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PRIYA

On the first day, they made her kneel.

There, at the base of the Hirana, on soil laden with flowers, she lowered herself down. Her clothes were already filthy from her long journey. It didn't matter that the ground made her filthier. The yaksa with her brother's face had told her to kneel, so she had.

He bowed over her. Leaves surrounded her. It was like being beneath the boughs of a great tree.

"Priya," he said. "Wait here. Will you wait?"

What else could she do? She had come here, hadn't she? If a yaksa wanted her to kneel, she would. If they wanted her to walk again—walk and walk until her feet bled and she reached the edge of the world, and beyond—then she would. What else could she do but obey?

She was so impossibly tired.

"Yes," she said thinly. "I will."

The shadows of his leaves, points of cool darkness on her skin, rustled. They drifted away, leaving her in bare sunlight.

She was alone now, in silence, but the green was a cry in her ears: the susurrations of growing things. The sharp, sap-bright crack of things rising from the soil, gasping for sunlight. All of Ahiranya, under her knees, inside her, around her.

Someone was approaching.

She raised her head again. But this figure did not tower over her. This ghost was small, slight—no more than a boy. Silvery, flat eyes. Soft petals flowering from his shoulders.

"Nandi?" Her mouth shaped his name without her say-so. Her little temple brother. A memory struck her like a clear bell: Nandi laughing, cheeks dimpled.

Nandi, lying dead on the ground in a burning room.

This Nandi smiled. Too many sharp teeth.

She touched the ground beneath him. Green things were growing beneath his bare feet. The world at this angle was all vibrant soil and falling leaves the color of moonlight. He curled his toes, and she heard the click of wood.

“You’re not Nandi,” she said. “I am sorry.” She bowed, or tried to bow, in the way she’d always done before the effigies of the yaksa, with her forehead pressed to the ground and her hands beneath her. But her body had other ideas, and took that moment to collapse. Mouth full of dirt.

Hands on her upper arms. Lifting her back to her knees. The yaksa wearing Ashok’s face was holding her up.

“You’re tired,” Nandi said. “Come with us.”

“Where is Bhumika?”

“Come with us,” he said again, and it was not a gentle urging any longer. It was an order. And because it was an order, her body obeyed. She rose, until she was standing. Walking.

She followed the two yaksa to the Hirana. There, in front of her, were familiar carvings. Familiar stone, weathered and ancient. She felt an ache: a pang like homesickness or homecoming.

Nandi touched a hand to the stone and it shifted, parting to open a way for them. The tunnel ahead was dark, but it called to her. She heard a song inside it.

My sapling.

Into the darkness she went. She walked, and walked, and the darkness opened—softened by blue light. And there before her were the deathless waters, and before it three more figures. Against the light behind them they were faceless, fleshless. No more than shadow.

A sudden fear gripped her heart like a fist. A yaksa would step forward wearing Bhumika’s face. Bhumika, hollowed out, with flowering eyes and wooden smile, Bhumika gone—

Then one stepped forward, and it was Sanjana.

It was better. Terrible, but better, and when Sanjana told her to kneel again Priya did so without complaint, with something almost like thankfulness.

Elder Chandni and Elder Sendhil followed, and for a brief moment Priya wondered, wildly, whether she had died. How could she be meeting the dead if she were still alive?

“Priya,” Sanjana said softly. She stepped behind Priya and took hold of her hair, her touch nearly tender. She gathered it up in her hands. “You’re home.”

She felt Sanjana’s fingertips move up to her scalp—ten points of sharp touch, ten seeds ready to take root.

“Why am I here?” Priya asked. “Yaksa, ancient ones—why here, by the deathless waters? I’d do better resting in a bed.”

There was something like laughter—rustling, rippling.

“Your soul needs rest,” the yaksa who was not Sendhil said. “More than your body.”

The one wearing Ashok’s face kneeled before her.

“You carry something precious within you,” he told her, his voice hushed. He grasped her hands, turning them over. The bluish light of the deathless waters reflected on her skin, turning the brown of her palms soft gray. “We want to protect you.”

She felt the sangam pour over her—cosmic and rippling, mingling with the light of the deathless waters before her. She breathed out, only half knowing her lungs, and felt Sanjana’s nails press deeper against her scalp, points of grounding, points of pain.

Is this healing? Priya thought. *Is this rest?* It certainly didn’t feel like it. But she had stabbed Malini and watched the terror and betrayal fill her eyes. She had left Sima behind. And Bhumika—wherever Bhumika was—could not help her.

“Rest,” Nandi urged again. And Priya...

Priya closed her eyes.

On the second day, she dreamt.

She was in the sangam. Wholly, deeply, immersed in rivers of green and gold and blood red. And they were around her, the yaksa. All five of them, all utterly inhuman. Fish-scaled, flower-eyed, lichen-fleshed—river water oozing from their skin, and pearly sap adorning their finger bones. She loved them, a little, or perhaps entirely. She'd worshipped them all her life, after all. But she feared them too, and that was bitter, a sharp thorn under her tongue.

Are you hollow? the yaksa asked. *Are you ours, wholly and utterly?*

Are you hers?

Yes, she told them. Yes and yes. She had cut out her heart, after all. If they could see her soul, then surely they could see that. Her ribs of wood, and no human heart within them.

They picked at her. Picked her apart. They asked her again, and again.

Can you be trusted?

Will you stay? Will you serve?

Yes.

She isn't enough. She isn't ready. She isn't strong enough.

Words not meant for her that darted through her anyway; silvery arrows, piercing her.

Will you be what you need to be? Will you reach for her? Can you find her? Can you break your bones, your heart, your mind in her service? Can you yield?

Yield to it, Priya. Beloved. Yield.

Yes, and yes, and yes, and yes—

On the third day, she stopped counting.

Someone pressed water to her mouth. She drank.

She slept. She dreamt of the war: the churn of chariot wheels, and the Saketan warriors around her racing forward on their horses, and Sima holding up a shield to protect her.

More water. Pangs of hunger through her belly.

She was walking into the imperial court. She was sliding a knife between Malini's ribs. She was kissing Malini—kissing her even though she hadn't kissed Malini when she'd stabbed her. Kisses that tasted of blood, salt. *I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Hate me, you can hate me.*

Hate me and live.

She woke. Back in her own body, breathing and aching, sprawled in the dirt. There were flowers growing from her wrists, burrowing their heads into the soil. The yaksa were still there. She could feel them, even before she caught sight of them; kneeling as she had kneeled, as if they were tending to her, worshipping her.

She was dizzy with hunger. Her body hurt.

“Where is Bhumika?” Her voice cracked. “Where is my sister?”

Silence.

“Padma, then,” Priya said, when no answer came. “Where is she?” She rose up on her elbows, dislodging growing things—feeling the soil under her thumb at her presence. “I came back for my family,” Priya went on. “For my people. If you won't tell me about Bhumika, then at least tell me her child is safe.”

“You think we would hurt a child?” Ashok—*not* Ashok—asked. But there was something assessing in the fathomless liquid of his eyes, in the leaf-rustle rasp of his voice.

“I think I know what nature does,” Priya replied slowly. And what were the yaksa, if not nature? “And I know how I was raised. And I know... what was asked of me.”

“Do you think,” Sanjana asked, “that you have the right to ask?”

“I am an elder,” Priya said. “I am thrice-born. Who else can ask, if not me?”

They said nothing, but the silence was weighty. There was a question inside it. It reminded her of her childhood—of her elders teaching her. They were waiting for her to fill the silence herself; to give a *proper* answer.

“That's what an elder should be,” she went on, her throat sore. “The one who can ask. Not just—a worshipper. If I am wrong, yaksa, then I am—sorry.”

Elder Chandni—or the yaksa who mimicked her—leaned forward. Her dark hair was shining with water.

“Your sister ran,” Elder Chandni said. “From her duties. From her purpose, in cowardice.”

Lie. Bhumika would never have run. But as ground down as Priya was, she knew better than to say it.

“Did you kill her for it?” Priya asked. Her voice trembled. She couldn’t help it.

“No,” the yaksa wearing Ashok’s face said. His eyes were fixed on the distance—on nothing, and everything. “We did not.”

Was that a lie, too? She had not seen Bhumika in the sangam in so long.

She bowed to the earth again. Flowers against her face, the smell of petrichor seeping against her lips.

“Yaksa,” she said. “I’m only mortal. Let me go. You’ve seen enough of my soul. My body needs to rest, too. To eat and to rest.” *And I need to find my sister.*

“How long,” the yaksa asked, “do you think you have been here?”

She turned her head, looking at him, then through him, at the rivulets of shining blue water, working their way down the stone wall. How long had the water run, bleeding like light in that same pattern, for the stone to scar as it had?

“I don’t know,” she said dully.

“If you were simply human,” Sendhil murmured, “you would be dead.”

She traced her lips with her tongue. It almost felt unnatural: tasting the salt of her skin, feeling the parched dryness of her mouth. *Simply human.* What was she meant to do with those words? She knew she wasn’t simply human.

But she was human enough to be thirsty. Her knees hurt. And for all they’d been picking her apart from the soul upward, every shadowy root-and-spirit thread of her, she was more than her soul in the sangam. More than the sap under her skin. There was blood and flesh in her yet.

“You have my heart,” said Priya. “Mani Ara has my heart. And you’ve seen everything of me that matters. Let me leave here. Let me serve you properly.”

“And what service must you provide to us?” Elder Chandni prompted.

A flash of memory. Malini’s betrayed eyes. A thorn blade. The feel of blood and flesh. She knew what Malini would do.

“There’s going to be a war,” Priya said. “The Parijatdvipans—they’ll come. And you will need me. I’ll serve. Just as the elders served in the Age of Flowers.”

She raised her head, and saw as Chandni’s mouth shaped a slow smile.

“Let me out, yaksa,” Priya said. “So I can do the work you need from me.”

She almost asked again. But she bit down on her tongue instead. Begging wouldn’t get her anywhere. The yaksa would not respond to pleading. She’d learned a little more about them, in the time they had spent rummaging through her skin. She waited. Waited.

“Resting has fashioned something useful out of you,” Chandni said indulgently. “Go, then, Elder Priya. Tend to your flesh. And then we will prepare for our war.”