

WE SHALL BE
MONSTERS

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For my mother, who crossed an ocean
And for my father, who always knew



“It is true, we shall be monsters, cut off
from all the world; but on that account we
shall be more attached to one another.”

—Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley,
Frankenstein



Chapter One

THE WORST DAY of Kajal's life was the day she broke out of her own coffin.

It wasn't even a nice coffin. It was one made to burn, reducing unclean flesh to ash, allowing the soul to return to nature and be reborn. Traditions such as this reigned strong in Dharati, especially in the town of Siphar, isolated as it was against the crags of the eastern mountains.

Though tradition did not specify what to do when a girl's fist broke through rotting wood, terrifying the humble crowd assembled to witness the burning.

Kajal shoved the coffin lid off and sat up with a gasp. Everything in her vision slanted and slid. Blinking rapidly, she could do little more than stare at the second coffin beside her, then at the people who gazed back at her in horror.

"Get away," she rasped.

Half of them didn't need telling twice, outright running to the squat, pale buildings sitting under a dusk-flushed sky. The coffins had been placed far enough from the town that the smell of charring flesh wouldn't carry.

The man who held the flaming branch meant to light the pyre stood with rigid limbs and a slack mouth.

"W-Witch," he breathed. "Dakini."

Kajal ignored him and forced herself to move, teeth gritted as she gracelessly climbed over the side of the broken coffin and dropped onto the kindling. Her arms and legs were shaking and weak with disuse; how long had she been lying in there? Dust and dirt billowed around her, and she thought she saw a shape within it—a moth or a butterfly. Mindlessly, she reached out, but it dissipated between her fingers.

“How?” the man with the torch demanded. His voice was thick with the local country dialect Kajal had grown used to during the months she’d stayed here. “The medicine woman said you were dead!”

“The medicine woman was wrong,” Kajal croaked. Her long black hair hung limp and unwashed on either side of her face. Someone had dressed her scrawny body in a plain white kameez, another detail dictated by tradition. White was pure. White was the color of renewal, rebirth.

“You . . .” The man pointed the branch at her, the fire reflected in his wary eyes. “We found you both outside the cave-in, surrounded by . . . by malevolent offerings. You were behind it, weren’t you?”

Her head was spinning, but she recalled a cave. A plan.

It should have worked. She had been *so sure*. But all she remembered now was a flash of unbearable light, a cacophonous breaking of stone.

Screams.

“They’re *dead*,” the man growled, his wariness turning to fury. “Six of our miners dead because of you, and we can’t get to their bodies.” He pointed at the second coffin. “Not even she was spared from whatever wicked spells you cast. You killed her.”

The words slid off her like raindrops. She was sanded down, edgeless, without corners or niches to catch them.

She crawled over branches and roughly hewn firewood toward the second coffin, gathering stains on her white dress and splinters in her skin. Her chest constricted so painfully she could hardly breathe.

It wasn’t true. It couldn’t be true.

She waited for a fist like hers to break through the wood, but all was still and silent. Kajal's throat tightened as she pushed at the flimsy coffin lid.

"Don't," the man cautioned.

The lid fell to the ground. The girl within was swathed in the same white cotton as Kajal, but on her, it looked intentional, like she had chosen it from her clothes trunk that morning. Her glossy black hair had somehow maintained a hint of a curl at the ends. Her face was lovely even in death, lips pale against her brown skin.

Kajal's breaths were coming in short bursts, her lungs on fire, her stomach writhing. She fumbled at the girl's cold neck.

"See?" The man's country dialect drawled around a sneer. "Now move aside. We can't burn the miners 'cause of you, but at least we can burn her before rakshasas are drawn to the smell. There's already an aga ghora prowling the outskirts of town."

An eerie cry in the distance backed up his claim, followed by the shouts of what had to be hunters wielding crossbows with iron bolts.

Kajal barely had a thought to spare for them. The girl's name was a bright, burning spot in her mind, lodged in her throat, waiting to be cried out—but she couldn't, she couldn't, if she said her name it would make it true, and it couldn't possibly be true that she was . . .

Dead.

Kajal was alive, and she was dead.

It was an accident.

I'm sorry.

How am I alive and you aren't?

Wake up!

She slapped the girl's cheek. The remaining townspeople murmured at her disrespect, but when she bared her teeth they shrank back, unwilling to fight a feral, possibly undead creature.

Kajal shook the girl's shoulder until her head lolled. "Please. Please, you can't. La—"

The first sob caught her off guard. She slumped against the coffin as the cry tore through her like removing an arrowhead, all agony and bloody mess.

"No," she moaned when the man with the torch approached her again.

"She needs to burn," he said. "Stay there, for all I care. You can burn with her and spare us the rope for a hanging."

For a moment, Kajal was resigned to let them have their way. She would sit here and let the flames consume her too. Have them finish what she had started.

Someone gasped, and another screamed. A high-pitched call shivered through her, breaking the fragile mountain air.

The horse appeared with little warning, leaving a trail of scorched hoof prints in its wake. It stood with head bent and forelegs spread, snorting fire while smoke purred from its open mouth. The body was barely distinct under the roiling flame, its eyes unseeing orbs of brilliant light.

"The aga ghora broke through!" came a cry as the remaining townsfolk fled, followed by a warning to prepare weapons and water buckets.

Kajal moved without thinking. She scrambled to kneel before the coffin, arms spread. If the rakshasa wanted to eat the dead, it would have to eat Kajal first.

But it stood unmoving, unblinking. As if waiting for her to take charge.

A dark laugh rumbled in her throat.

They wanted fire.

She staggered to her feet, hauling the dead girl up by her armpits. The weight was more than she had anticipated, and nearly made Kajal topple to the ground. But she only had a few minutes before the townspeople would return with their crossbows to drive the demon away.

“If you’re not going to eat us, then make yourself useful,” Kajal snapped.

The flames engulfing the aga ghora ebbed. It fell to its knees, and Kajal hesitated despite the urgency coursing through her. But the rakshasa made no move to attack, so she pushed the girl’s body across its bare back and scrambled up behind, the stained kameez shifting around her hips. The horse’s flesh was hot, almost unbearably so, and threatened to burn the insides of her thighs.

Kajal fisted a hand in the demon’s mane.

“Run,” she commanded.



The body refused to grow colder with the horse’s heat, but it did begin to stiffen. Kept in this state, it would continue to decay until flesh sloughed from bones and organs were reduced to fetid liquids.

But Kajal knew how to prevent it.

Several miles from the town of Siphar, Kajal pulled the girl’s body off the rakshasa. The horse’s flames sprouted and danced again, flickering against those uncanny white eyes.

Horse and girl stared at each other for an uncomfortable moment. Kajal wondered if it expected some sort of debt, now, or if it was only drawn to her because she had been a dead thing seemingly resurrected.

If she had even died, that is. If she had implausibly returned through a veil of darkness and unbeing, she had no idea how—or why the girl beside her hadn’t returned too.

“Thank you,” she said at last.

The rakshasa let out another cry and galloped across the plain, its embers singeing the ground.

She was at the edge of the mountains that bordered eastern Dharati, near a thick forest of looming evergreens. Beyond was swampland and a

field tangled with scrub. Ghost lights bobbed between the weeds, pinpricks of pulsing blue.

Kajal slowly lifted the girl's kameez to reveal what it had hidden: a large wound slanted across the girl's abdomen, sewn shut to preserve her dignity. She winced and tugged the dress back down before dragging the body toward the base of a tree, far enough out to hopefully not run into roots.

Then she began to dig.

She had no tools other than her own two hands. Her kameez was a ruin and clung to her with sweat, and she had to pause every so often to vomit thin bile that made tears spring to her eyes. The moon had fully risen by the time she'd dug deep enough, her arms sore and wrecked, her insides scraped raw.

Kajal turned to the body. It looked so serene, so at peace, even while sprawled in the middle of nowhere with no heartbeat and no future.

For now, at least.

She pulled the girl into the grave. The arrangement was awkward, and Kajal had to readjust the arms and legs until they fit. When she lifted the girl's wrist, she stared at the snug copper ring on her pinkie finger, the skin around it tinged green. She debated whether to take it. In the end, she decided to leave it be.

Kajal flexed her sore hands; it was hard to imagine the dirt under her nails was the same soil blessed long ago by the nature spirits of the yakshas. Soil that would protect a body from devourment and preserve it from decay.

Of the flesh, that is. A human soul, if trapped within its vessel and denied release through the gift of fire, would warp into a bhuta—a wraithlike ghost. A specter that, once strong enough, could claim lives of its own.

This was why it was steadfast tradition in Dharati to feed their dead to flames.

Kajal sat straddling the body a moment longer, her breaths evening out. She had to make this right. She had to undo this before the spirit began to corrode.

More tears blurred her vision. Staring at the girl, Kajal finally forced herself to speak her name.

“Lasya,” she whispered.

As she’d feared, saying it out loud made it worse. Something real she could not take back. Something she had to accept, with her whole miserable heart.

Her chest faltered under a sob as she leaned down and pressed their foreheads together, one cool and one burning.

“I promise this isn’t the end. I’ll bring you back, Lasya. I swear it.”

The corners of her sister’s pale lips were curved slightly upward, as if even in death she knew better than to trust Kajal’s promises.



Chapter Two

Five months later

THE SOUND OF a snapping twig forced her head up.

Kajal was elbow-deep in the dirt, a position she now lamented as she thought of what all could be stalking the countryside at night. Rakshasas and wild animals—and, worse, other people—had proven troublesome in recent months.

Especially as more and more of the Usurper King's soldiers prowled the roadways.

She strained to hear anything in the darkness. Breathing, rustling, the slide of fur or skin over branches. But there was only the faint breeze through the leaves, her own racing pulse. And a strange odor, like murky, stagnant water.

Keep going, she urged herself.

Kajal flexed her sore fingers and grabbed the end of the burlap sack she'd unearthed. Clouds rolled across the sky, casting shadows over the town and the woodland on its outskirts. Perfect conditions in which to dig up the body.

But she'd forgotten how *heavy* it was. When it was halfway exhumed, she sat on her heels to catch her breath and sigh over the state of her hands. She had a tool this time—a small, rusty shovel she'd stolen from one of the local farms—but that hadn't prevented dirt from digging into every crevice and crease of her brown skin.

She was readying herself for another heave when voices brought her up short, followed by the crunch of boots on detritus.

Who'd be senseless enough to go strolling through the woods at night? she thought. Barring herself, of course.

Kajal searched the trees until she spotted a couple figures moving amongst the scraggly trunks. A shaft of moonlight broke through the weak edge of a cloud and shone upon the hilts of their swords.

Biting back a curse, Kajal ducked lower. None of the villagers owned swords; these were either strangers passing through or, if she was exceptionally unlucky, soldiers.

She debated slipping away. Her right foot shifted, ready to creep off into the night, a habit she was on her way to perfecting.

Keep going.

Kajal took a fortifying breath. She wasn't going to abandon her experiment so easily, not when she'd gone through so much trouble for it.

Not when she had so little time to complete it.

The figures stopped and leaned against the trees. The smell of tobacco and betel nut reached her nose before one of them lit a match and ignited a clay chillum.

"How long do we need to stay here?" A man, his voice a weary tenor.

"As long as it takes," said his companion, her tone cheerier. "What, you're not liking our tour of the countryside? Take a moment to enjoy the scenery once in a while."

The man inhaled from his chillum and exhaled a smoky sigh. "I'll enjoy being done with our search."

"The good news is I think we're close."

"How do you know?"

"I have a feeling."

"Wonderful," the man muttered. "Because your *feelings* have been so reliable in the past."

The woman scoffed. “We get chased by a chimera *one* time . . .”

Kajal peered through the foliage to get a better look. Their clothing wasn’t the light kurtas and trousers common in western Dharati or the blue-and-marigold uniforms of the Usurper’s highest-ranking soldiers, but rather the thicker salwar kameezes of the northeast, plain and loose for riding. They both carried curved talwars on their backs over long-sleeved, skirted cloaks, still dusty from the road.

Whatever they were searching for, they had certainly traveled a long way to find it. But Kajal couldn’t think of anything important enough in this tiny rural northwestern town that would attract people like them.

It was why she’d chosen Kinara in the first place: Far less chance of strangers passing through. Less chance of being interrupted—or discovered.

The travelers kept smoking, and mumbling about inane things like the weather, how uncomfortable their beds were, the bug bites they had collected on their journey. Kajal curled her fingers into the burlap sack and glared in their direction.

Hurry up and leave already if you hate this place so much, she thought. *I have work to do.*

The breeze came back to tickle her cheek, bringing with it that scent of murky, stagnant water.

“What is that?”

She lifted her head to discover another shadow-draped figure standing between the trees.

Kajal’s instinct was to call it a rakshasa—a demon—but that wasn’t quite right. The creature was both too ordinary and too outlandish for such a word.

It was a buck, tall and strong and pelted in tawny fur. But the antlers growing from its skull were cracked and rust red, its eyes dark and weeping black liquid. That same viscous substance dripped from its lolling

mouth. It staggered forward as a guttural keen left its throat, like the scraping of metal.

The travelers immediately reached for their weapons. Kajal reached for the shovel, despite the little to no good it would do her.

“What is it?” the woman demanded. “Demon?”

“No, I think . . . I think it’s blighted.”

The woman swore, and Kajal tried not to echo her. She had never seen the blight infect animals before.

Life and death were always in flux, kept in careful balance so that one could not overpower the other. The blight—a worsening sickness that spread in unpredictable waves of black rotted fields, now seemingly jumping into any weak, living thing that made room for it—was the cost of imbalance. One that spelled the gradual yet undeniable tilt toward catastrophe.

Kajal did not have time for catastrophe. Her sister’s corpse was waiting for her in the east. If the blight reached Lasya’s body first, like it had this poor creature . . .

Her throat tightened the way her hand did around the shovel’s handle. *Stop it*, she told herself, cutting her thoughts off at the root before they could spiral. Fear would only delay her further. *What-ifs won’t solve anything.*

The travelers flanked the diseased buck. Its mouth yawned wider, revealing teeth sharpened to fangs. With a quick turn, it made to sink those fangs into one of the traveler’s throats, but the other came in and pushed his sword between its ribs. The creature gave another of those strange dissonant cries before folding toward the earth.

Even in death, its eyes were open. They were the absolute black of the night sky beyond its stars, like tipping into a hole you’d never crawl out of. The dirt soaked with its blood formed dark tendrils, like veins sprouting from a sick heart. Kajal worried about them infecting her half-buried experiment.

The man cleaned his sword on his sleeve and sheathed it, giving the creature a disgusted yet pitying look. "Let's burn it before it spreads."

Kajal frowned and watched one of them gather dry brush and twigs while the other dug a shallow firebreak and coughed over the smell of the buck. Mere travelers wouldn't carry swords like theirs or remain so calm when facing something as abnormal as a blighted animal.

Unless they weren't mere travelers, but demon hunters.

They'd mentioned they were searching for something. Maybe they were searching for *someone*.

Kajal shivered while they lit the kindling before they turned to leave, the man complaining he'd have to burn his shirt. A thin ribbon of smoke curled like a beckoning finger from the first licks of fire. Inviting Kajal to remember Siphar, the bob of a lit torch, the smile frozen on her sister's face.

Keep going. Her teeth chattered. *Keep going.*

She turned back to the burlap sack. She needed to be far away from this place before the flames rose higher.



With only weak starlight to see by, she dragged the sack through town. The mustard fields to the south swayed in the wind, waiting for the laborers to come at dawn and resume their harvesting. The town of Kinara was mostly self-sustaining, with enough livestock and hunters for meat and milk and furs, but the people here still needed something to bring to the city's markets to trade for metal and cloth.

Kajal had been traveling on her own long enough to know that a girl who did little else than pace her rented room at the boardinghouse, collect unusual supplies, and mutter to herself invited unwanted suspicion. So to appear less reclusive—and since she needed some way to pay the wrinkled potato of a woman who ran said boardinghouse—she had taken to those fields on a near-daily basis for the last several weeks.

As much as she hated standing under the wickedly bright sun for hours while picking greens, it was far from the worst job she'd had. She worked with her head down and her mouth shut, and it was enough to make the townspeople excuse her otherwise worrying behavior.

But if they saw her dragging a corpse through town, especially one that had been lying so close to the site of a blight attack, the illusion would be shattered, without hope of repair.

Please don't be blighted, she begged. This will have been a massive waste of time if you are.

Kajal eased the front door to the boardinghouse open. The proprietor, who insisted everyone call her Gurveer Bibi, had a room right by the entrance. The woman snored like a fiend while Kajal dragged the body across the threshold as quietly as she could, wincing when it snagged on the jamb.

The boardinghouse was always drafty, and when the rains came the building tended to absorb all the wet, making the ceiling drip for days afterward. That was likely why every single piece of wood decided to creak under Kajal's feet when she lifted the sack into her arms and staggered into the stair railing, earning herself a bruise at her hip. Holding back a grumble, she made her slow ascent.

Gurveer Bibi had a tendency of staring at those who displeased her with milky, captious eyes. The old woman especially liked to watch Kajal, waiting for the exact moment to chew her out over some trivial thing. Kajal could practically feel that gaze on her as she navigated the curling stairs, like Gurveer Bibi had enchanted the walls to keep track of her every movement.

By the time she tottered into her room and set down the bag, she was red-faced and trying to stifle her gasps.

The hardest part hadn't even begun.

She turned to her sparsely furnished lodgings, containing only a low rope bed and a trunk to store her belongings. A small window peered out

at the fields, half obstructed by the next roof over. A slab of pale limestone lay on the floor.

She'd learned the hard way that limestone was the best conduit for this type of work. An incident with common shale and a chicken had led to Kajal frantically cleaning up blood and feathers while Gurveer Bibi shouted at her through the door about the noise.

Kajal rolled the bag toward the slab (stolen from the nearest quarry), which she'd already soaked in water and salt (the latter nabbed from Gurveer Bibi's tiny kitchen). She had used vinegar before (also taken from the kitchen—so, sure, maybe the woman did have a reason to keep an eye on her), but that had resulted in yet another tragic chicken accident. She kept telling herself it was all part of the scientific process, but each failure cost her days, if not weeks. If this new method didn't succeed . . .

Slow and steady, Lasya would have told her. Already, her voice was starting to fade from Kajal's memory, sending a spike of panic through her stomach. *You're always rushing into things. Breathe and try again.*

Kajal inhaled deeply. Two bodies in this room, and only one heartbeat.

But not for long.

She opened the burlap bag, spilling dirt and fur. Ignoring her already aching limbs, she dragged the dog's filthy corpse onto the stone.

"Of course the first dead thing I saw had to be massive," she muttered. "You probably weigh more than I do." It was easily over a hundred pounds of muscle and long black and brown fur, its paws nearly the size of her head.

But there was no rot. As soon as she'd spotted the mongrel lying near Kinara's cremation grounds she had buried it, buying time in which to gather the necessary components. Which meant now that it was out in the open, she raced against the ticking clock of decomposition.

She pried the dog's mouth open and pushed a zinc pellet past its large yellowed teeth. It hadn't been easy to obtain even a pebble of the mineral; she'd had to make a long trip to the nearest city on foot, limping on

blistered soles to a market where she had traded stolen goods from Kinara. Then she'd crushed it into powder using a pestle, which had rubbed her palms raw.

All this effort for a dog. Kajal put a hand on its flank, its fur bristling between her fingers. *You'd better be worth it.*

Kajal's tongue felt swollen with anxiety as she reached for the jar of salt and sprinkled it liberally over the dog's body. She parted the dog's fur to rub chopped goldenrod and adder's-tongue against its pale skin, the herbs having been boiled in oil and suet (the used oil bartered from the dhaba down the street, the suet stolen from their kitchens when they were busy getting her the oil), then used a spoon to dribble more of the mixture into its mouth.

Pressure was already emanating from the limestone and seeping through the hunk of dead flesh like the charged air before a storm. Her skin prickled in response, the warning before a lightning strike.

Slow and steady.

Kajal massaged her hand over the dog's cold throat and chest. Her fingers tingled with the current. She followed the body's pathways, pressing against the focal points of its chakras, until she rested one hand over the dog's chest and pressed her other thumb to the center of its brow.

Reach its heart, she thought desperately. She visualized grasping the energy flowing between her and the dog, thick and smelling vaguely metallic, like blood. *Please. You must.*

One pulse, and then another. She gasped at the lick of pain that went up her arm from the contact. The only thing preventing her from recoiling was the thought of Lasya opening her eyes, of looking up at Kajal and smiling.

Come on!

With the next lashing pulse, the limestone cracked nearly in two. The sound took her back to Siphar, to the gaping mouth of a mine entrance, to the echoing break of stone, bone, heart.

Six of our miners dead because of you.

You killed her.

Kajal pushed down a cry as the dog spasmed again. Its paws twitched. Its fur stood on end.

And then it opened one amber eye.

Kajal scrambled away from the slab. The dog lumbered to its feet, salt flying as it shook its shaggy head. It began to growl.

“No, it’s all right!” She reached under the patterned rope of her charpoy. “I don’t mean you harm. See?”

She unsteadily held out a strip of dried lamb. The dog stopped rubbing at its face to inspect the offering.

“That’s it,” Kajal breathed when the dog cautiously padded over, head lowered. It didn’t *seem* blighted. “Are you hungry, after being in the ground so long?”

Preserved as it had been, its organs should be functioning. But the dog sniffed at the lamb, took it gently in its mouth, then spat it out.

“Oh,” she said. “All right. We can work on that.”

The grin that stretched across Kajal’s face was so wide and unfamiliar it made her cheeks hurt. She watched the dog nose around her room, sometimes growling, sometimes turning its head to make sure she hadn’t moved. Her chest welled with the same warmth that stung her eyes.

“You’re alive,” she whispered to the shadows. “I brought you back.”

I can fix this, Lasya. Just wait a little longer.

I won’t let you down again.



Chapter Three

THE WORLD CHANGED when you had nothing left. The first impulse was despair: to lash out, fight, gnash your teeth in denial. But after a while it became a calm surrender, a realization that nothing could be as it once was, so what was the point in fighting? Kajal had been left in an empty house that had once been filled with comfort, and she had chosen to lie on the cold floor with the windows boarded up, entombed within her loss.

Then had come a fresh wave of determination, a door swinging open. She *could* fight. She *could* reclaim what had once been hers. Lasya was gone, but not forever.

And now Kajal was one step closer to getting her back.

The dog was restless the entire night, and neither of them slept. Kajal sat in the middle of the rope bed with her battered and stained notebook, taking notes with the nub of a charcoal pencil.

“Sure you don’t want to eat?” she asked again. Without Lasya around, Kajal was out of practice when it came to conversation—not that she’d ever been proficient at it in the first place—but she found it oddly nice to speak to the dog, perhaps because it couldn’t talk back.

The dog gave her a flat look in response.

“Fine, more for me.”

She chewed on the dried lamb, making exaggerated noises of satisfaction and waving it around in a show of enticement, but the dog pointedly ignored her. She rolled her eyes and made a note of his lack of appetite.

In the first town she'd visited after the Siphar accident, she had worked a short stint as a butcher's assistant, plucking chickens and hanging up the bodies of other animals to drain them of blood. Whenever the butcher wasn't looking, she'd poked and prodded at the animals' insides, committing the layout of their organs to memory. Eventually, she'd saved up enough coin to purchase a pencil, as well as paper and thread to bind up a notebook, one of the few possessions she hadn't stolen.

Most of the pages were already filled with sketches and measurements and theories, as well as the occasional doodle (her favorite being Raja Hiss, a mustachioed snake wearing a turban). Her handwriting was cramped and barely legible, but she had been lucky to learn her letters at all. Living as they had, she and Lasya hadn't received a traditional education. Instead, Kajal had hidden in classrooms, listened in on tutoring sessions for the brats she minded, and stolen books from libraries and homes.

If they weren't swarming with soldiers, she would have traveled to the cities of Malhir and Suraj to make use of their grand public libraries. At the libraries she *had* been able to access these last few months, she'd read essays published by the Meghani family, celebrated demon hunters who'd even traveled to the Harama Plain and lived to tell the tale. Although Kajal disapproved of the profession—there was simply no reason to hunt rakshasas that weren't actively trying to kill you—she'd found plenty of useful information.

Namely, what would happen if she didn't succeed. Six months after death, an unburned body would form a bhuta that first would target those it had known in life, then—once gluttoned with power from those kills—whatever unfortunate soul crossed its path.

Already, five months had passed since she had buried Lasya, and one of those months she'd wasted wallowing. Her window of opportunity was

closing, but with this latest triumph, she was more confident than ever she could achieve what all the books in the libraries she'd combed through deemed impossible.

The dog settled on the floor and stared at her. She stared back, blinking slowly, but the dog only stared harder. Was he trying to tell her something? Was he hungry after all, and simply didn't like her offering? It would be just her luck to have resurrected a picky dog.

"You better not have expensive tastes. I can't afford to feed you prime cuts."

The dog's sides heaved with a sigh. His eyes were an oddly glowing amber, and the morning sunlight didn't lessen the effect. She couldn't help but think of the *aga ghora* with its uncanny white eyes.

Kajal had a shift scheduled in the fields that day. Unwilling as she was to go, she needed the money to travel to Lasya's body and gather the supplies for her revival, now that her latest experiment was a success.

"Don't even think about it," she said when the dog trailed after her. "You stay here." If the travelers-maybe-demon-hunters were staying at the boardinghouse, she didn't want to give them any reason to notice her if they crossed paths.

But the dog was large and stubborn, shoving her into the door as he stalked past. Kajal gave an incredulous huff and hurried down the stairs after him.

Gurveer Bibi was smacking her sunken lips over a bowl of rice at the communal table when she saw the dog and Kajal. Her eyes widened, and her frayed *chunni* slipped down to her shoulders, revealing a shock of gray hair.

"What's that disgusting creature doing here?" she demanded.

Kajal reached for an excuse and landed short. "It followed me home?"

"Take it out at once!" Gurveer Bibi rapped her spoon on the table, her iron bangle making an echo beside it. "Crawling with fleas like its master, no doubt."

"Fleas can't live in human hair."

“Don’t you talk back to me! The mutt’s an omen of misfortune. If I see it in here again, I’m kicking it *and* you out.”

Kajal bit the inside of her cheek. She could hardly argue with the woman; she owned the damn place. But Kajal couldn’t stop the wick of indignity from being lit, already charred from so many other exchanges like this.

“Be grateful I haven’t done it already. I know you’re up to no good.” Gurveer Bibi’s face twisted into a sneer. “Did I ever tell you what the Vadhia did to our fortune teller?”

She had, many times. Just a few months before Kajal arrived, the star reader of Kinara had accurately predicted the death of her cousin, an otherwise healthy man who’d ignored her warnings. When he’d died in a hunting accident, her own family had encouraged the soldiers passing through at the time to drag the star reader from her home and blind her. She’d then been exiled, forced to wander sightless through the countryside. It was the same propaganda Kajal had seen popping up everywhere lately; any connection to the preternatural, to death, would land you a final—and more often than not, fatal—meeting with the Vadhia.

“I’m sure the next Vadhia patrol would be interested in searching that room of yours,” Gurveer Bibi suggested.

Kajal’s teeth pierced her delicate skin, and the iron tang of blood filled her mouth. She was momentarily caught in the urge to walk up to the woman and smack her rice bowl away, if only to see that sneer wiped from her face.

You have no idea what I can do to you.

The corner of her mouth quirked at the thought. It was satisfying in a way few things were lately, encouraging her to push beyond the realm of daydream.

She was about to take a step forward when she heard a thin, high whine, like wind blowing through a crevice. Gurveer Bibi didn’t seem to hear it, still clutching her spoon like a battle-axe.

She's not worth it.

Kajal shook her head and led the dog outside. The sun was already fixing its eye on Kinara, promising a humid morning of damp skin and frizzing hair. The strange whine died down, as did her anger, leaving her tired in its wake.

Kajal spat the blood from her mouth. "Half-dead wretch." She narrowed her eyes at the dog. "You *don't* have fleas, do you?"

The dog gave a tentative wag of its tail.

"Reassuring, thank you."

But not even Gurveer Bibi could fully dampen her burgeoning hope. Kajal made for the fields with a somewhat lighter step, pursued by the padding of large paws on the dirt road.

Her attention strayed to the northern woodland. A pillar of smoke was coiling toward the sky, and she wasn't surprised to see a cluster of curious townspeople gathered at the tree line. The travelers were nowhere to be seen.

A few of those gathered frowned at her and the dog. Kajal lowered her head and walked faster.

"Irya," Farmer Abhay greeted when she arrived. He was leaning his weight on a plow as he surveyed the field. It was the one closest to town, and Kajal appreciated the short commute from the boardinghouse. A camel walked in circles around the stone well that pushed out water to irrigate the crops while Abhay's two small children ran between its legs. "You're late."

She glanced at the sun's position. "I'm on time."

He scowled, his sun-leathered face framed by deep lines. "Just find an empty row."

Harvesting and planting greens was mindless, repetitive work. Her worn leather slippers filled with soil as she transferred ripened greens to her small handcart and reached into the seed bag at her waist to replace them. Sometimes, the motion made the scars on her back ache. Today, she

was slower than usual, preoccupied by the sight of the dog sitting silent and watchful at the edge of the field, amber eyes glowing faintly, like twin stars.

It also didn't help that two farmhands behind her were chatting in low, solemn voices.

"It's a bad sign," one of them said. "A *warning*. I'm telling you, it's only a matter of time until we're hit. Did you hear about Jahar? Entire crop ruined. All that rye rotted overnight."

"I doubt it was that fast."

"That's what they said. Had to burn the whole field." He spat. "This must be our punishment finally come for allowing a usurper to sit the throne. We've failed our dharma."

The other farmhand hissed at him to be quiet. "It's not dharma. It's a *curse*. Why else do you think the Vadhia are crawling all over, looking for those who cast it?"

Kajal grimaced. Anu Bakshi, the Usurper King—the moniker whispered only by those who despised him, or the very brave—had been ruling Dharati ever since she could remember. Those he had invited into his personal army were called the Vadhia, and did not operate in the same manner as the Dharatian military, though both fell under Bakshi's control. The Vadhia were fewer, elite, loyal.

And they had no qualms enforcing Bakshi's rule with cruelty. In recent years, Kajal had seen homesteads burned and would-be rebels hanged from trees. But in these last few months, with the blight growing worse by the day, the Vadhia had been given permission to fight back in whatever ways they could—specifically, the eradication of supposed witches.

To be suspected of being a witch meant trials and torture, or banishment at best. Nowadays, the claim was as good as a death sentence.

Kajal struggled to drown out the men's gossip. The farmhand in the row beside hers paused to wipe sweat from his forehead, his rumaal stained with it. He nodded to the dog by the trees. "He yours?"

She looked around, as if he could possibly be talking to anyone else. When she realized she'd have to indulge him with a reply, she cleared her throat. "A stray. I guess he grew attached to me."

"Huh. Can't see why."

Kajal pursed her lips at the gibe.

"You named him yet?"

She supposed her creation did deserve a name. "Kutaa."

The man scoffed. "You named the dog *Dog*?" He stared at the animal a bit longer, frowning.

The dog stared back, hackles rising as if sensing danger. It made the nape of Kajal's own neck tingle unpleasantly.

Eventually, the farmhand shrugged and returned to harvesting.

She shouldn't have brought the dog with her; he was drawing too much attention. Dogs had never been popular in Dharati to begin with, as they were considered pests who haunted cremation grounds for bodies to scavenge (which *was* where she had found him, but as someone who'd spent a good deal of time near cremation grounds herself, she hadn't thought much of it).

Even Gurveer Bibi knew something was wrong with him. What if the woman tried to get Kajal in trouble? Never mind that she hadn't actually *done* anything, besides some light thieving here and there.

But Kajal knew from experience that those like Gurveer Bibi needed little provocation to pounce. That it was easier for people to point at and blame outside forces for their troubles.

She remembered the man at Siphar, ready to put a torch to her and Lasya's bodies. But the fury in his eyes had been more than understandable if what he'd said was true. If she had really—

If she had—

The corner of her vision flickered. Her chest tightened, cutting off her breath. A frisson of cold swept over her, despite the blazing sunshine.

Then she heard it: the same noise from the boardinghouse, a thin, high whine.

Slowly, Kajal turned.

A girl who cast no shadow stood beyond the field. Her white dress and black hair fluttered in a nonexistent wind, her feet hovering a few inches from the ground. She stared at Kajal with eyes red as cinnabar, so utterly and inhumanly still.

Those eyes used to be dark and warm. That flat, pale mouth used to always be curled up in a smile. That stiff, unmoving body used to be in constant motion, either swaying to music Kajal couldn't hear or practicing mudras or cutting up herbs.

"No," Kajal whispered.

No, I still have time. I thought I had more time—

The bhuta that was once her sister stared without recognition, without emotion. The whine climbed higher, louder, worming its way into Kajal's brain. It made her insides shiver and her knees weaken; it made the center of her forehead burn.

"Behan, please be careful," Lasya said, nervously twisting the copper ring on her pinkie finger. "We don't know what this will do."

"I'll figure it out," Kajal insisted. "This is me we're talking about. It'll work."

"What if it doesn't? What do we do then?"

A hand on her arm made her jump. One blink and the bhuta was gone, as was the cold and the whining drone.

"If you're getting heat sick, go sit in the shade," the farmhand said. "If you faint, I'm not going to move you."

Kajal scanned the field, but Lasya was gone.

"This isn't . . . This can't be right," she stammered.

According to the Meghanis' findings, bhutas didn't form until at least six months after death. She still had a few weeks until that marker, so why had

her sister begun to haunt her already? Was she truly that angry, that desperate for Kajal to make good on her promise?

The blight. Had the tainting of Dharati's soil caused the bhuta to come early? Or perhaps Kajal really was heat sick, and had imagined the whole thing. But Kutaa was also staring at the spot where the bhuta had appeared, ears at attention.

Farmer Abhay whistled sharply. "Irya! No dawdling!"

She forced herself to continue harvesting, ignoring the persistent thrum of dread under her skin. Telling herself what she'd seen wasn't real. Couldn't be real.

Pushing away every thought as she had grown so adept at doing these last few months, lest she end up back on the floor.

When the sun hit its zenith, Farmer Abhay called everyone into the shade. Kajal sat under a teak tree, tensing every time its leaves rustled, whisper-like, above her head. Kutaa lay down beside her and watched her tear the flatbread she'd been handed into pieces. She held a piece out to him, but the dog turned his head away.

"Yeah," Kajal breathed, scratching him behind the ears, which he seemed to enjoy. "I can't eat either."

She was staring at the spot where she'd seen Lasya when movement caught the corner of her eye. A few men were running along the town's main road, which ran parallel to the field, in the direction of the boardinghouse.

Gurveer Bibi's sons.

"Did something happen?" a farmhand murmured.

Kajal's uneasiness sharpened on the whetstone of her lingering dread. Dropping the remains of her flatbread, she approached the edge of the field.

Her gut twisted at the sight of people hovering at the entrance of the boardinghouse down the way. The throng parted at the arrival of the town's medicine man, who hurried through the front door and nearly collided

into a woman on her way out. Kajal caught a brief glimpse of the woman's clothes before she disappeared into the crowd. One of the travelers.

"What's going on?" Kajal mused out loud.

An older auntie on her way to join the nosy onlookers glanced at her, tsking at Kajal's dirty clothes and the equally dirty dog behind her.

"You didn't hear? Gurveer Bibi is dead."



Chapter Four

“**HEART FAILURE,**” THE medicine man claimed. “Found her twisted up with a ghastly look on her face, clutching at her chest.”

Kajal kept her own face carefully blank as they carried the body out, covered in a sheet that did little to hide the strange contortions of its limbs. But under Kajal’s blankness was a howling panic, clawing up her insides and rattling the bars of her ribs.

Once, in a village she and Lasya had passed through, a young man had been carrying buckets of milk when he’d dropped like a stone in the street. The milk had seeped into the dirt as he writhed and choked on nothing, scrabbling at his chest while his mouth foamed.

Kajal had insisted on staying long enough to learn what had caused it, much to Lasya’s annoyance. Apparently, the young man had had a long-standing feud with a hunter who’d disappeared months before. Likely attacked by a rakshasa, the hunter was eventually found mauled and half buried in a ravine. But his body had been there long enough to form a bhuta, intent on taking the lives of those who had wronged him. If the villagers hadn’t burned the body to release his spirit, the wraith would have grown stronger with each kill until it became a permanent fixture of the village, like a particularly murderous tree or building.

But according to the Meghanis, bhutas stayed within a couple miles of where their mortal forms had perished. There was no way Lasya's bhuta could have ended up *here*, so far from Siphar. And beyond that, there was no reason for the bhuta to target Gurveer Bibi, whom her sister had never met.

But Kajal had always considered herself above believing in coincidences.

"That girl stays at the boardinghouse, doesn't she?" A couple of farmhands had wandered over from the field; the one muttering was the same one who'd implied the blight was the work of witches. "She didn't used to have a dog. Did you see its eyes?"

"Do you see *her* eyes? Swear they glow red in the light."

A memory emerged, one she had tried to suppress yet nonetheless surfaced in her nightmares. A swinging noose, and a woman screaming for help, crying that she had done nothing wrong. The Vadhia standing around in their blue-and-marigold uniforms, brass pips gleaming at their collars.

Smiling.

Kajal's heart beat fast and hard against her breastbone. She had planned to remain in Kinara a bit longer, as she would need money to buy supplies for Lasya's resurrection and to arrange transport to her body. But she knew all too well what would happen if she stayed: the glares, the rumors, the suspicion. No good would come from it.

The boardinghouse was crawling with activity, and the farmer would harangue her if she didn't finish her row, leaving her little choice but to slink back to the fields. She reluctantly slipped into her routine of pulling up greens and dropping new seeds in their place, repeating to herself that she just needed to lie low until nightfall, then she'd grab her things and disappear into the dark.

But a sudden realization froze her in place, her hand wrapped around a stalk. She was lucky the people of Kinara didn't recognize a bhuta attack when they saw one, but if those travelers really were demon hunters, they surely would.

And if they had heard about her misdeeds in Siphar—a concern gnawing at her since last night—then she already had a target looming over her.

“Hey.” Farmer Abhay snapped his fingers at her as he passed. “What’d I tell you about dawdling?”

She jerked. Her fingers spasmed around the stalk, and she pulled the mustard greens from their earthen bed.

At first, she didn’t understand what she was seeing. What she was holding. The green veins of the plant had been overtaken with black, like a series of polluted rivers. A foul smell emanated from within the wide leaves, smoky and sweetly rotten.

Kajal dropped it and stumbled backward. The farmhand in the next row chuckled.

“Found another spider?” he teased. Then his eyes landed on the fallen plant and widened.

“Blight,” he rasped. Then louder: “*Blight!*”

Kajal backed farther away as the other farmhands descended, in a flurry of curses and cries. She stared at the field—at the spots of black beginning to wend through the rows—and wondered if there was anyone in this world with worse luck than her.

She ran. Leaving so abruptly was a foolish idea, but staying here was even more so.

She had to leave—now.



A bhuta attack and blight. Perhaps Kinara truly was cursed.

Or maybe Kajal was the only cursed thing here.

One of Gurveer Bibi’s sons, who in Kajal’s experience did little more than pick his nose and leer at women, seemed to have taken it upon himself to oversee the boardinghouse. She could hear him barking orders in the kitchen, which meant he wasn’t around to say anything about Kutaa,

who trailed her like a shadow as she slipped up to her room. Outside, the noise was growing, the alarmed commotion from the field making its way into town.

Kajal hastily washed her hands and packed her meager belongings. They didn't amount to much: a knife, a change of clothes, a small pouch of herbs that was a pitiful reminder of Lasya's beloved spice box.

And of course, Kajal's notebook. But when she lifted the pillow to grab it, her heart plummeted.

It was gone.

She held the pillow in one clammy hand, at a loss. Her mind—usually a chaotic storm of chattering thoughts and colorful ideas that, yes, fine, maybe weren't *all* winners—had ground to a standstill. This couldn't be happening.

Who—?

The demon hunters.

Or, rather, the one she had seen slip out of the boardinghouse earlier.

"Oh, no no no," Kajal breathed, smooshing the pillow between her fists. "You're not getting me that easily." If anyone read even a page of that notebook, it would mean a short trip to the noose.

She threw her pack over her shoulder and, with Kutaa at her heels, she bounded down the stairs as the furor grew outside. When she reached the door, she immediately saw why.

Agitated farmhands and fearful townsfolk had congregated near the boardinghouse. And there, at the center of their irate storm, were two young women—including the traveler-perhaps-demon-hunter who'd likely stolen her notebook.

Heat prickled along Kajal's skin. Before she could decide if she should hurry up and find where the woman's belongings were stashed or just run for the town's outskirts, someone grabbed her by the elbow.

“Got her,” grunted Gurveer Bibi’s son, the one who’d been in the kitchen. He was a hulking thing, a bottle of fermented rice wine in his right hand, and the left, an unmovable clamp on her arm. He dragged her through the crowd, ignoring Kutaa’s warning growls.

Kajal stumbled as he pushed her toward the women. Also in the circle was the only other female farmhand, an unmarried girl who socialized even less than Kajal did. She shook under the town’s glares, ashen and unsure.

The traveler—perhaps—demon—hunter merely seemed bewildered, blinking and looking around, with something like amusement in the upward tick of her mouth. Her brown hair was long enough to keep in a braid, and a silver stud glinted at her left nostril. Her gaze landed on Kajal, who stiffened, but the girl only raised her eyebrows, as if to ask *What is happening here?*

Don’t look at me like I’m your conspirator, Kajal wanted to snap. This was the *last* thing she had wanted to happen, especially if this girl had Kajal’s notebook and decided to use it as her escape ticket.

Sure enough, that’s when the blaming started.

“One of you cursed our town!” a woman yelled. “First, the animal in the woods. Then, the fields. Our *crops*.” Some of the townspeople murmured worriedly; those crops were a considerable source of income for Kinara. “Not to mention Gurveer Bibi dying so suddenly when the medicine man claimed she was healthy. It can’t be a coincidence.”

The son who’d grabbed Kajal curled his upper lip at her. She fought to remember his name—Sandeep? Gurdeep? Gurveer Bibi’s two other sons flanked him, one as brutally large as Gurdeep(?), the other tall and stringy.

Doesn’t matter, she told herself while her eyes flitted around, trying to find the best escape route. Maybe Kutaa could cause a distraction. Maybe—

Farmer Abhay leveled a coarse finger at the traveler. “You and that friend of yours arrived just before all this happened.”

“That’s true,” the traveler said brightly.

“So you’re admitting to having something to do with this?”

The girl made a face that Kajal would have snorted at in any other circumstance. “Now that’s quite the leap in logic, don’t you think? My friend and I put down that diseased buck. We did you a favor.”

“Just listen to the way she talks back,” hissed an older women in the crowd. “Impudent. Disrespectful.”

Kajal pressed her lips together while sweat soaked her underarms. Kutaa prowled the fringes of the crowd, whining.

Farmer Abhay looked like he wanted to close the distance and strike the traveler across the face. “For all we know, *you’re* the ones who cursed that buck in the first place.” Murmurs of assent followed. “You and your *friend* could be rakshasas in disguise, come here under orders from the demon lord to spread the blight!”

The crowd gasped at the idea, most of them taking a couple steps back—including the other accused girl.

The traveler burst out laughing. Kajal’s jaw dropped.

“That’s a good one,” the young woman giggled.

“She doesn’t deny it!”

“Quick, find her accomplice!”

The traveler stopped laughing as members of the town watch moved forward. “Wait, what’s happening? You really believe that?”

Of course they do, Kajal thought bitterly. *They’re nothing but superstitious fools.*

The wide-eyed farmhand had, smartly, taken the opportunity to flee into the crowd while everyone’s ire was directed at the stranger. This was the distraction Kajal had been hoping for; even Kutaa was waiting for her with his head down and muscles bunched. But then she thought of her notebook, her months and months of research—and a possible lead for the Vadhia if this girl decided to implicate her after all.

They can't prove it was you if you're not here.

She could make it to the edge of town and be on her way in the time it took the town watch to arrest the travelers. Kajal shuffled farther from the woman, turning on her heel—about to walk away like she always did, leaving others to their fate while she defied hers.

But in her mind burned the afterimage of a swinging noose and an echo of a helpless woman's screams.

Kajal had done nothing to stop it. There was nothing she *could* have done, not when she followed only one rule in this world: *Survive*.

Lasya would have done something then. And Lasya would have done something now, if she were here.

If Kajal hadn't . . .

She clenched her jaw and swallowed hard before turning back and blurting, "That's not how the blight works."

The crowd, including the advancing town watch and the bemused traveler, swiveled their fevered eyes to her.

"Um," she croaked under their stares. "So, the thing is . . . even if rakshasas *could* take on a human appearance, there's been no proof so far that they have the ability to spread the blight." When no one moved or made a sound, she kept going in a slightly stronger voice, reaching for the comfort of factual evidence. "The pattern of blight is unpredictable, yes, but most of what's been reported in the surrounding area has been in places with a *decreased* rakshasa presence. It's only after the discovery of blight that the number of rakshasas increases. It seems strains of blight tend to lure demons to those places, which is likely how the correlation came about, but rakshasas themselves are not the cause. If anything, it's the buck that caused the blight to form, which means the blight can spread through *animals*, not humans, or curses, or whatever nonsense you believe—"

Glass shattered on the ground near her feet. Kajal flinched.

“You.”

Gurdeep—she was fairly certain it was Gurdeep—took a swaying step forward. His dark eyes were bloodshot, his mouth set in a grimace of grief. He flexed the hand that had thrown his wine bottle.

“My mother hated you,” he muttered, coming closer while the others got out of his way. How had she not realized until now how large he was? He was built for farmwork, all broad shoulders and thick hands. Those hands could easily wrap around her neck and break it.

“I saw the way you talked back to her, just like this—thinking you’re so much better’n the rest of us. She should’ve smacked you around, taught you some respect.” Gurdeep laughed, off-kilter. “I bet it was you. All the stress you gave her wore down her heart. You *killed* her.”

You killed her.

Kajal winced.

Gurdeep’s eyes widened at her reaction.

“No . . . No, you think you’re too clever for that, don’t you? Was it poison? Did you poison my mother?”

“What? I didn’t—”

“Liar!” he screamed before he rushed her.

Kajal was too shocked to do anything but let him crash into her. She grunted as her elbow smacked the dirt road, a nauseating pain shooting down her arm.

Gurdeep huffed like a bull above her, grabbing a fistful of her hair and knocking her head against the ground. Her vision blackened. No one came to help.

“You’ll pay for it,” he seethed, his other hand finding her throat and squeezing. “Evil thing. I’ll kill y—”

He let go with a shout. Wasting no time, she rolled over and crawled away.

“Get the dog!” someone yelled.

“Kill the filthy mongrel!”

She raised her head. Kutaa had sunken his teeth into Gurdeep's shoulder.

"Stop!" Kajal cried hoarsely. "Kutaa, *stop!*"

She didn't think the dog would listen, but he let go and backed off with blood on his muzzle. Gurdeep kept hollering as he scratched at the bite mark.

Good. She wanted him to hurt. She wanted him to bleed, to feel even a fraction of the fear he had made her feel. An unnerving satisfaction bloomed within her.

Gurdeep pierced her with murderous eyes. But when he launched at her again, he seemed to slow, even the dust particles in the air stopping midrift.

A high, piercing whine filled her ears.

No.

A flutter of white, the low whisper of a voice she had once known and loved. Lasya stood behind Gurdeep, preternaturally still against the wind that accompanied her. It smelled of damp soil and rotten fruit, of something the earth harbored deep within its stomach, masticated and fermented.

Lasya's eyes glinted red as she stared at Kajal. The whisper and the whine grew louder, louder, until it vibrated against Kajal's bones and made her wish for death after all.

Find me, she thought she heard in the din. *Kill me.*

Gurdeep rocked back with a strangled cry and clutched his chest. His mouth opened and closed, trying desperately to suck in air, while his face purpled and his eyes rolled until only the whites were visible. His brothers grabbed his shoulders to steady him as his large frame shuddered and jerked, frothy blood leaking from his mouth. Then, at last, he lay unmoving.

The silence rang as loud as his screams. Kajal tangled her fingers in Kutaa's long, soft fur, unable to move, her knees aching on the dirt road.

"D-Dakini," someone whispered in the shocked hush that had fallen over the crowd. "*Witch.*"

Kajal barely heard the accusation. She couldn't tear her eyes off Gurdeep's body, Lasya's voice—the one she had been so scared to forget—echoing through her with its terrible request.

A mother and son, only a few hours apart, both preceded by her sister's ghost. Kajal couldn't deny any longer that Lasya had become a bhuta well before she should have.

One that was already starved for power.



Chapter Five

IT WASN'T HER first time in a jail, and it likely wouldn't be the last.

Kajal, reeling from the attack, didn't even put up a fight when members of the town watch grabbed her. Kutaa snapped his jaws, but one sharp word from her and the dog's ears flattened before he turned and ran. Despite present circumstances, Kajal brimmed with curiosity over how well he took her orders.

Law enforcement was tricky in rural Dharati. Unlike the bigger cities' use of magistrates, most towns and villages were left to look after themselves. Many had developed their own systems, such as Kinara's town watch, consisting of dutiful citizens. They maintained small jails like the one she was hauled to, buildings of white brick with a couple barred-off cells.

"You don't have any proof," she argued as she was pushed into a cell. She knew it was pointless, but that wouldn't stop her from trying. "How could I have possibly killed him without a weapon? It wasn't me!"

"We all saw what happened," a town watch member retorted, a man with a glossy beard. "Gurdeep died right after he touched you. Not to mention you sicced that unnatural mutt of yours on him."

"Dakini," said the other, touching his forehead and flicking his fingers away. It was the same word flung at her in Siphar, the same accusation she couldn't seem to shake no matter where her feet took her.

Claiming that a human woman was a dakini, a type of rakshasa, was not a casual offense. It implied there was something *wrong* with her—even if she was merely widowed, single, or too smart for her own good. These women were thought to have been reincarnated from other types of rakshasas, or else had faced neglect and violence in their past lives and carried their hatred into a new one.

While it was commonplace for people to adorn their doors with chilis, neem leaves, and pouches of rock salt to ward off the evil eye dakinis were said to cast, these superstitions had strengthened in the last few decades. Over time, *dakini* had become synonymous with *witch*.

“It was *her* row where they found the blight,” the bearded man went on. “All of Kinara’s misfortunes can be traced back to her.”

A pit yawned open in Kajal’s stomach, where all her blackest thoughts went to calcify. This man believed what he was saying. He was willing to place the town’s problems on her shoulders, to punish her as a means of fulfilling his dharma.

Because girls like her, who knew too much and conformed too little, must be full of darkness.

When the two men left to discuss her punishment with the rest of the town watch, Kajal paced the cell’s straw-lined floor, rubbing the spot between her eyebrows. She ran into the wall more than once; the cell was cramped, and there were no windows to provide light. Kajal heard Kutaa’s distant howl and cursed at him to be quiet.

Calm down. You can figure a way out of this. She had a feeling that whatever punishment they settled on, it would be enacted quickly. *Think, think.*

In the past, depending on the severity of her crime—theft, mostly—she had gotten away with whatever she had done by performing an ordeal. They varied wherever she went; in one instance, she had been weighed twice on a balance scale, and when she had weighed less the second time she was declared innocent (thanks to the rock she’d wiggled from her sleeve when no

one was looking). In another instance, she'd had to stay underwater while an arrow was fired into the lake and someone ran in to retrieve it, only allowed to come up for air once the arrow had been brought back (and the boy had taken his sweet time with it too).

This, though? Two people dying the same way, so close together? Blight running through their precious crops? She'd be lucky to receive an ordeal at all. Especially if any of the Vadhia were nearby and caught wind of the incident.

Keep going. The sweat had dried on her skin, leaving it itchy and tight. *I have to . . .*

But she was already too late.

"How did this happen?" she whispered to no one, the shape of her voice too large for such a small enclosure. "Lasya . . ."

The blackness around her was oppressive, thick, as suffocating as deep water. She kept pacing, four steps, then turn, four steps, then turn, if only to hear something amid all that silence. It wasn't enough, so she began to hum.

It was the song she'd hum when Lasya was upset, when they were bored, or simply if her sister requested it. *Lotus Blossom*—the title begrudgingly given after days of Lasya pestering her to name it. The melody was as familiar as the sound of her own name, the frame of her bones, something that had long been part of her.

Caught up in the notes, it took a moment to realize there was a second set of footsteps.

Kajal froze. The footsteps stopped as well. She didn't move even as a sigh of cold air swept over her, the space between her shoulder blades prickling.

In the heart of the darkness came a flutter of white, a flash of red eyes.

Kajal stumbled into the wall. There was nothing in this cell, save herself, some straw, and a few insects. But it was no longer silent. A whisper blew into one ear and then the other, breathing down the nape of her neck.

Kill me. Kill me.

“What does that mean?” Kajal croaked. “Lasya—”

She jumped when the door to the building opened. The whispers scattered, leaving her shaken and disoriented.

Kajal had expected someone from the town watch, returning to reveal her sentence. She was surprised to find the two travelers instead. The young man held a torch, its flickering glow playing with the shadows of their clothes and faces, threading their dark hair with red.

The travelers approached her cell slowly, as if afraid she would turn into a snake and slither through the bars. *If only*. Kajal eyed the torch, helplessly thrown back to that day in the coffin, the chill of Lasya’s body, digging in the dirt until her hands cracked and bled.

If they were demon hunters, then today was all the proof they needed.

“They say your name is Irya,” said the young man—boy, really. Both looked barely older than Kajal. The boy had a prominent nose, and his hair fell in a swoop across his forehead. He had no adornments save for the tip of a faded tattoo peeking from his collar. “But I doubt that’s true.”

She glanced at the girl, who winked in a way Kajal found overly familiar, despite their recently shared injustice. “No. It’s Kajal.” She had grown used to throwing out false names since Siphar, but there was no use pretending in her current situation.

“Kajal.” The boy said it like a bitter seed caught between his teeth. “No family name?”

“Why? You planning to write up a marriage contract?”

If Lasya were here, she would have done all the talking. Those were their roles: Lasya, the negotiator; Kajal, the thief. Without her sister’s calming voice and pleasant words, Kajal was left to defend herself with nothing but nails sharpened on threats and insults.

The boy’s mouth grew pinched, but the girl laughed. “I need to thank you for intervening earlier,” she said, her tone considerably lighter than her partner’s. “Even though it led to this.”

"I don't want your thanks," Kajal spat. "I wasn't doing it for you. Is that why you came to gawk at me?"

"Not the sole reason. Want to hazard a guess as to the other?"

Kajal smiled. It was not a nice smile. "I think I'll leave the explaining to you."

"Right." The girl smacked her hand against the boy's chest, making him grunt. "The two of us heard about strange happenings in Siphar. A collapsed mine, dead miners, an aga ghora . . . and two sisters who'd died, only for one of them to come back to life and run off with the other's body."

The blood drained from Kajal's face.

"And now this," the girl went on, gesturing to the wall and the town beyond it. "Classic signs of a bhuta attack."

"Then . . . you *are* demon hunters."

"What?" the boy said. "Hardly." He looked down at himself, as if wondering what about his appearance had given her that impression. Even the girl seemed strangely offended.

Kajal was growing more confused. "If you're not demon hunters, then why are you here? Why did you follow me?" *Why did you take my notebook?*

"Dead girls don't come back to life every day," the boy answered.

"I wasn't *dead*. Siphar's medicine woman was wrong."

"Uh-huh. But your sister is dead. The bhuta is her, isn't it?"

Speechless, Kajal pressed her lips together.

"We overheard the town watch," the girl said. "They're going to give you an ordeal in the morning."

Kajal relaxed somewhat. She had survived ordeals before. She could do it again.

"An ordeal of poison," the boy added.

Never mind. *No one* survived an ordeal of poison; even walking weaponless into a battlefield seemed less of a risk.

Seeing the panic on her face, the girl sighed. “We might be able to help, but you have to be honest. Is the bhuta your sister? Did you manipulate her into killing those two?”

“Why should I be honest with you? I have no idea who you are or what you want.”

Both of them smiled then, eerie in the torchlight.

“Because if we like your answer, we’ll get you out of here,” the girl said.

Kajal took another look at the two standing before her, attempting to suss out the lie.

“I’m Sezal,” the girl said. She nudged the boy’s side until he muttered, “Vivaan.”

“I don’t care about your names. I care about your motivation.”

“Answer our questions, and we’ll tell you more.”

Kajal breathed out sharply. “Yes, the bhuta is my sister.” Her fingertips twitched at the admission, unable to take it back. “But I didn’t make her kill them. Not intentionally. She . . .” Another icy draft blew on the nape of her neck. “The bhuta formed sooner than it was supposed to.”

“And somehow followed you here,” Vivaan finished. “Were the six miners also because of your sister?”

Kajal curled her hands into fists. “No. That was just a cave-in. That was how Lasya . . . How she . . .”

Vivaan gave a short hum, as if he found the subject of her sister’s demise trivial. He and Sezal shared a silent conversation until Sezal dipped her chin.

“We’ll get you out of Kinara,” Vivaan said at last. “But in return, you’ll have to do something for us.”

Kajal had learned from an early age that nothing was free—unless it was stolen. She leaned against the bars and crossed her arms, pretending at nonchalance. “Go on.”

“Sezal and I have been hired by group of concerned citizens who want to do something about the current state of Dharati.”

This, she was not expecting. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what it means,” Vivaan said darkly. “The Usurper.”

When the warlord Anu Bakshi had made a campaign across Dharati, he’d amassed jaded and incensed citizens into his army before storming the capital—notably those from the wealthier districts who had opposed the then king’s mandates to cease the hunting and killing of rakshasas. Bakshi had killed the king, and when the royal battalion marched against his army, the crown prince had also been slaughtered.

Or at least, that’s what Kajal had been told when she was young. She had been born and raised under Anu Bakshi’s rule and didn’t have a proper comparison to what their country had been like before. All she had to go on were the mutterings of the farmhands, or news broadsheets in the more affluent towns she passed through, which painted Bakshi as some sort of savior. Ironic, considering there were more rakshasas now than ever.

“So you’re rebels,” she guessed. “You want to depose Bakshi?”

Vivaan quickly looked to the door while Sezal grinned. “That’s the heart of it,” she agreed.

“Why?”

“Why?” Vivaan whirled back to her, thick eyebrows lowered. “Have you not been paying attention? The yaksha deities have run out of patience. They’re furious at all the blood Bakshi’s spilled on their soil. It’s poisoned our land.”

“You think he’s responsible for the blight?”

“Bakshi *is* the blight. This imbalance started with him and will end when he’s no longer on the throne.”

Kajal stared at the twisting shadows on the wall as she thought it over. It was not exactly a secret that Bakshi was corrupt, but it felt so far away from her, inconsequential.

“What do you want *me* to do about it?” she asked at last.

Another silent conversation passed between Vivaan and Sezal. Vivaan then reached inside his shirt. What he pulled out made Kajal’s eye twitch.

Sometimes I hate being right.

“Judging from the dog the town watch is trying to catch and what we’ve read here,” he said, waving her battered notebook around, “you’ve had some success with your experiments.”

She ran her tongue over her teeth; her mouth was so dry. “I’ve never seen that before in my life.”

“Oh?” Vivaan flipped through the notebook, turning stained pages crowded with her uneven handwriting. “There’s plenty of notes about bhutas. And . . .” He pointed at one of her doodles. “What’s this supposed to be? Excrement?”

“That’s Raja Hiss,” she muttered in affront.

Vivaan smirked. “What we found most interesting are your theories about resurrection.”

“You’ve done it, haven’t you?” Sezal whispered. “You brought that dog back to life.”

Kajal should have been horrified, unnerved, panicked. If the Vadhia were to find her with that notebook, she’d be executed on the spot. But while those reactions were certainly present, at the forefront was a bright flash of flattery, pleased that someone had finally acknowledged her work.

“We have a contact at the Ayurvedic university in Suraj,” Sezal went on. “If you agree to help us, we’ll take you there. You’ll have access to whatever resources you need to continue your experiments.”

Ayurveda was an ancient practice, the knowledge passed down from mothers and fathers to their children and then their grandchildren, from one town’s physician to the next. There were also the Ayurvedic universities—one in Suraj, one in Malhir—where scholars learned to apply that knowledge for modern use. But much like with the Usurper King, the idea of them had always been distant, impossible for someone like her.

“Why would I agree to help your mission if I don’t know what it is?” Kajal countered. The rebels obviously wanted her to resurrect someone, but she needed to hear it in their own words.

This time it was Sezal’s eyes that darted to the door. “We shouldn’t explain it here. Don’t know who might be listening.”

Kajal could *smell* the lie. “Then no deal.”

Vivaan scoffed. “Fine.” He dangled the notebook from his fingers. “Then I guess we’ll give this over to the Vadhia who’ve been trailing you.”

The entire cell seemed to contain Kajal’s heartbeat, frantic and wild, pressing in on all sides. “What?”

“We’re not the only ones who heard about the mishap in Siphar,” Vivaan said. “You’re lucky we tracked you down before *they* did. They’d be more than interested in what you’ve been up to.”

In her mind echoed the memory of a woman’s screams as the Vadhia rubbed chilis into her eyes, binding them with cloth to protect against the evil eye. Stirring up suspicion around the woman’s singing and suggesting she was casting spells with her voice.

Whispering in villagers’ ears that Dharati was being devoured by blight for a reason. That cutting off that beguiling voice with a noose would fix it.

Whatever Sezal saw in Kajal’s expression made her put a placating hand on Vivaan’s arm. “We’ll make the deal sweeter. You’re planning to revive your sister, aren’t you? After you make good on your part of the bargain, we’ll bring your sister’s body to the university.”

One of the reasons Kajal had stayed this long in Kinara was her unwillingness to travel alone. Following the belief that dakinis lured travelers off roads to eat their flesh, the Vadhia had shown no restraint in interrogating women who journeyed on their own. On the trek from Siphar to Kinara, more than one tree she’d passed had been decorated with swaying upside-down bodies,

their eyes bound and their throats slit, blood nourishing the ground below like an offering.

Kajal touched her throat. If she agreed to this, not only would she have resources supplied to her for free, but she could avoid wandering through blighted Vadhia-infested lands to retrieve Lasya.

It was a gamble. A dog was one thing; humans, another. Considering that Kutaa—as beautiful and perfect as he was—didn’t have the ability to eat, it would be beneficial to practice on a person before attempting to bring back Lasya. And if she fulfilled the rebels’ wish, the only condition on which her freedom depended, then she could finish what she had started.

The bhuta would be gone. She would be reunited with her sister.

Everything could return to how it used to be.

Kutaa howled outside the jail. Kajal rolled her shoulders back, settling into the idea, glimpsing the first move of a new game where she would inevitably end up the winner.

Meeting the rebels’ gazes, she grinned.

“On one condition,” she said. “The dog comes with me.”



Chapter Six

EARLY THE NEXT morning, she was given her last meal.

It was the same thing she'd made for herself at the boardinghouse: a simple cracked wheat porridge. Scooping it up with her fingers and shoving the mush into her mouth, she tried not to focus on the blandness or the texture, tried to appreciate that they had given her anything at all.

She would need all her energy if she was going to get out of this alive.

Kajal shut her eyes and thought wistfully of her sister's rice porridge, the kind she would make on chilly mornings. Lasya would add as much jag-gery as she was willing to part with from her traveling spice box, made from palm sap and coveted like gold.

Her sister had always been so protective of her spices and herbs. One time Kajal had taken a dash too much asafoetida to use in an experiment, and Lasya had been drawn to tears.

"These herbs are important!" Lasya had admonished. "They have to be in the right quantity to work with our specific constitutions. What if I run out? I don't want you getting sick, behan." While Lasya keenly followed the practice of Ayurveda when it came to preparing food, Kajal followed the practice as it applied to the human physique, learning about the tissues and channels of the body.

Kajal had rolled her eyes. “I’m not so weak that I’d keel over from an asafoetida deficiency.”

Lasya pinched her hard in reply, spurring Kajal to take even more asafoetida in retribution, despite already having enough for her experiment.

For two miserable days, Lasya had given her the silent treatment. But, like they always did, they’d apologized and moved on. Forgiving each other had been easy, and a necessity; after all, they had no one else in this world save each other. Even death couldn’t stop her sister from finding ways to stay by her side.

Kajal swallowed the sticky memory with difficulty. Lasya had believed in her, had indulged her boastfulness, and in the end, that very boastfulness had ruined everything.

“Lasya?” she whispered, ignoring the way her voice trembled. “Are you . . . there?”

Will you be able to forgive me this time?

There was no answer. She was still listening futilely when the town watch returned to collect her.

Her eyes watered when she stepped into the hazy sunshine, but after a minute of walking they cleared enough that she could make out the shrine ahead. It was nearly the size of a building, carved from stone upon a plinth and washed red in the light of dawn. Three tall, pitted figures were distinguishable despite the years and the elements wearing them down: the Serpent, with its wings, the Elephant, with its crown of briar and bone, the Tortoise, with a banyan tree sprouting from its shell. The three yaksha deities, who’d made their home in the heavenly realm of Svarga after blessing the bedrock of Dharati.

The townsfolk had already gathered to witness her ordeal. Fear was as bright as a flesh-eating fire as they wept and pleaded and prostrated themselves before the shrine, begging for the yakshas to free them of blight and

curses. Women had brought offerings of flowers, bowls of milk, and waxy red pomegranates heaped like a pile of misshapen hearts.

Kajal was forced to stand under the statues' blank stares, the town watch on either side. A couple hunters held bows with loosely nocked arrows, ready to release at her slightest misbehavior. A bit of overkill, in her opinion.

Then again, they suspected her of witchery. She supposed she should consider herself lucky that this was the extent of it so far.

The townspeople backed away at her appearance. Gurveer Bibi's remaining sons glared at her with a loathing so intense it could have shunted her straight into the ground.

Vivaan and Sezal hadn't told her the details of their plan, only that they would come for her once she'd been taken from the jail, since the town watch had been posted to guard it all night. She searched the crowd, but there was no sign of them. She could hear Kutaa's muffled whines, though; someone must have finally captured him.

There was a thought nagging at her, but she wasn't sure what it was until she took a deep breath and realized: There was no smoke coming from the cremation grounds. They hadn't burned Gurveer Bibi or Gurdeep's bodies.

Strange. What were they waiting for?

"No priests have wandered through here in a while," a farmhand was muttering. "No offerings have been given."

"We should have tended the land better."

"There's no fixing this," a woman proclaimed. "Everywhere the blight touches is ruined beyond repair, like the Harama Plain."

At the name, many in the crowd shuddered and touched the center of their forehead before flicking their fingers, a warding sign to open their third eye against evil. The Harama Plain was the no-man's-land in the center of Dharati, where bhutas of soldiers felled by Bakshi prowled. Some thought

it might be where the blight originated, but unable to investigate the area without being torn to shreds, no one could definitively prove it.

A middle-aged woman with silver in her hair stepped forward.

“There is a way to fix this,” she said, her voice commanding attention. “When we travel to the city, we hear tales of the blight. Of patches of land that are sick and withering because the yakshas have withdrawn their blessing.”

She gestured up at the shrine. Several people fell to their knees and prostrated themselves again, as if that would do anything other than dirty their trousers.

“It’s because we’ve allowed the rakshasas and their minions to have their way,” the silver-haired woman went on. “The blight lets them breed, then spread their influence into our own communities!”

“I already told you that’s nonsense,” Kajal muttered as the crowd gasped, and the guard next to her shoved her to be quiet. Again, she cast her gaze around for Vivaan and Sezal. Had they been hit with second thoughts and left without her? Had they decided the bhuta was too much of a threat?

“We have no yaksha deities to fall back on, no divinely appointed asura and deva to aid us,” the woman said. “The only way to remove this demonic energy is to cull those who strengthen it.” She gave Kajal a pointed look. “Only then can balance be restored to our land.”

Kajal swayed on her feet at the words, so similar to what the Vadhia had said before they’d hanged the singing woman. The same words they’d been spreading throughout Dharati for months.

These people wanted an easy solution to the challenges they faced that were beyond their control. They were terrified, and Kajal was their scapegoat.

You could show them true terror.

The eyes of the yaksha deity statues were heavy upon her, like a hand laid on the crown of her head. But this watchfulness wasn’t coming from

pitted stone—it was coming from the bhuta, a prickly sensation at the edge of her awareness. White fluttered in the corner of her eye, and she flinched before realizing it was just someone's dupatta stirred by the wind.

The silver-haired woman approached Kajal with a small jar in her hand, its glass a cheap, cloudy green.

"Irya, you've been found suspect in the deaths of two of our people, as well as the presence of blight in our fields," the woman intoned. "You're believed to be a witch who placed curses on this town. Are you innocent, or guilty?"

These speeches varied from town to town, but Kajal knew the gist of what they wanted to hear. "I'm innocent, because I didn't kill them," she said. It wasn't *not* the truth. "And I have nothing to do with the blight. Or curses. Which, if you recall I mentioned before, aren't real—"

"She lies," hissed the man on her right. "There was a blighted animal in the woodland. She brought it here the same day that mongrel showed up!"

A murmur ran through the crowd. Gurveer Bibi's sons scowled harder, if possible.

"Amma and Gurdeep's bodies are missing," the larger of the two growled. "She must have ordered that beast of hers to feast on them!"

Missing? Kajal frowned and the crowd grew even rowdier, jeering at her and warding off the evil eye.

"The ordeal of poison will reveal if you truly are innocent," the silver-haired woman continued. "If you live, you will leave Kinara with your life. If you die, it'll be a punishment fitting for your crimes."

"I had to piss on straw last night," Kajal said. "Surely that's punishment enough."

A startled laugh from the crowd was immediately hushed.

Without another word, the woman passed her the jar. The glass was cool against her skin, her fingertips finding small imperfections in its bubbles and folds. Kajal loosened her grip in the hopes it would fall and shatter.

But the woman cupped her hands around Kajal's, digging between tendons as she pushed the jar toward Kajal's mouth.

She should have conditioned herself to resist poisons. She should have ingested small amounts of madar and datura every morning, sprinkled an arandi seed or two on her tasteless porridge.

Where are they? she thought furiously. Her lips were dry and cracked, longing for water and instead about to be wetted with toxin.

The glass had just touched her bottom lip when a coarse scream resounded over Kinara, so loud it vibrated though the jar. The people in the crowd echoed that scream with their own as a large shadow swooped over them.

The shadow belonged to a massive bird bristling with sharp feathers, and wings that stirred dust into the air with every flap. It sported a head similar to a vulture's, and its underside was covered in thick scales, curved talons sprouting from its feet like sinister smiles. It circled the town and screeched again, the sound reverberating down the valley.

A sakela pachi. A slow grin spread across Kajal's face while the crowd panicked and dispersed. The hunters let their arrows fly, but they only knocked harmlessly against the demon's keratin plating.

Using the commotion to her advantage, Kajal hurled the jar at the shrine behind her. The glass shattered against the Elephant, its stone trunk dripping poison.

"This is the dakini's doing!" someone cried.

Two pairs of hands grabbed her. But it wasn't the rebels; it was Gurveer Bibi's sons.

"Ah," she said as her heart gave a sickening thump. "So, this probably looks bad—"

She broke off with a gasp as they dragged her from the shrine. One fisted a offhand in her hair, and pain lit across her scalp. Kajal fought back, stepping

on the insteps of their feet, but it only enraged them more. They shook her and bruised her, spitting vile curses and names.

A sharp whistle broke through the screeches of the sakela pachi. Kajal despaired, thinking that the bhuta had appeared, that Lasya had also decided to make her pay—but it was the rebels riding toward her on horseback.

“Get away from her!” Sezal shouted.

Too invested in their vengeance, Gurveer Bibi’s sons didn’t listen.

Sezal pulled on her horse’s reins, and the brown gelding reared with flailing hooves, which caught the bigger son in the chest and sent him flying. Rattled, the smaller one ran to help him.

Kajal coughed and choked on dust as Vivaan dismounted and hauled her to her feet.

“My dog!” She pointed to the building where she’d heard Kutaa’s whining. Vivaan swore and ran toward it.

Sezal reached down. “Come on!”

Kajal took her hand and scrambled up behind her on the gelding, her clumsy efforts making the horse step nervously sideways. Then again, it may have been reacting to the bird demon circling above.

“How did you manage this?” Kajal demanded over the uproar.

“What, you think we’re able to summon rakshasas at will? We just know what it takes to lure them out.”

The lack of pyre smoke suddenly made sense. “You took the bodies.”

Sezal gestured at one of the taller buildings nearby. Kajal watched the rakshasa land on the flat roof in a great pile of feathers and scales, its beak yawning open.

It tore into what was undoubtedly Gurveer Bibi and Gurdeep. A severed arm sailed over the edge and plummeted limply to the ground.

“It’s not elegant, but it got the job done,” Sezal said.

“Rakshasas grow stronger when they eat the dead,” Kajal reminded her.

“Yes.” Sezal’s smile fell. “But despite what these people believe about rakshasas, most don’t go after humans or eat live ones. The sakela pachi should fly off once it’s had its meal.”

Vivaan returned, Kutaa at his heels. The dog let out a deep bark at the sight of Kajal.

“Let’s go,” Vivaan said once he’d swung up onto his own horse.

Kajal held on to Sezal as they rode for the town’s perimeter. She worried Kutaa wouldn’t be able to keep up with the horses, but if anything, being undead made him faster, as if he were no longer hindered by the normal limitations of his body.

Kajal hoped Sezal was right about the sakela pachi. She worked closely with death and did not shrink from it, but that didn’t mean she wanted the townspeople to become a rakshasa’s victims.

Are you sure about that?

She shoved the thought away, as well as her faint misgiving at the rebels’ methods. They were her best chance of safely getting Lasya’s body back. In the meantime, she just had to continue what she’d been trying to do all these months: keep her head down and avoid suspicion.

Easier said than done.