

KAVITHRI



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For Nisha

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Part One



Chapter 1

The last train of the day was late.

Kavi's railway porter uniform, a worn, red linen shirt, clung to her torso, and she popped the collar to blow air down her chest.

She sat huddled with the other porters in the shade among the hanging beards of an ancient banyan tree. The collective stench of the group – a lethal combination of sweat, tamakhu, unwashed hair, and rancid breath – ensured that everyone gave them a wide berth.

And a good thing, too. Kavi wrinkled her nose. The mood matched the stink. They were exhausted, short-tempered, and to make matters worse, Stationmaster Muthu had waddled up during the tea break, hand extended, and flicked his fingers. *Hand it over.*

She'd grumbled. She'd gnashed her teeth. And she'd paid him his monthly platform tax. All her earnings, every single ryal she'd made that day, were in that bulging shirt pocket of his.

She glared at the stationmaster, who now stood on a raised podium on the other side of the tracks. White lungi folded over his knees and tucked into his waistband, telescope jammed into one eye, thick line of ash smeared across his forehead to signify

that he was in mourning – a speeding steam-rickshaw had run his cat over.

Off to the side, well clear of the porters, passengers waited, sweaty and impatient, under a corrugated iron awning. Hawkers and vendors chatted and laughed, impervious to the heat, as they counted the day's profits. Beggars lay on their backs, one eye on Stationmaster Muthu, as they fanned themselves with torn newspampamphlets.

The platform itself was the site of a massacre. Splattered and stained red with chewed up and spat out betel nut that had somehow missed all the strategically placed copper spittoons.

It was the same every year. Bochan was the only city with an administrative branch of the mage academy in the south, and on testing day, all the villagers and townspeople who'd either just turned sixteen, or had never taken the tests, came streaming into the city with dreams of a better life; to test if they could be a mage, to learn if they were that one in ten-thousand who had the favour of a Jinn. Every single train would be late. Every single compartment would be packed to overflowing. And every single year Kavi would limp home from the station with swollen limbs and torn muscles; wash, eat, and head back into the city to join the long, winding queue outside the administrative branch of the Vagola (that everyone in the city simply called the Branch) for her annual attempt at taking the tests.

She shuffled on her haunches and glanced at the Gashani tribesman squatting beside her. Fresh from the mountains with a single fang tattooed down the right side of his mouth. A sign that he'd failed his rites of passage. The tribespeople were only a rung above the Taemu, who were of course, rock-bottom, and she couldn't help but feel sorry for him. Stationmaster Muthu had rostered the poor man on cleaning duty.

The tribesman, sallow-cheeked and hollow-eyed, stared at Muthu in a daze.

Kavi nodded to herself. The man was clearly traumatised by the railway station toilets. Her first month had been much the same. Actually – she swatted a fly away from her face – it was worse. They'd barely acknowledged her. And when they had, they'd cursed her, shoved her around, and beaten her with a broom if she did something wrong. It'd been weeks before she could actually porter.

Stationmaster Muthu stiffened. Snapped the telescope shut. Tucked it under one arm, dipped his knees, adjusted his crotch, and in one smooth movement slapped the clapper of a bronze bell that hung over his head.

The *ding!* pealed through the station, and the platform exploded in a flurry of movement.

Kavi's hands flew as she unwrapped the cloth around her waist and, like the other porters, tied it around her head into the shape of a turban. She tightened it. Slapped it to test the cushioning. But stayed on her haunches while the other porters stood. A condition for her continued employment at the station: the Taemu would always go last.

She smelled the train before she heard it.

Acrid smoke followed by syncopated chugging that crescendoed into a teeth-jarring rumble as the engine – a long cylinder that rotated and shimmered with orange maayin – burst past, followed by row after row of magenta compartments that stalked the shadows they left on the platform.

The locomotive had barely stopped, was still hissing, when its passengers came spilling out.

The porters surged ahead. The hawkers followed. The beggars staggered with skeletal arms extended, hands and fingers in eating-food and empty-stomach gestures.

The disembarking passengers ignored them. Their porters, weighed down with luggage, shooed them away and jostled defensively with pretend concern for their patrons.

Kavi waited. Fidgeted with her collar. It was almost her turn.

A woman in a bright-green sari hopped out of a first-class compartment and, with hands on her hips, searched the platform for a porter.

Kavi licked her lips. That there was the ideal customer. A lone, wealthy passenger who travelled light but was too spoiled to carry their own bags. The future flashed before her eyes: she'd drop the woman off at a rickshaw, pocket her hard-earned money, march back to the slums where her friend Haibo would be waiting to help with her disguise, then a brief but necessary stop at Murthy's Super Special Dosas, and then on to the Branch.

Her heart fluttered with nervous energy.

Except ...

Except ...

She tsked and turned to the tribesman who was still squatting next to her. 'Dai,' she said, 'why are you still waiting?'

He started. Glanced at her and quickly looked away. 'They told me to go last.'

Kavi's brows shot up. She'd risen in the railway station hierarchy.

'Look.' She tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the woman in the green sari, who was still searching the platform for a porter. 'Go. Easy fare.'

He swallowed. Shuffled uncomfortably. 'They said—'

'It's okay,' Kavi said, and pushed him forward. 'Go.'

The tribesman stood and wiped his hands on his trousers. He glanced at her again, paused, and bobbed his head in thanks.

Kavi nodded and returned to her inspection of the first-class

compartments. A politico had disembarked and was being swarmed by his followers – they buried him up to his eyebrows in jasmine garlands, slapped him on the back, and ushered him through the throng. She frowned at his glistening, bald pate as it slithered out of the station.

She'd seen these chootia in the bazaars. Seen them talk at rallies before the elections. Raaya had gone from a collection of city states to kings and queens to being a colony of the Kraelish Empire for almost six centuries, and then a hundred and fifty years ago, independence, and now the country was in the hands of these crooked—

There.

Standing at the entrance of the same first-class compartment was a tall man with gold-rimmed spectacles. No doubt a sahib from his bearing and the way he dressed – exquisite shirt and tie in the Kraelish fashion, tight-fitting trousers, immaculately groomed and oiled hair.

Kavi checked to ensure none of the other porters were approaching him, and got to her feet. She threaded her way through the crowd, never taking her eyes off the man, until she stood in front of him.

'Sahib! Porter?' She slapped the back of her hand against her forehead in a salute.

The man stared at her. Searched the platform, presumably for another porter, then scrunched up his nose and lifted a handkerchief to his face.

She smothered a flinch. 'Sahib?'

He sighed. 'Cabin 12A.'

'Thank you, sahib!'

Inside, waiting for her in 12A, were three large suitcases.

She groaned and nudged one of them with her foot. Just her fucking luck. What the Hel did he need three – *three* suitcases

for? She scowled at the floor. At the suitcases. The seats. The table. The glass windows, outside of which families clustered together, chatted, yelled at their children to not wander off. Couples shared tired smiles, leaned over to whisper in each other's ears; shoulders touched, hands brushed, fingers, ever so briefly, intertwined. Kavi's gaze softened. Further down, a girl helped her grandmother navigate the platform. A man laughed at his irate wife. Friends joked and jostled for the idli vendor's attention.

She pressed her lips together, lowered her eyes, and took a heavy, shuddering breath. *It's fine. I'm fine.*

The noise dulled to a hum and the rustle of dry leaves drifted into her ears with the sound of her father's warm chuckle, the sobs of her brother Khagan, wrapped up in a bedsheet and tied to her chest, and Kamith, barely five, skipping around her, *Akka? Akka, are you listening?*

Her hands trembled as she hefted each suitcase to check its weight.

Always, Kamith.

She would find them. They were still out there, somewhere, and she would find them. She would take the tests, and once she was a mage, she would use the Venator to find them.

Kavi puffed out her cheeks. Carried the suitcases out of the compartment, one at a time, while the sahib watched with his nose and mouth covered. Once they were all secure on the platform, she stretched her back till it cracked, then bent, balanced one on her head, lifted another in her left hand, and carried the lightest one in her right, which she used to support the suitcase on her head.

She gritted her teeth as her shoulders ached, as her legs burned, and her neck, stiff from the day's work, turned raw and pinched. Behind her, the sahib walked, oblivious, ignoring the

beggars, turning away the hawkers, though a particularly daring one came right up to his face screaming, 'Taste it, sahib! Free sample, take it!'

You've never offered me a free sample, you bleddy bastard. Kavi grunted and adjusted the suitcase on her head as she glowered at the samosa hawker.

Step by excruciating step, she led the sahib across a platform buzzing with excitement and anticipation. All she could hear were tests this and tests that, the enormous stipend, the land rights, the power, the prestige, the doors it would open. *If I could choose a mage class, I'd be a warlock*, a rotund teen announced to his mother, who patted him on the head. *If I get chosen by the Jinn*, said another obnoxious-sounding girl with pigtails, *after my training, I'll teach at the Vagola.*

Kavi had made five attempts since she'd turned sixteen.

The first time, they'd stopped her at the entrance and asked her what she was trying to do. *Test, sir-ji*, she'd said. The hawaldars had nodded, exchanged a glance, and beaten her black and blue.

The second time she'd waited till sundown and scaled the wall. Only to find that they'd covered the top with colourful shards of glass. She'd fallen with a loud and pathetic, *Aiiyoooo!*

The third time she'd run into hawaldar Bhagu, freshly transferred to Bochan from Azraaya, and things got exponentially worse after that.

There was no law that prevented her from taking the tests. Raaya called itself secular, a republic, all its citizens had rights. But some rules were so deeply ingrained, passed down from parent to child for generations, that they needn't be written. Everyone knew them: the Taemu cannot be allowed the privilege of testing. Not after what they've cost us.

Kavi growled and nudged her way past a gaggle of schoolboys and under an arch with a large yellow sign that said:

Welcome to Bochan

Culture #1

Beaches #1

Dosas #1

And underneath, an enterprising vandal had recently painted,
Your mother is also #1

Traffic outside the station was in full swing: steam-rickshaws, cycle-rickshaws, horse-drawn carriages, and bullock carts all jostled for space on a road where drivers honked like Raeth himself would drag them to Hel if they stopped.

Fumes from the steam-rickshaws mingled with the pungent scent of tar melting in the hot sun and the air stung Kavi's throat as she opened her mouth to speak. 'Sahib, rickshaw? Carriage?'

The sahib gestured to a steam-rickshaw.

The driver, who sat in the backseat of the hedgehog-shaped vehicle with a newspamphlet in his lap, spotted Kavi lumbering in his direction and grudgingly vacated the rickshaw.

Once the sahib's luggage was stashed, she turned to him, and saluted again. 'Sahib.'

He looked her over. Frowned.

'Sahib.' She held out her hand.

'Ah,' he said, and reaching into his pockets, dropped a single rayal into her waiting palm.

Kavi blinked at the coin. 'Sahib? Only one rayal?'

He paused. 'You want more?'

'Sahib ...' The fare for the work she'd just done was at least six rayals. 'Please.'

His face hardened. 'It's either this, or nothing,' he said, and reached for the coin.

Kavi's fingers snapped into a fist around the money. She stared at the man's face, at his eyes. So cold. So flat. So ... dead.

The pressure in her core, the fever that had lived there for as

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long as she could remember, built and built, travelled from her chest to her limbs, to her throat, her jaw, her temples, and into her ears where a voice whispered, *It would be so easy. Reach out, grab his throat, and squeeze. Feel your fingers dig into his flesh. Feel his muscles contract. His bones crack. Hear his—*

Kavi sucked in a breath. Averted her eyes and bowed to the sahib while she choked and drowned the voice of the berserker that lived inside her.

‘This – thank you, sahib,’ she said with a dry mouth, and slowly backed away. Her vision blurred, but she dabbed and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand until it cleared again. Should she go back to the platform? Look for a straggler who still needed a porter?

She clenched her fist around the coin until it dug, painfully, into her palm.

No, there was no time. Haibo was waiting. And she needed to prepare.

Chapter 2

‘Zofan-ji, have you seen Haibo?’

The old man, the unofficial mayor of the Bochan slums, sat on his porch with the mouthpiece of his hookah in his lap, watching the sun set over the sprawl of thatched huts and beige tents. He took a long drag and peered at Kavi’s face.

Men, women, and children trudged past Zofan’s hut – hungry, exhausted, but still they bobbed their heads and smiled at the old man, who acknowledged their greetings with a nod.

Kavi squeezed her eyes and scratched her head. Her recently donned wig was itchy and uncomfortable. Her eyes burned from the kohl she’d rubbed around them and the lashes she’d stuck to her eyelids. But Haibo said it would work, and she trusted him.

‘Kavithri? Is that you?’

Even Zofan couldn’t recognise her. It would work.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Have you seen Haibo?’ He was supposed to meet her at the hut, look her over and make sure her disguise was perfect.

Zofan sighed. ‘Sit down.’

She blinked. ‘Zofan-ji, I need to—’

‘You will want to sit,’ he said, voice strained.

Kavi obeyed. Carefully arranged her new salwar-kameez and sat cross-legged to face him. Zofan had lived in Bochan and the

slums all his life. He mediated all disputes, allocated dwellings to new arrivals, helped people find work, and pretty much ran the place. Without him, she'd still be a cleaner at Aunty-ji's seaside brothel and Haibo would be knee-deep in sewage. He was the only person in the slums who didn't treat them like Taemu.

'You know I've done the best I can for you both,' Zofan said.

Kavi nodded, unease slowly winding its way into her gut.

'Haibo,' he said after a long pause, 'is not coming back today.'

Kavi cocked her head. 'What?'

Zofan ran thick, calloused fingers through his long, grey beard. 'The Dolmondas.'

'The gangsters?'

He nodded. 'Haibo was on his way home, but he took the shortcut – he took the route back through the Niketan colony.'

Kavi's blood went cold. That was Dolmonda turf. 'He wouldn't. He knows not to—'

'I don't know. Maybe he was in a hurry.'

'But he wouldn't—' An ache in her throat cut her off. The Dolmondas had made it clear that Taemu were not allowed on their turf. She always avoided the area, even if it took her another hour to arrive back at the slums. Haibo knew that. *He knew.*

Zofan's shoulders slumped. 'The Municipal hospital. They've kept him there.'

Kavi swallowed. 'How badly did they hurt him?'

The old man shook his head. 'It's not good.'

Her heart sank. 'I'm going, Zofan-ji,' she said, voice trembling, as she stood.

He nodded without meeting her eyes. 'I'm sorry.'

She sprinted through the winding, weather-beaten streets of Bochan. And when she ran out of breath, she jogged. The

hospital was in the eastern quadrant of the city, an area where the artificers set up shop. There were still customers lined up outside Theramalli and sons: musicians with sitars and tablas whose sound needed to be amplified, zobhanatyam dancers who wanted the weight of their anklets and bangles altered, priests carrying boxes filled with chimes and bells – Kavi bowled through, ignored their protests and curses, and bundled her way into the only hospital in the city that catered to people who couldn't afford a healer.

'Where is the Taemu?' Kavi said to a woman in a blue sari who sat behind a desk.

The woman, without looking up from the paper she was scribbling on, said, 'First floor. Surgery.'

She found his body in the corridor. Blood dripping down the sides of the gurney they'd strapped him to.

'Haibo?'

Time seemed to slow. Her chest heaved with the force of the breaths she took. She leaned against the wall as her knees lost their strength and she crumpled.

'Haibo?'

'Ah, you know him?' A man with a bloody apron emerged from a room. 'Compound fractures.' He pointed to Haibo's legs, severed below the knee. 'Infected with urine. We tried to amputate, but it was too late.'

You tried to? Kavi's lips trembled as she stared at what was once her friend. His torso was covered with bruises and lacerations. His face was frozen in a rictus of horror. His eyes, the dull red irises that marked him as a Taemu, now empty and bloodshot, bulged out of their sockets. Did they even drug him before the amputation?

'Why?' she whispered.

'Ah, you see, the infection—'

‘Why?’ she said, louder.

‘Miss?’

Haibo was the kindest person she knew. Always smiling. Always happy to help. They were the same age, but he’d looked up to her. Called her Akka, big sister. *You promise you’ll come back for me, Akka? When you’re a mage?* he’d said, eyes wide with sincerity, and when she chuckled and nodded, *If you end up as a warlock – he waved around an imaginary sword – I could be your Blade. I’d protect you.*

She reached out and pushed his eyelids shut.

‘Miss? Please do not touch the body.’

Why don’t you try taking the tests too? she’d ask, nudging him in the side.

He’d shake his head. *I’ve seen what they do to you, Akka, /don’t want it.* Then his eyes would glaze over, and a faraway look would drag his face down. *But if I could choose a class, I would be an artificer. I don’t think I could cope with the healer’s countervail, and being a warlock just seems so ... violent. An artificer would be perfect; the only price I’d pay would be my own memories. I have so many I’d gladly give up.*

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered, sniffing and fighting to keep the tears at bay.

‘That’s fine,’ the surgeon said. ‘But you need to leave now. The body is scheduled for cremation.’

Kavi brushed her fingers against Haibo’s hair, stiff with dried blood. ‘Can I stay? Until then?’

The surgeon sighed and tsked. ‘Fine. Just – don’t touch the body.’

She nodded, waited till the man was out of sight, and intertwined her fingers with Haibo’s. ‘It must’ve really hurt, no? Haibo?’ she said. ‘You must’ve been so scared. So alone.’

She squeezed his swollen, stiff fingers. ‘Did you’ – her lips

quivered – ‘take the shortcut because of me? Haibo? *Why?* I’m not—’ The tears came then and wouldn’t stop. Great coughing sobs shook her entire body as she clung to Haibo’s cold, lifeless hand.

And while she waited, while she watched them wheel his mutilated corpse away, and afterwards, while she stood with her eyes on her feet, breathing in the omnipresent smell of anti-septic, letting the moans and groans of the patients slither in and out of her ears, she found that her resolve, her determination to escape from *this*, had hardened.

It was dark by the time she arrived at the Branch. The line outside the building snaked around the corner and continued past the intersection. Gas lamps burned and lit the streets and footpath in corrupted yellow; shadows stretched and twisted, seeming to claw at the candidates waiting for their turn to take the tests.

Kavi joined the queue. Kept her eyes averted and avoided conversation. Seconds turned into minutes, the man in front of her stepped forward, she closed the gap. He moved again. She followed. Hawaldars walked down the line and eyed the candidates. Hawkers passed by, screamed at the candidates to try some jalebis and ladoos. Sugar-cane juice was offered at hiked-up prices. No one paid her any attention. She was just another candidate waiting for her turn. It was working.

Kavi’s pulse raced as she took another step.

It’s working, Haibo. All those midnight hours spent yanking-pulling-ripping the hair off the dead, trimming the scalp away, smuggling the hair to the wigmaker, cajoling the cantankerous wretch to make her a wig within her means, and then the Picchadi style back-and-forth haggling matches where they’d somehow squeezed out a third-hand salwar-kameez and a pair of rubber chappals...

She sniffed and blinked heavy eyelids. The hag had taken all her savings. *But you were right, it was all worth it.*

There was no guarantee that the Vagola flunkies inside the Branch wouldn't turn her away, but she had to try, she had to know. *Worry about that once you're inside*, Haibo had told her. She nodded, took another step. The large iron gate that marked the entrance to the Branch came into sight. She was almost there.

Once she was inside, she would only get one opportunity to pass the tests. A rejection by the Jinn was binding. There would be no second chances. Kavi dabbed at the sweat beading on her forehead as the line snaked closer to the gate.

She'd prepared for the tests. Knew exactly what each entailed. She would first be tested for endurance, to see if she could withstand the weight and power of a Jinn. If she passed, she would then be exposed to an artifice dating back to the era of the First Mages, which, in exchange for a selection of her memories, would somehow force her into the presence of the Jinn. If one of them liked what they saw, and chose, she would take the third and final test: she would demonstrate that a Jinn had gifted her with the ability to channel its maayin.

Spirit, Bridge, and Instrument, the three tests were called, and she was ready for them. Had been for the last five years. All she needed was a way into the Gods-damned building. And now she had it.

'Bhai, no, please!'

Kavi craned her neck around the heads of the other candidates to look for the source of the cry.

Outside the gate, a group of teenagers were heckling a boy carrying a basket of coconuts. They'd snatched a coconut and were now tossing it between themselves while the boy chased them.

‘Please, bhai, I have to sell—’

One of the teens shoved the boy, and he fell flat on his face. His coconuts spilled out of the basket, bounced and rolled away down the street. He got to his feet with a strangled yelp and tried to chase after them.

They grabbed him by the arms. Mussed his hair and poked him in the ribs. Pinched his jaw until his mouth opened and shoved a fistful of mud into it.

Tears came streaming out of the boy’s eyes as he gagged and spat.

The teens laughed and called for more mud.

Kavi stared at the crying boy. At the dirt stuck in the groves between his teeth. At the apathy on the faces of the other candidates watching.

Why was no one doing anything?

Help him.

The boy wasn’t even a Taemu. *He’s one of you. Help him.*

No one moved. They just watched the humiliation continue.

Was this what it was like for Haibo? Did people just stand and watch the gangsters toy with him? Beat him? Break his legs? Urinate on him?

What if it was your brother this was being done to? Would you still stand and watch? What if it was one of her brothers? If it was Khagan or Kamith being bullied. Would she act?

Would she?

A weight lifted off her chest as she stepped out of the line. She flicked the braid of her wig behind her shoulder, walked up to the bully she decided was the boss-teenager, and cuffed him. Cuffed him hard enough to hear him squeal. His goons surrounded her. She slipped a rubber chappal off one foot and smacked the closest teen on the side of the face. They froze. Cursed. And scattered.

She turned to coconut-boy and extended a hand to help him up.

He took it. Stood, dusted himself off, and spat the mud out of his mouth. 'Thank yo—' His eyes went wide. He took a step closer. Peered into her eyes.

Kavi started. Took a step back. Ran a hand over her face. Her lashes, they'd come unstuck.

'Taemu?' the boy whispered. His face twisted, his lips pursed and the veins on his throat stood as he gathered up a mouthful of mud-laced saliva.

Ack-thoo!

The thick gob of spit hit Kavi square in the face with a wet *splat*.

'Chootia Taemu!' The boy yelled and hurried away to collect his coconuts.

A hand, heavy and powerful, clamped down on her shoulder.

Kavi winced, twisted and turned to gaze up into the eyes of the last person she wanted to see. Hawaldar Bhagu.

The constable's waxed moustache twitched as he snatched the wig off her head, hair clips and all. 'You,' he snarled. 'I warned you.'

'Saab-ji—'

He grabbed her by the throat. Dragged her into the middle of the street. And flung her to the ground.

Steam-rickshaws honked and screeched to a halt. Drivers spat and yelled at her. But one look at the hawaldar and they lapsed into silence.

'Stand,' he said.

She obeyed. Did her best to ignore the eyes of the candidates watching her.

'Put up your fists,' Bhagu said.

‘Saab-ji?’ Kavi said, fumbling with her salwar while she searched for a way out.

Bhagu took a step closer. ‘The Taemu are supposed to be fighters, right? Come. Raise your fists.’

Kavi clenched her jaw. Shook her head.

‘Don’t make this harder than it needs to be,’ Bhagu said, and raised two enormous fists to hover under his eyes. ‘Like this. Come.’

Kavi hesitated, but with a tightness in her stomach, and a cold, nameless dread seeping into her skin, she raised two trembling fists.

‘Good,’ Bhagu nodded and lowered his hands. ‘Good, now say it.’

‘Saab-ji?’

‘Say the battle cry.’

Kavi’s eyes bulged. She licked her lips. Tasted the sweat on them. ‘I can’t, saab-ji.’ It was forbidden. If the Kraelish still ruled Raaya, she’d be stripped naked, strung up by her wrists in the bazaar, and whipped till she passed out. Now? There was no law against it, but she didn’t want to find out what would happen.

‘Say it,’ Bhagu said again and reached for his lathi, which hung in a holster on his hip.

‘Please, saab-ji, I—’

‘Say it,’ he growled.

Kavi squeezed her elbows into her sides. Took a sharp, shaky breath, and said, ‘Aadhier Taemu.’

‘Louder.’

There was a tremor in her voice, but again, she obeyed. ‘Aadhier Taemu!’

‘Yes!’ Bhagu said and turned to face the candidates. ‘Everyone heard, right? You heard right?’

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There was a mumbled chorus of assent.

'She's left me with no choice,' he said to no one in particular, and rolled his shoulders as he squared up to Kavi.

She still had her fists up when he threw the first punch. A wide hook that crashed into her forearms and sent her stumbling. She hissed. Found her footing.

He threw the same punch again.

Her body, as if reacting to the first blow, twisted to receive the hook on her biceps. Her teeth rattled from the impact and a deep keening spread through the bones in her left arm.

Again and again, Bhagu hit her in the arms until, numb and heavy, they fell, leaving her head exposed.

But like eyes grown accustomed to the dark, she found, as her heart thundered and her blood pounded in her ears, that she could *see* the next punch coming. Its trajectory, its painful descent and eventual destination. His movements, so sharp and oozing with violence a moment ago, had turned sluggish.

She could get out of the way. Dodge. It would be so easy.

Or, she could reach out and slap his fist aside. Throw him off balance. Leave him open for her to strike back.

Adrenaline coursed through her veins. The candidates disappeared and her vision tunnelled on Bhagu and the incoming fist. The rage in her core screamed and howled for blood. The berserker reached up, wrapped its fingers around her throat, and took contro—

No.

A hammer blow connected with her temple. Lights expanded and exploded. Her ears popped. Needles buried themselves in the right half of her skull, and the impact knocked her off her feet and into a pothole filled with stagnant rainwater.

Bhagu slipped his lathi out of its holster. Raised the heavy, iron-bound bamboo stick over his shoulder.

Kavi twisted. Wrapped her hands around the back of her head, clamped her jaw shut to protect her tongue, and dug her knees into her chest.

The blows arrived – blunt and heavy when they found flesh. Sharp and searing when they landed on bone.

Kavi gritted her teeth.

‘Who the fuck do you think you are?’ Bhagu spat. ‘*Taemu* fucking scavenger filth—’

Kavi made herself even smaller.

I am nothing.

Forget me.

Please. I am no one.

The blows stopped.

She peeked through her fingers and caught a glimpse of hawaldar Bhagu’s face: contorted with revulsion and hate, twisted veins on his neck, muscles bunched. He took a step back and his armoured boot crashed into her midriff. She gasped. Fought to keep her last meal down and failed.

‘If I see you here again,’ he said, grabbing her by the hair, ‘I don’t care if it’s next year or the year after – if you ever try to test again, I will do to you what I heard the Dolomondas did to that *Taemu* today. Do you know who I’m talking about?’

Kavi’s blood went cold, and she lost control of her bladder and bowels. She nodded without meeting his eyes.

He shoved her head away with a snarl.

She stayed where she was and waited. Waited till Bhagu’s footsteps receded into the honks of steam-rickshaws and the shouts of the drivers.

She slowly unwound herself, groaned as fresh jolts of pain shot through her joints and lower back. Bubbles of bloody snot popped as she wheezed and pushed herself to her feet.

Kavi refused to look at the candidates. Refused to let them

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see her cry. She fought the tears, strangled and suffocated them, gathered up the bile and blood and bitterness in her mouth, and spat it all out.

Chapter 3

If only she'd kept her eyes on her feet and acted the part. If only.

No one ever stood up for her, so who was she to stand up for someone else? Kavi clenched her jaw. She was powerless, a Taemu at the bottom of the dung heap, and yet ...

She sighed and waited for a steam-rickshaw to rattle past before limping across the street.

Artificed lamps, a sign that she'd passed into a wealthier area, lit up the footpath and the row of woodblock prints plastered on the adjacent wall. The city used the same ones every year. An image of a moustachioed warlock who stood arms akimbo while a ball of emerald-green maayin hovered over his head. Underneath, text read:

Only one in ten thousand are blessed with the ability! Will it be you? Pass the tests and glory awaits!

The stench of ammonia wafted off the urine-soaked walls and Kavi spat.

What a waste. Everything that Haibo had done for her, had helped her with, it was all for nothing.

No, Akka, she could hear him say, *there is always next year.*

'Next year,' Kavi muttered. The tests were her only option. Her route to a better life and a path to finding her father and

brothers. She could spend an entire lifetime searching and still not find a trace of them. Raaya was too big. But if she became a mage and joined the Vagola, she would gain access to the Venator, and she could find them.

No one really knew how the artifact worked or what exactly it was — after the Kraelish left, it had been decommissioned and given into the care of the Vagola — but one thing everyone agreed on was that the Venator could once locate anyone you wanted, as long as they were on the subcontinent, within minutes. ‘Next year.’ Yes, but she had more important things to worry about now.

Despite how well she’d stashed her rations, once the moon was three-quarters of the way across the sky, once the clock handle in the bazaar dinged at the number fifteen, they were no longer safe. The neighbourhood urchins were an industrious and motivated lot, and they’d been casing her hut for the better half of the year.

She swallowed and sped up. This would be their chance.

Only when her rations were secure, and the pint-sized thieves thwarted, only then would she start planning again. There *had* to be a better way to disguise her appearance and mask her accent. Had to. But then again, all her study and analysis of upper-class Raayan inflection and intonation, and all the wigs from all the Gods-cursed wigmakers in Raaya wouldn’t matter if, like today, the hawaldars looked into her eyes.

She tsked and came to a stop. First, she had to make a quick detour.

Towering over her, with its spires and black marble bas-reliefs of clawed tentacles and tormented faces, was the temple of Raeth.

The municipal hospital would turn her away because her injuries were not life-threatening, and she couldn’t afford a

healer, so the temple was her only option. Bruises and wounds could prove lethal in the Bochan slums, and she couldn't afford to leave them untended.

She searched her pockets, pulled out the single rayal ensconced in them, and waddled up the steps, wincing and cursing her way to the entrance where a lone priest on night penance was laying supine and chanting into the ether.

'Swami-ji,' she said, in what she hoped was her most pious voice, and held out the coin.

The chanting stopped. The priest slowly roused himself with a series of grunts and groans. He turned to her with the most sorrowful expression on his face, and said in an equally dolorous tone, 'Yes?'

'Help.' She gestured to her face and head and the rest of her bruised and battered body.

The priest blinked, wrinkled his nose, and lifted the collar of his kurta up over his nose.

Kavi frowned. Yes, there was regurgitated fish congee on her shirt, and yes, she may have soiled herself during her beating, but the Watcher of the Dead, the Caretaker of Souls, the almighty Raeth did not discriminate on the basis of olfactory propriety, so why must his priests? She stepped closer, and said again, more firmly, 'Swami-ji, help.'

He sighed and gestured for her to drop the coin in the donation box off to the side. 'Come, child,' he said, suddenly sanctimonious, 'the Tentacled One has sent me another trial, and I must overcome.'

She left her chappals at the entrance and followed the priest into the circular courtyard that ringed the conical black temple.

'You must wash,' the priest said. He pointed to a water pump and a solitary bucket sitting next to it, then gestured to

a bathroom at the base of the spire. 'I will bring you clothes. Leave the old ones here.'

Kavi bowed and obeyed.

She pumped the lever until the faucet spluttered and spat brackish water into the bucket. After a quick glance around to ensure she wasn't being watched, she peeled off the soiled salwar-kameez and left it in a heap by the pump.

The weight of the bucket made the muscles in her back twinge as she carried it into the temple's sanctified bathroom. Inside, on a stone floor that was still damp from its last use, she sat on her haunches, reached for a steel mug next to a bar of soap, and scooped the cool water over her head. She winced as it burned its way into and out of her wounds.

In the dark, in the silence, the bruises on the inside, that the priests of Raeth would not be able to heal, throbbed with renewed agony.

Haibo had loved visiting the city's temples. He found them peaceful. Even dragged her along with him on his excursions. She had been happy to tag along, sit with him while he put his hands together and mumbled his prayers, but there was one temple – a shrine, he'd called it, that she'd refused to accompany him to, and it would always upset him.

It's ours, Akka, he'd said, trying to convince her to visit the hidden Taemu shrine. *A place just for us.*

But she wouldn't budge.

She was curious, however, and had asked him to tell her the name of this forbidden Taemu Goddess to whom the shrine belonged.

No, he said, *you have to see for yourself.*

Fine. Then I guess I will never know.

He'd make a face. He'd tsk, groan, and ask, *Why, Akka? Why won't you come?*

Because I don't need to visit the shrine of a Goddess who has abandoned us.

Kavi tightened her lips, viciously dumped another mug of water over her head and reached for the bar of soap. *See where all your piety got you, Haibo? Fuck this Goddess and her shrine.*

When she was done washing herself, she peeked out of the bathroom and found a neatly folded kurta-dhoti waiting for her by the door. Outside, by the water pump, where she'd left her soiled clothes, the priest stood with a matchbox in one hand and a matchstick in the other. He looked her dead in the eye, struck the matchstick till it caught fire, and dropped it on her hard-earned, and now useless, salwar-kameez. Kavi winced as it turned into a hissing, spitting ball of fire.

The next hour was a blur. The priest summoned more holy men and together they ministered to her wounds with their famous salve – half coconut oil, half turmeric, half cow piss, and half secret ingredient to which only the disciples were privy.

Coarse hands dispassionately squeezed and twisted, raspy voices commanded her to hold up her kurta or lower her dhoti, lift this leg or bend that arm. Her stomach growled, her head throbbed, and the pungent tang of the salve made her head spin.

But she bore it, impatiently, as her eyes tracked the moon's inexorable journey across the cloudless sky. She bit her lip. *It's fne.* There was still time.

'Finished,' the night-shift priest finally said.

Kavi patted the kurta-dhoti down and studied her injuries. The mysterious yellow balm covered almost half her body, and when she moved – she gingerly stood on her toes, rolled her shoulders, stretched her back – the pain dulled into background noise. 'Thank you, swami-ji.'

'Yes-yes, ensure that you do not exert yourself, or the effects

of the salve will diminish. Now, before you leave,' he said, bobbling his head, 'you must pray at Raeth's altar, and accept his blessings.'

Oh nonono, she knew what that meant. 'My thanks, swami-ji, I'm grateful for the uhm, for what you have done for me, but I must return to my uhm, what're you doing?'

The remaining priests, who'd assisted with the salve ministration, surrounded her, and slowly ushered her in the spire's direction.

It would have been so easy to make a break for it. The emaciated-looking priests were no match for her. She could have bowled them over with a sneeze. But she needed their goodwill if things went wrong next year, or the year after, so there was nothing to do but grit her teeth and play along.

They escorted her through hallowed corridors infused with jasmine incense and the dull, yellow light of dia lamps. A right here, a left there, a staircase up one level, and she was standing in front of the altar. A single protruding eyeball was sculpted into the ceiling and hung menacingly over the head priest, who waited with a tub of freshly harvested tentacles. Kavi shuddered. They were still moving, writhing on top of each other in a single mass of viscous pink.

The head priest, a heavysset man with eyebrows that trailed down past his eyes, waited for her to kneel. Which she did, reluctantly, due to more than just her bruised knees.

'The almighty Raeth will absolve your soul,' the head priest announced when she had settled. 'Unlike the other Gods, he accepts even the foul and the wretched in his sanctum' – cries of *Praise Raeth! Hel awaits!* erupted from the priests at Kavi's back while she silently seethed – 'and purifies their soul so they may serve him better, when they return in the next life.'

He launched into a prayer citing Raeth's inevitable embrace

and his supervising of souls till they were ready for an incarnation and his blah, blah, blah. She tuned the priest out. Beads of sweat seeped through the skin on her forehead as her mind cartwheeled back to her hut.

The urchins were rummaging through it. Ransacking it. Flinging her books around and ripping the pages apart. Poking holes in the thatched roof. Unearthing the stash of rice and salt and lentils and—

‘Child,’ the head priest boomed, bringing her back to reality, ‘you will now be blessed by Raeth.’

Kavi resigned herself to her fate and bowed her head.

The head priest reached into the tub at his feet, shuffled around, extracted an exceptionally fresh tentacle, and smacked it on her head. The tentacle, somehow sensing how the rest of her day had gone, promptly attached itself to Kavi’s forehead.

‘You have been blessed by Raeth,’ the head priest announced again, to grunts of approval and impromptu chanting.

Kavi remained on her knees, swallowed thoughts of violence, and waited for the man to notice her predicament.

Why did this always happen to her? Sometimes it felt like she was an out-of-place joke in those tragedies the actor-wallahs performed in the bazaar. The ones with the *nice women* and pure-hearted royals. She was a gag line in a dour and depressing tale, a comedian coming out of nowhere and leaving the punters with so much whiplash that it broke their necks. Gods, she hated those plays.

The priest finally spotted the holy appendage dangling from her head. He chuckled, set one foot on her shoulder, and yanked the fucker off her.

She ran her fingers over the marks left by the extricated suction cups on her forehead and thanked the head priest through a clenched jaw.

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'Go forth,' he said with an outstretched arm, 'and live, till it is your time to return to Hel.'

The priests cleared a path for her, and Kavi bolted.