes, glazed and unmoving, her slender bleeding feet

pierced by thorns and sharp stones — her complete indifference to her plight — they moved away.

She followed the sound of rushing streams. She came up to a place where the white foam poured over the rocks. The sun beat down on her, slashing her eyes. She searched the waterways. The village women, filling their jars, watched her, took pity on her, asked her what she was looking for. They pointed to a slope of land, blinding in the sunlight. Himal climbed further up, climbing without any break in her step. She saw the rivers, roaring, striking each other, a crashing confluence. She looked up and saw the clearing, a place encircled by a ring of trees. She made her way up, her hands chafing against ridges of dry earth, for support.

She heard the deep resounding silence before she entered it. She saw the solace, the tranquillity, contained between the trees. A translucent light streaming through the air. Her eyes found an old man, sitting outside an open door, the kind face lowered in meditation. Himal went towards him. Her eyes closing, her body collapsing as her feet finally came to a stop, her hand striking against the threshold of his hut, as she fell.

'Help me,' she breathed.



The healing press of salves was cool against her feet, stopping the blood, sealing the shredded skin. But she didn't feel it. She didn't feel anything. She sat on the ground, between the open doorway, her back against the thin wood frame.

The hermit sat before her. His head was lowered, his hands folded. The sorrow, the compassion, breaking quietly on his face. He had known she would come. He had hoped, he had prayed she wouldn't have had to.

Himal leaned her head back against the door. In the light of evening, her face was pale, white as bone. The shock, held in like glass. It hadn't broken, it hadn't poured yet. She was submerged beneath it. Disconnected,

dislodged. Pushed out of all feeling, all thought, by a body of ice wedged between her own self. She parted her lips and breathed. And the air that entered was nothing but ice.

The hermit sat there, wishing there was something he could say, beyond what she was there to know. He shaped his words with care, knowing how the smallest truth would rip and burn a skin that was already torn.

He pointed to an undulating plain that rose beyond the clearing — a raised stretch of land leading to a hillock in a dense wood — a wood, at the heart of which was a grove that guarded a sacred pool. Far beneath its surface, spread a vast water kingdom, vast as a sea; its conduits all around, leading to every river, every stream. It was a secret habitat, the realm of a huge mass of sacred snakes, worshippers of the deity of the mountains who had granted them the boon to attain a human form when their body touched the earth; a boon of protection, for their kind.

Slowly, a whole universe opened in her mind. Himal saw the dark cold world of the snakes, the world Nagrai had left behind. Their immense length, living deep in the waterways, sometimes following the currents of rivers and streams to hunt for larger prey, always moving in secret, to hide from the race of men. They kept close together, but the king cobra was always alone. And when the time came for the stronger and the younger to overpower it, the older cobra following the decree of its ancestry, found an opening in the water and disappeared into the deep recesses of the mountains, and was never seen again.

'Nagrai is the king cobra now,' said the hermit.

Himal closed her eyes.

'When I saw him, thrashing in the waters, tangled in his coils, wounded by the rocks in the river, he was the largest snake I had ever seen. The largest of his kind.'

His name inside her body. Nagrai. *Nagrai*.

'When he came out of the water, when his body touched land and he changed his form, and sat here on this floor, he told me about it all. And

he told me about you,' the hermit's eyes rested on Himal, the sorrow in them the only balm he could offer her. 'He told me why, in spite of his superior powers, he had chosen to leave his kingdom. He told me how he had wandered alone, in the waterways, a longing for another world growing painfully inside him. The gift of the boon slowly destroying him.'

She swallowed, her throat dry, nothing there but ice. Her senses, disengaged from her body. And she saw it all, watched it all as it had been. She saw herself, alone in the gardens, lying on the grass, her eyes closed, her hand trailing in the water. The great snake rising silently out of the pool, watching her. The frightened cry of birds in the trees. Nothing there but a circling ripple. And she, never asking him where he went, never asking him how he had entered the walls of the palace grounds. Nagrai, never going into the water in front of her, always a new vigour and energy to him when he returned to bed late at night, his skin and his hair wet. Nagrai, the king cobra, bending everyone and everything around him to wonder and submission. Nagrai, the king of the forest, striking terror in the lethal jaws of the snow leopard.

'He knew, that at some stage, he would have to face the question of his identity. And he hid from it. And he discovered fear. And he hid that fear from you.'

Softly, the wind fanned the air. The birds folded their wings inside the trees.

'He was bound by the oath of ancestry. And he knew that if his identity were revealed, he would have to go back to the realm of the snakes, and never return to his human form again. He would lose his boon forever. And lose so much more.'

Himal opened her eyes.

'He knew the cost. He risked it all. For you. He abandoned all trace of himself in the world beneath the waters, and stepped into yours.'

Himal looked at the hermit, holding his gaze for the first time.

'The wealth he owned, the wealth you saw, was the wealth he

commanded in his world. They were sacred stones. The snake stones of his kingdom,' he said. 'That golden diamond you handed him—' he paused, hesitating, 'Was no jewel. It was his own *Nagamani*. The stone that bound him to his snake form. The one stone he had left behind.' The words burned through the air. 'The woman who gave it to you, was of Nagrai's own kind. A female snake who had changed her form, because that was the only way she could ensnare him, the only way she could return his stone to him. Through you,' he said brokenly. 'That was the only way she could separate him from you.'

'*Why?*' said Himal. A low, strangled sound.

'*Why* you ask,' the gentle eyes misted by a fathomless wisdom, 'Think of it as if it were your world. The highest of you, the best of you, gets away, disappears, turns his back on his world in his quest for an alien one. Think of the pall of gloom he leaves behind. The loss, the emptiness. The thwarted desire. And then the jealousy, the vengeance, in the knowledge that he has abandoned his own kind, choosing instead to be with one — with *you* — who doesn't even know who he is.'

It came back to her now. Rushing, relentless. Nagrai's unrest when spring melted the ice over the waters, his eyes darting through the undergrowth, sensing the danger, protecting her, keeping her safe. She could see it now: the female snake, following him, moving stealthily up the waterway, hiding under the surface of the pool. Waiting. Watching them together. Hissing with venom, with hatred for Himal. Waiting for the chance to strike at her. Knowing that as long as Nagrai was around Himal, she could not touch her.

'*Why?*' Himal shook her head, '*Why isn't he coming back?*' her voice rose, the blood seeping back, clawing into her veins. '*Why won't he change his form and come back?*' there was only a fire now, blinding red, a fire of anguish. '*Why can't everything be as it was?*'

It was in the way the hermit refused to meet her eyes that Himal understood what she had done.

‘The oath of ancestry—’ her lips went white against the words. ‘*He can’t . . .*’ Her voice lost its sound. ‘It was me. I did it. I returned it to him—’ She bent over in the ghastly horror of the pain.

She lifted her face, the burning agony pouring down. ‘It is all over, isn’t it?’ her voice bled. ‘*It is all over.*’

‘No, child,’ the hermit shook his head, he looked at her mournfully. ‘It has only just begun.’



All night, Himal sat at the edge of the clearing, staring into the trees. She didn’t leave. The great wide dark spread before her, pulsating with a sharp susurrus. The hum of night creatures stirring behind black leaves.

Helpless, the hermit turned his eyes away. He had unrolled a reed bed for her where she sat. He had left bowls of food and water on the ground. Now he sat in his hut, deep in prayer, watching her from the open doorway, knowing it was not for him to tell her what she must do.

In the morning, he found her by the rivers, her eyes watching the waters mesh in a force of sound and light. She sat there for hours, tracing each line of ripple, rising, disappearing into hidden waterways, entranced as if it were the string of an instrument whose sound she was following, unravelling it back to a beginning.

The hermit knew the shock still held her in its grip, that she wasn’t yet awake to what she was seeking to come up against. But she had chosen it, and nothing would deter her.

‘You have seen the future,’ she said, when she heard him standing behind her. ‘Will I find him again?’

‘Your worlds have diverged Himal,’ said the hermit. ‘Your story with him, as it was, has ended. It is not for me to see a path that is yet to be,’ he looked at her as she turned to face him. ‘A path that is yours to create.’

