

MELUKHHA...

Many thousands of years ago, an urban civilization of singular caliber arose along the fecund banks of the Indus and Sarasvati Rivers. Growing rich on maritime trade, Melukhha steadily expanded until it covered a quarter of a million square miles—twice the geographical area of the contemporary kingdoms of Egypt and Mesopotamia. And yet, after impressive epochs of peace and prosperity, and well before the consciousness of the Sakya Prince Gautama rose into enlightenment in the sixth century B.C.E., this jewel of the ancient world simply vanished.

Archaeologists have uncovered the remnants of Melukhha in territory now controlled by both India and Pakistan; the ruins reflect a civilization that had reached an extraordinary level of material, scientific and spiritual evolution, where momentous events flowered before fading away, in the manner of all transient things.

Who or what destroyed this thriving river metropolis? A cataclysmic yoking of elemental forces? Barbarians who scaled high mountains to raze her to the ground? Or was it Rudra, the Wild God himself, who, incensed with her rulers for misusing the serpent fire, obliterated her? Yes, the mystery of Melukhha remains, still haunting curious minds.

I do not know what I truly am

I roam about, mysteriously fettered by my mind

—*Rig Veda*

DEVIKOTA VILLAGE: 1839 BCE

A drongo bird shrieked a raucous warning from the *devadaru* tree as Ishvari turned the corner of the narrow path leading out of the valley. She skidded to an abrupt halt, sucking in her breath at the sight of the yellow-banded coils of a king cobra lying before her on the sunwarmed path. The king cobra was belligerent, its venom capable of killing an elephant! Fast as lightning, Ishvari clambered sideways on to the rocks bordering the trail, hoping the serpent was too sluggish to give chase. When she glanced back fearfully moments later, the cobra had only raised its painted hood in her direction, its tongue a forked, flickering earthworm.

She resumed her zigzag flight along the regular pathway, her long, black braid bouncing against her skinny buttocks. Again she sensed the presence of a benevolent entity: *had this power prompted the drongo to shriek its timely warning?* And why did she feel its hovering warmth most intensely in the quiet of the forbidden valley, where the fog of sadness enshrouding her since her father's brutal murder nine moons ago always seemed to temporarily dissolve?

Despite the valley's abundance of fruit, herbs and berries rendered more valuable than ever by impending famine, the superstitious Devikotans kept away from it for fear of ghosts. So Ishvari had been free to explore its lush beauty in peace, gorging on its bounty and drinking from a spring so clear it reflected not just her

thin face but the glory of the sun. Best of all, she always returned home with her frayed shoulder bag bursting with rare herbs that her mother could barter for staples at the weekly village market.

As she raced homeward, a vision of the riverside cave she had stumbled upon today arose in her mind's eye. The cave had been veiled by a thick tangle of tall reeds, and on the crystalline surface of the water below, a white lotus had reigned. Amazed, Ishvari had watched a leopard emerge from its gloom and slip down to the riverbank, scanning his surroundings with liquid eyes before extending his neck to lap at the cool water.

The big cat had raced up a slope and into the stone temple perched on the valley's rocky outcrop. Padding right up to the *sadhu* meditating within, the beast had placed his tawny head on the man's lap, as if in some primal form of worship. Even from afar, the *sadhu's* copper-skinned beauty and regal air had enthralled Ishvari—if he was guardian of the valley, she wondered now, why was he allowing *her* to roam its length and breadth when the few Devikotans who ventured there could only stammer about chilling experiences that served to keep other explorers at bay?

Mica-flecked piles of rock lining the edges of the trail caught shafts of dying sun and sparkled like stardust, bringing her back to the present; yes, even at its most bitter, life had its precious moments. But, as she cut through the fruit orchard that spread behind the cottage she had been banished to with her mother and baby brother, right after the brutal murder of her father, she sensed something was horribly wrong.

Stealing up to its back wall, Ishvari peered in through an open window. Her fist shot to her mouth to stifle a scream—Ghora, the village priest, knelt naked on the earthen floor, his thick-fingered hands grasping the waist of her equally naked mother from behind. The squat priest was uttering ugly cries as he bucked crazily against her mother, the juttu of hair proclaiming his high status bobbing on the crown of his shaven head, the sacred thread worn across the chest by the high-born looped conveniently over his left ear. In a corner, her baby brother Obalesh lay placidly on a *kusha* mat, a trickle of milk oozing out the side of his rosebud mouth. Ghora's body vibrated with a weird energy, his frenzied movements suggesting mingled pleasure and pain. *But what of her mother?* Could Sumangali possibly be enjoying this brutal invasion? Ishvari crept towards a second window for a better view—and saw that while Ghora's small eyes had rolled upwards in obscene gratification, her mother's lovely face was contorted with loathing.

Grabbing a sharp-edged stone, Ishvari stole back to the first window. Tucking it into the leather pad of the slingshot she used to chase monkeys away from the orchard, she aimed at the cleft of Ghora's plump buttocks and let fly, praying to the gods for a perfect shot. Then she turned and fled through the approaching darkness, racing back along the tortuous path until she reached the giant rock throwing its oblong shadow across the base of the valley. Only then did she release her anguish in a piercing wail, dashing her forehead against the rock and welcoming the agony of tender skin splitting open.

Thunder rumbled ominously. Startled, Ishvari looked up to see the sky turn a violent maroon as a mass of storm clouds scudded rapidly past, leaving the sky clear again. *So the Little Goddess attempts to force open her third eye but only succeeds in doing violence to herself!* a great voice roared through the silence.

Little Goddess? Had the pain crashing through her head driven her insane? Or was Ghora playing a trick on her? Impossible! The stout priest could never have chased her all the way here in so short a time—nor did this mighty voice sound anything like Ghora’s plaintive whine! Warily Ishvari opened her eyes and beheld a gigantic being straddling the valley, shining like the sun. The black-and-gold striped skin of a tiger covered his *lingam* and the velvet hide of an antelope draped itself across his massive chest. Knots of cobras writhed about the peacock-blue column of his neck and a crescent moon, luminous and delicate, hovered above his matted coils of hair.

The god raised an enormous hand from which light streamed forth to enter her forehead.

Harness your rage, O Ishvari! the cosmic apparition thundered. Anger weakens the spirit and attracts the attention of demons. I come to grant you great gifts that you have earned over a thousand past lifetimes. Abuse them and I shall whip you until you beg for oblivion! The awesome face visibly softened at her terror. Now, take heart—your marksmanship has sent the false priest scuttling. Be kind to your mother tonight, for soon, Devikota will exist only in memory.

Ishvari touched her wound with tremulous fingers—still wet with blood, and yet the pain was miraculously gone! Then she was alone

again in the shimmering valley. Stumbling home in an incredulous daze, she found her mother seated on the stoop, cradling Obalesh as she fretfully scanned the horizon. “Why so late?” Sumangali demanded as Ishvari set the bag of herbs down by her feet. Then she gasped at the sight of the discoloration on Ishvari’s forehead. “What happened?” she demanded.

“Tripped,” Ishvari mumbled. “Hit my head on a rock.”

“Get inside this minute!” Sumangali ordered shrilly. “When will you ever learn?”

And when will you? Ishvari thought angrily. Inside the one-roomed cottage, she rocked her drowsy brother in her arms while Sumangali ground healing herbs for a poultice on a pock-marked grinding stone. She dared not speak of her outlandish experience in the valley—how would fragile Sumangali react to the god’s cryptic words? Then her eyes fell on a straw basket of vegetables and a sack of rice standing next to the doorway and her rage flared again—so *this* was Ghora’s pay for using her mother’s body!

Obalesh whimpered restlessly in her arms as Sumangali applied the ground herbs to her bruise. “A rock flew in through the window while you were gone,” her mother announced tersely, tying a piece of muslin around Ishvari’s forehead to keep the poultice in place.

“Really, maa?” Ishvari asked, her eyes widening mock innocently. “Was it a monkey, do you think? They hurl stones at me, you know, when I chase them away from the orchard. Except for Ghora,” she added slyly, “no Devikotan would dare to come this close to the valley.”

Suspicion alternated with guilt on Sumangali’s expressive face.

“Did the stone strike you?” Ishvari persisted.

“If it had, idiot,” Sumangali retorted. “I’d be bleeding.”

Ishvari hid a satisfied smirk as Sumangali served her a clay bowl of rice gruel and greens; so the god had spoken true—Ghora would think at least twice before coming here again!

“Sleep well, child,” Sumangali said, her face pinched and weary as she picked up Obalesh to give him her breast. “Ghora came by to say that a royal envoy arrives tomorrow morning from Melukhha to address all of Devikota.” Bitterness flashed across her face. “Apparently the occasion is so important that even *pariahs* like us must attend.”

Ishvari’s spirits plummeted. “But what has this envoy got to do with *us*?”

“We shall find out soon enough,” Sumangali muttered. Then her voice rose, indicating her constant state of tension. “I beg you—do *not* follow your father’s example! It is dangerous to provoke even the lowest of them! Will you swear to me by Mahadevi to keep your big mouth shut?”

Ishvari nodded a sullen assent. The wound on her forehead throbbed faintly, but the rawness of the pain was truly gone. “Rest now,” Sumangali coaxed, placing sleeping Obalesh on the *kusha* mat beside Ishvari. “Your dreams will be sweet if you obey me.”

She lay down beside Obalesh as Sumangali tidied up the kitchen area; the image of Ghora slamming himself against her mother’s willowy body flashed, forcing from her a sharp cry. She managed to disguise it as a cough, but Sumangali half-turned before resuming her work, and Ishvari glimpsed the stark misery on her face. Her mother

hated Ghora, she reminded herself sternly—the only reason she could have submitted to the lecherous rascal was for the food he brought.

Ishvari stared up at the cracked ceiling, her thoughts a confused jumble as she considered her mother's recent ramblings. Sumangali had traced the onset of their current troubles in Devikota to her mother-in-law's death four years ago, when a pestilence had raged through the village and stolen over a hundred lives. Soon after, her father-in-law too had sickened and died. Then Hiranya had begun drowning his sorrows in liquor.

That wealthy Hiranya had been hit hard by the death of both his parents had reached the wrong ears: Andhaka, village headman, had joined with Ghora to circle around her father like birds of prey. Soon, vicious rumors concerning Hiranya's parents' consecutive deaths were floating around Devikota. Possessed by a reckless god, or more likely demon, Hiranya had retaliated by making public speeches denouncing the powerful headman and the priest, his main accomplice. Fuelled by shots of rice liquor, her father's eloquence had soon attracted a swelling crowd—whereupon the demon of drink had tightened the noose over Hiranya's foolhardy neck and led him toward a humiliating death.

Sumangali's dismal version of events continued to disturb Ishvari—was there really a curse on her mother as Ghora had publicly claimed? Like Hiranya, Sumangali too was an only child, orphaned by cruel circumstance. Born in the seaside village of Parushni, her mother had lived a carefree life until the night her merchant father had been struck dead by lightning. Parushni's

spiteful necromancer had warned Sumangali's mother that her daughter's beauty had provoked a jealous demones into killing her father—unless Sumangali was cast out of Parushni, the hag swore, this malevolent entity would prey on its men, one after the other, ravaging the village. Believing the necromancer, her mother had thrown Sumangali out into the streets; then, in a frenzy of grief, she had drowned herself in the raging Parushni River.

A childless widower had offered Sumangali shelter. Fearing for her safety in the seething village, he had immediately sent a message to his nephew in Devikota—a nephew who just happened to be Hiranya's father. Stressing Sumangali's suitability as a bride for Hiranya, the kindly widower had even offered for her a small dowry in precious stones. Fortunately Hiranya's parents had accepted his offer and the widower had personally escorted the nervous teenager all the way to Devikota. Soon Sumangali had fallen in love with her silver-tongued husband; producing Ishvari, she had blossomed into womanhood. Then disaster had struck yet again.

Feeling no older than Obalesh, Ishvari sucked on her thumb for comfort. How long before Sumangali broke down from the strain of keeping them alive in this wilderness? Would they survive the coming winter without a single kinsman to cushion their exile?

On the other side of the room, Sumangali prostrated before a stone deity of Mahadevi adorned with stripes of vermilion and a few wilting marigolds. Tears streamed down her mother's gaunt cheeks as she gazed at the image. "Where is your protection, Goddess Mother?" she sobbed, so lost in agony she did not care that her daughter was watching. "Do you not love us any more?" Her

beautiful face twisted with torment and Ishvari cringed to see her suffer. “Allow Ghora to defile this body just one more time,” Sumangali cried softly, “and I swear I shall end my pain forever!”

Ishvari shivered under the thin quilt—how could a good mother abandon her children to an unfriendly world? Why was Sumangali so *spineless*? Her hatred for Ghora intensified; at least, she consoled herself as sleep dragged her down into the underworld, her mother had not willingly joined with the bestial priest.

ψ

When the Supreme Shakti

Of her own will assumes every form in the universe,

In that one quivering instant the Chakra comes into being.

—*Yogini-hrdaya*

LORD KUSHAL, ROYAL ENVOY

Sun beat down on the village square, scorching Ishvari so callously that she stamped her feet in a furious dance. The surrounding throng of Devikotans sent hostile looks and muttered curses her way, but she did not care—hours of waiting in this pitiless heat and still the grand envoy from Melukhha had not deigned to appear!

“Behave!” Sumangali snapped, rocking Obalesh in her thin arms. “You know how easy it is to provoke....”

“Why did you hide my slingshot?” Ishvari cut her off rudely. “I’d shoot the eyes out of the first....”

“You promised to shut your mouth, demonspawn!” Sumangali hissed, twisting Ishvari’s ear, her voice hoarsened by heat, dust and rising anxiety.

Ishvari rubbed her smarting ear, fighting back tears. *Demonspawn!* Ghora’s vile name for her! Ever since his intrusion into their lives, her mother had turned into a jittery wreck. Turning her back on Sumangali, Ishvari furtively surveyed the villagers. By the gods, the entire population of Devikota seemed to have assembled in the square, all waiting for this cursed envoy! Ghora and the moribund Council of Elders stood at the head of the community, females congregated behind, while males lounged alongside the

baked mud wall edging the square's north end. Only she and Sumangali stood apart, as was customary for those declared pariahs. Hanging her head in frustration, Ishvari thought of their own little orchard—the instant this ridiculous gathering dispersed, she would race home to pick the ripening fruit before birds and monkeys got them all. Her toe dug into the dry earth to trace a rough circle. She added small eyes—like those of the grunting pigs kept by the barber's new mistress—then a wide slash of a mouth and a tongue hanging out. Looks like Ghora, she thought, gratified, only not so ugly.

Muffled laughter rose from the dense ranks ahead of her. Village belles, kohl-rimmed eyes glittering with expectation, exchanged whispers under the hawkish scrutiny of their elders. Ishvari noticed that heat had not dampened their spirits nor affected the richness of their garments. The twin daughters of the spice and incense merchant were dressed in scarlet and blue tunics edged with gold, while the sulky, double-chinned daughter of Devikota's jeweler sweated in a tunic fashioned out of turquoise linen. In contrast, she and Sumangali were garbed in the plain white homespun that all pariahs were enjoined to wear for public occasions. Her eyes met those of Anasuya, the good-natured daughter of the village goldsmith. Anasuya flashed Ishvari a shy smile, whereupon her shrewish mother hit her daughter sharply on the head. Ishvari flinched, as if she herself had been struck; not that long ago, she had happily played *Seven Tiles and Snakes-On-The-Roof* with the rich village girls. Blinking back tears, she recalled the necklace of seashells Anasuya had gifted her—only yesterday, Sumangali had bartered it for herbs she hoped would strengthen her shattered nerves.

The crowd parted to let Andhaka through. Ishvari watched him stride to the front of the square and fall into agitated discourse with Ghora. Her throat constricted with renewed fury—was it only nine moons ago that these fiends had arrived at the gate of their ancestral home at twilight, accompanied by a couple of louts pushing a hand cart? Andhaka had yelled out for Sumangali, who had hurried out carrying sleeping Obalesh in her arms. Ishvari had tagged close behind. Ghora had pointed to Hiranya’s body splayed over a hill of dung at the back of the cart, his feet sticking out into mid-air. “Dead of snakebite,” he had announced, the tic beneath his left eye jumping crazily. “A fitting end for a loose-lipped scoundrel, eh?” Ghora had turned to the grinning men whom Ishvari recognized as kinsmen of Andhaka. “Burn the corpse quickly, fellows, lest it further pollute Devikota. And do not forget to bathe right afterward, and to light incense to appease the gods, *plenty* of it!”

Sumangali’s slender body had swayed like a lily in a strong breeze. Obalesh had awoken and begun to wail. Ishvari had made to run after the cart, whereupon Andhaka had lunged forward and struck her so viciously she had skidded backward and hit a *devadaru* tree. Andhaka had ordered them back inside and stalked off with the smirking priest.

Before daybreak, Ghora had returned with the same men, pushing the same filthy cart. Eyes glittering with lust each time they fell on her frightened mother, the priest had ordered his accomplices to toss their essentials into the cart. Then he had force-marched them to the stone cottage at the base of the haunted valley, abandoned by

its sheep-herding owner who'd sworn that peals of laughter rolling across the deserted region at night had driven him near insane.

Next morning, Ghora was back with more black news: by unanimous order of the elders, their home, orchards and wheat acreage had been sold to the Merchants' Guild to pay off Hiranya's debts. Moreover, the elders had declared the three of them to be pariahs. "Be grateful, woman," Ghora had leered. "If not for my intervention, you and your litter would have been burned alive."

Paralyzed by the ruthless events that had overnight deprived her of husband, assets and reputation, Sumangali had fallen into a near-catatonic state. But Ishvari's own anger against these influential bullies had risen to fever-pitch. Doubtless, her father had gradually turned into a violent drunk. Truth be told, mere weeks after Obalesh had emerged into the world, Hiranya had thrashed Sumangali near senseless for begging him to stop antagonizing Devikota's administrators. Then he had stumbled back to the tavern, muttering about an insatiable demon that had cast its spell over him. Soon after, Devikota's rogues had murdered him.

Sumangali blamed Hiranya's liquor-loosened tongue for their troubles. "Guard your own tongue from here on, child," she had begged Ishvari, her eyes swollen with weeping. "We women are defenseless against such evil." But Ishvari's spirit was only temporarily quelled and soon she was conjuring up fantasies of revenge.

Now hot winds from the encroaching desert buffeted the square, sweeping grains of sand into her eyes. Ishvari rubbed them with grimy fists. A sob escaped her, causing Labuki, eldest daughter of the

headman, to swivel around and shoot her a derisive look. “Thhhhhu!” Ishvari spat like a wild cat, unable to hold back her own contempt.

“What is wrong with you?” her mother cried. Obalesh stirred in the cloth pouch hanging around Sumangali’s waist, disturbed by the mounting tension. “Calm yourself!” Sumangali ordered, gripping Ishvari’s hand. “See? Over there? Lord Kushal has arrived!”

Ishvari watched the envoy descend from a semi-enclosed traveling coach drawn by four snorting, jet black stallions. The driver sat on a red seat, while the coach blazed in stripes of gold, green, crimson and saffron, colors of the royal elite. A phalanx of guardsmen formed a protective shield around the nobleman, who, despite his jeweled headdress and sumptuous attire, seemed to be quite ordinary—except for his eyes, Ishvari noted, which gleamed with cold intelligence.

Men jumped off the walls as Lord Kushal climbed onto the mud-packed dais, his keen eyes sweeping over the sea of upturned faces. “Salutations from Takshak, Maharajah of Melukhha!” he began, with such sure authority that the restive crowd grew quiet. “In celebration of the trade treaty between Melukhha and Sumeria, your Maharajah has instructed his engineers to divert the Sarasvati River into the lowlands. Soon Devikota will be fertile again!”

“Come, Kushal, do we not deserve a little honesty?” a man shouted. “Takshak concocts these so-called treaties to appease the masses. Why not spit out what you’re really here for?”

Dead silence followed these incendiary words. Lord Kushal’s eyes darted fiercely from face to face, looking for the source. The stranger laughed, his voice now coming from a different angle,

confounding both the envoy and the edgy mass of Devikotans. “Your loyalty to a corrupt king baffles me, Kushal. If you truly love Melukhha, inform Takshak that to seek new *tantrikas*—even as he abuses the old—only serves to further enrage Rudra!”

“Who speaks?” Lord Kushal demanded, even as the guards’ hands flew to their scabbards—which villager would dare address a royal envoy with such easy familiarity? Ishvari peered through the gaps in the surging multitude until she spied a tall stranger standing at the far edge of the square. His chiseled face shone like burnished gold, while his body, clad in a red loincloth, stood as sure as an unsheathed sword. A wide grin of recognition broke the gloom of her expression—why, here was the sadhu of the valley!

“Speak up, if you dare!” Lord Kushal roared. “Who insults our Maharajah?”

Ishvari looked to see what the sadhu would do, but he had vanished!

“Not a Devikotan for sure, sire,” Andhaka offered fearfully. “Rest assured, he does not speak for anyone of significance....”

“Mahadevi showers us with prosperity,” Ghora broke in frantically. “May the benevolent Takshak live forever in the hearts of his people!”

Lord Kushal summoned up a disdainful smile. “Madmen pop up in the oddest places,” he remarked languidly. “And now permit me to explain my presence in Devikota: our royal astrologer has chosen twelve—out of the three thousand villages surrounding Melukhha—for a signal honor. Devikota, I’m happy to inform you, ranks first among them.”

A burst of surprised cheering broke out.

“Today,” Lord Kushal continued gravely, “I shall select one young virgin from among you. Tomorrow she will leave with me to be trained, along with eleven aspirants from other villages, by Melukhha’s most venerated *tantric* monks. All twelve shall later serve our nobles, but only *one* among them shall be elected High Tantrika—the most revered female role in all of Melukhha.” The envoy’s lips widened into a broad smile. “Who can predict the play of the gods? This fortunate woman may well turn out to be Devikotan!”

Ghora rushed up to the dais eagerly, his juttu of hair bobbing atop his freshly shaved dome of a head. “Tell us more, my lord,” he urged. “Provide every detail so we may better serve our Maharajah!”

Lord Kushal ignored the fawning priest, and for this reason alone, Ishvari began to warm to him. “Yes indeed,” he continued, “a High Tantrika may evolve into the most influential woman in Melukhha, which is why my choice today shall not be arbitrary. Indeed, our astrologer has given me psychic and physical signs to guide me unerringly to the right aspirant.” His gaze swept over the hushed assembly. “I trust you will all cooperate.”

Puzzled, Ishvari scratched her dry head, which Sumangali had not inspected for nits since Hiranya’s death. What in the name of *karma* was this fellow going on about? And why were these over-dressed girls vying so brazenly for his attention?

Lord Kushal stepped down to stroll between rows of nervous women. The crowd held its collective breath as he stopped before Labuki, Andhaka’s teenage daughter, considered the prettiest girl in

Devikota. He studied Labuki's slender ankles, raised his practiced gaze to her jewel-studded silver waist belt, and examined her sloe eyes. The girl thrust her full breasts forward and a seductive smile curved her lips. In time, Ishvari thought disdainfully, Labuki's breasts would hang low and dry, like those of her querulous mother, first wife of the brutal headman.

Suddenly Lord Kushal whipped around to face Ishvari. "You, in the white tunic!" he called. Sumangali nudged her sharply and Ishvari gawked at him, petrified by his approach. The aristocrat reached forward to cup her chin with cool fingers. "Your name, child," he ordered.

"Ishvari," she whispered. A trickle of urine ran down her thighs.

"Ish-vah-ree," Lord Kushal repeated, breaking her name into its three syllables. A glimmer of a smile crossed his face as he inspected her even more meticulously than he had Labuki, taking in the homespun shift, the skinny limbs and the black eyes that dominated her oval face. "Ishvari," he repeated, rolling her name around his tongue like honey. Unnerved, she ducked behind Sumangali. The envoy chuckled. "Ah, so the dirty Little Goddess hides behind her mother's skirts," he drawled. "Do you know what your name means?"

'Little Goddess' again? Panicked, Ishvari clutched at Sumangali's garment and the fabric ripped. Losing her balance, she fell flat on the dusty ground. A ripple of nervous laughter broke out as she scrambled to her feet, scarlet with shame, raking her eyes over the prettified girls.

“By Rudra’s whip!” the envoy exclaimed. “Fire animates this child!” He caught Ishvari by the shoulder and drew her towards him. “Ishvari means *goddess*,” he explained kindly, “feminine form of Rudra, Wild God, master of life and death in the Triple World. Your fierceness does not surprise me, little one—all those chosen to serve our God shine as brilliantly as Melukhha’s midday sun.” Lord Kushal gazed steadily into her frightened eyes. “Many honor the Wild God as Rudra, the Howler, while to others he is Ishvara, or Shiva the Destroyer. Whatever his name, our God encompasses everyone and everything, for he is the source of both darkness and light, as well as the fount of all contradictions.” Bending low, he whispered into her ear: “Take care never to displease Rudra, Ishvari—the misery inflicted by his whip humbles the proudest soul!” Then he noticed the bruise on her forehead and his eyes narrowed into slits. He turned to her mother. “Your name, if you please,” he ordered frostily.

“Sumangali,” she whispered, her almond eyes widening in her pale face.

Lord Kushal pointed to the bruise on Ishvari’s forehead. “Are you responsible for this?”

Sumangali shook her head, too intimidated to speak. She clutched Obalesh to her breast, her demeanor reminding Ishvari of the sacrificial goat the butcher had tied outside his door on the night of the last full moon.

“I fell, my lord, while running,” Ishvari cut in quickly. “Hit my head on a rock.”

“And just who,” Lord Kushal demanded, moving forward again to grasp her chin and pin her with his eagle eyes, “were you running from?”

“Ghora, our priest,” Ishvari blurted, her heart beating so fast she worried about falling dead at his elegantly shod feet. “He was hurting my mother with his body!”

A cry of horror escaped Sumangali; with her free hand, she instinctively shielded her eyes from the startled stares of the mob surging about them.

“The girl is lying!” Ghora shrieked, darting Ishvari a searing look in which she caught a flash of naked fear. “Ask anyone here, they’ll tell you—”

“Quiet!” Lord Kushal barked. Ghora’s face flushed an ugly red, although he subsided instantly. The envoy turned to Ishvari, stroking his beard thoughtfully. “Are you sure your mother does not invite this...this unappetising fellow to sport with her? Coupling is permitted if both parties are willing, you know.”

“My mother is *not* willing, sire,” Ishvari cried, her skinny body trembling with rage. “She does it for vegetables and rice—or we might starve!”

Lord Kushal’s face expressed fastidious disgust. He cast a withering look at Ghora before addressing the restless crowd. “Where is Ishvari’s father?”

“Sumangali’s a widow, great sire,” Vamadeva, Andhaka’s cousin, and Devikota’s tavern keeper, shouted hoarsely. “Her man died in debt—after poisoning his own parents at his wife’s wicked

urging. We found his body in the Field of Cobras! Only drunkards blunder there at night.”

“A dreamy stargazer who lived for his liquor,” Labuki’s mother offered in a quavering voice. “Sold his soul to a witch and got everything he deserved!”

Ishvari wanted to scream that *they* were all liars and thieves, but Lord Kushal was raising a hand for silence. He turned to her shaken mother. “Answer me truthfully, O Sumangali—was the name Ishvari your choice?”

Ishvari frowned—why was the envy changing the subject at this critical point?

Sumangali shook her head shyly even as she jiggled the restless baby in her arms. “It was her father’s notion, sire,” she said hesitantly. “He swore a voice too sweet to be human breathed it into his ear.”

A faint smile hovered about the envoy’s mouth. “What was the exact time of her birth?”

“Ishvari slipped out of my womb at dusk,” Sumangali whispered, forcing the envoy to bend to catch her words. “My husband urged me to look out of the window and I saw the moon hanging silver radiant in the sky. As we both watched, transfixed, the sun, already sinking into other worlds, rose high again to blaze forth on Devikota.” Her eyes blurred with tears. “I am no sorceress, my lord, and my Hiranya was the finest man in all Devikota. It was the sudden death of both his parents that led him to drink....”

Lord Kushal halted her rush of words with a raised hand. He pointed toward Vamadeva and Labuki’s mother, the diamonds on

his manicured ring finger flashing. “Such conflicting statements to make,” he tut-tutted. “Does a dreamy stargazer murder his own parents? Your scurrilous lying may get the both of you executed—for no less than murder!”

Ishvari stifled hysterical giggles at the impotent fury on Vamadeva’s face. Her eyes darted back to the envoy, now addressing her mother for all to hear. “I have circled the civilized world and learned much about our universe, O Sumangali. I’d wager my stallions that you are the furthest thing from a sorceress. By the power our monarch has vested in me, I hereby guarantee your safety. Now kindly complete the recounting of your daughter’s birth.”

Sumangali’s voice was choked with emotion. “My...my husband...he claimed the sun’s unusual ascent that evening was due to the gods pouring fresh fuel on that shining orb. Hiranya was learned and he enjoyed playing with ideas, my lord. He said it was a sure omen that our daughter was destined for *moksha*, for full liberation.”

Ishvari’s eyes grew big—why had Sumangali kept her father’s precious words from her?

Seemingly impressed by Sumangali’s eloquence, Lord Kushal nodded with satisfaction. He drew a clay tablet from the folds of his inner garment and scanned its markings. “Devadas predicted the girl would be born when both sun and moon were in the sky,” he muttered. He turned to Sumangali: “How did your husband die?”

Andhaka shoved Ghora forward. “Of...of snakebite, sire,” the priest stuttered. “A terrible omen, if one refers to the teachings of our *rishis*—”

“How bizarre,” Lord Kushal remarked, cutting him off in mid-flow, “that a boor who violates defenseless widows should claim intimate knowledge of our wisest men.”

Ghora’s cheeks flamed. Bowing clumsily, he backed into the crowd. Again Ishvari suppressed her giggles—if the priest dared to approach the cottage again, she would aim for his eyes!

The envoy swiveled around to face her. “How many years do you have?”

“Twelve,” Sumangali answered for her. The envoy took Ishvari’s right hand, clucking reprovably at the dirt embedded in her broken nails before turning it over to study the lines on her palm. She pressed her lean thighs together, hoping he would not smell her drying urine. He reached into the folds of his tunic and withdrew a transparent disc with a golden stem which he held over her palm, squinting at the network of creases that covered the work-toughened mounds—it was a magical device, Ishvari marveled, one that made things appear larger!

Lord Kushal turned to Sumangali, observing her weary beauty. Drawing a leather pouch out of the pocket of his robe, he handed it to her with a formal bow. “Compensation for your loss, my good woman. Kindly prepare your daughter to leave with me at first light tomorrow.”

Sumangali’s hand dropped with the weight of the purse. She cast an anguished look at Ishvari, whose legs had begun to shake uncontrollably—was her mother really willing to sell her to this man? “Your husband was correct,” Lord Kushal murmured reassuringly. “Ishvari’s lines reveal extraordinary intelligence and depth, while the

crescent in the corner of her palm indicates Mahadevi's direct protection—it would take great crimes to negate this spiritual benefaction.”

Slowly, Ishvari returned to the scene around her. The sun still burned her body but the surrounding crowd was now as ominously hushed as was the earth before the quake that had recently hit Devikota. “Hey, Andhaka!” a woman yelled. “Does the envoy know about the curse on the girl's mother? Why don't you inform him that Sumangali's a witch and all three of them pariahs?”

Then the voice of Andhaka himself, raised high in outrage—“Lord Kushal *must* reconsider! A disgrace for Devikota—choosing a pariah over my own daughter! Huh!”

The envoy confronted the hulking headman. “Could it be,” he said, enunciating each word clearly, “could it possibly be that you have forgotten whose authority you question?” He took a step forward. “Lording over this insignificant little village may well have addled your brains, assuming you had some to begin with.” He paused to adjust his headdress. “In fact, my dear fellow, it is almost as if you harbor a death wish.”

Andhaka flushed and made to turn away, but Lord Kushal held up a restraining hand. “I've selected aspirants for twenty-one years and many consider me an expert in the area of aesthetics.” He flicked a spot of dust off his embroidered jacket. “Let me inform you that your daughter, while pretty enough, lacks the depth of character that flowers into classic beauty. On the other hand, I predict that seven years from now, Ishvari will dazzle Takshak himself.” He wagged a playful finger at Andhaka. “Now don't you go blaming your

daughter for her inadequacy—shallowness, you see, is most often an inherited trait.”

As the headman backed away from the dapper envoy, Ishvari began to comprehend the meaning of royal power—if even influential Andhaka quailed at the words of this aristocrat, she could only imagine the might of the Maharajah. Lord Kushal leapt nimbly back onto the dais. “People of Devikota!” he cried. “Be assured—the girl Ishvari has all the signs I was directed to look for!”

Suddenly a stone flew out and struck Sumangali on the shoulder. The head of the guardsmen, a burly man with expressionless eyes, stepped forward instantly, but Lord Kushal waved him back. “Had that stone struck Ishvari,” he said coldly, “I would find and execute the culprit right now! Now hear me well—should *any* of you, high or low—” and here he stared directly at Ghora—“misbehave towards Ishvari’s family in the slightest, your punishment shall be swift and severe. Ishvari is now the personal property of the Maharajah. By sacred law, all her kinfolk fall under royal protection and are no longer pariahs. Never forget—Takshak has eyes *everywhere!*”

The jealousy of the crowd hit Ishvari like a palpable wave. A mantle of perverse pride fell over her as Lord Kushal returned to her side. It was followed by a steady drizzle of fear. This is *real*, she told herself, rubbing her arms with sweating palms. Tomorrow she’d be packed off with this intimidating nobleman, sold, like a sack of grain! The lump in her throat grew as big as the rock that stood at the foot of the valley. Dazed, she scratched her scalp again as the god of the valley’s prophetic words echoed eerily in her head.

Lord Kushal took a lock of her hair in his hands and gingerly separated the strands between his fingers. She had left it loose this morning, too vexed to even braid it. “Nits!” he cried, appalled. “Is there a barber among you?” he called to the crowd.

Kutsa came bustling forward.

Lord Kushal pointed to Ishvari. “Shave this child’s head clean,” he ordered.

Kutsa gaped, taken aback.

“The fool thought the envoy needed a trim,” a woman chuckled. Ishvari recognized the voice of the barber’s rejected mistress. Sniggers erupted—the liquor-addicted Kutsa was not popular. “Watch out, Kutsa,” the herb merchant sneered. “The girl bites.”

“Catching flies, are you?” Lord Kushal barked at the barber. “Go on now, get your implements and be quick about it.”

Kutsa lumbered away and Ishvari’s spirits sank into the earth—of all the awful things she could have envisioned, this had to be the worst. The barber returned with a worn leather bag and a wooden stool. Seizing Ishvari roughly, he deposited her on the stool and proceeded to hack off her long hair before shaving her skull clean with his razor.

“*All* of it,” Lord Kushal ordered, pointing to a spot he’d missed. Kutsa obeyed with alacrity. The envoy stepped back to view her properly. “A perfectly shaped head,” he murmured, pleased. He dropped a gold coin into Kutsa’s waiting palm and swung around to face the crowd. “The spectacle’s over. Leave—you two, as well,” he ordered, pointing at Andhaka and Ghora who stood huddled together. As the Devikotans dispersed in grumbling waves, Andhaka

strode toward Labuki to enfold her in hairy arms. Given his violent cunning with anyone who posed the slightest threat to his position, his genuine concern for his daughter baffled Ishvari. With a malevolent glance at Ishvari, Andhaka too left the square, his arm encircling a pale Labuki.

Then there were just the four of them and the guardsmen. Leading Sumangali a few feet away, Lord Kushal spoke to her in low tones. Ishvari caught the tremor in her mother's responses. Sumangali walked back to Ishvari, rubbing her bruised shoulder with her free hand. Grasping Ishvari's arm, she led her homeward in bleak silence, Obalesh napping all the way.

Ishvari sat on the stoop, unwilling to enter the cottage. "Come inside," Sumangali called from within, her voice immeasurably sad. "We've so much to do tonight."

In dramatic response, Ishvari jabbed her nails into her skull; bile shot up into the scrawny column of her throat and she vomited bright yellow bitter stuff all over the stoop.

Sumangali rushed out, Obalesh tucked under her arm, squalling loudly. "This is the result of your rage!" she cried, dragging Ishvari inside. She set the baby on the mat in the corner and gestured for Ishvari to lie down beside him. Then she placed the urn of spring water next to the mat and proceeded to bathe Ishvari's feverish body with a moist cloth. "Breathe deep and slow, child," she instructed gently. "Your heart beats too loud."

It was true, Ishvari thought, her heart beat as loudly as the drum she sometimes heard in the middle of the night. Rigid as a corpse, she watched Sumangali make space for her purse behind a loose stone in

the wall. It was clear why her mother had accepted the envoy's selection—his gold would buy much more than just food, clothes and luxuries they had almost forgotten, and, after his clear warning to the villagers about her family's new high status, Sumangali would be safe from Ghora.

Trapped alone in a chasm between discordant worlds, Ishvari fell asleep. In the dream that came to her, she lay in a clearing beside the sparkling river that snaked its lazy way through the valley. The leopard of the valley sprang upon her, tearing the heart out of her chest. Rearing up on sinewy hind legs, the wild cat held the mass of still-pumping flesh high in his bloody jaws. She screamed, so vivid was the vision.

“What is it?” Her mother came rushing to her. “What is it, my precious love?”

Ishvari turned her back on her mother and curled into a fetal ball. Only this morning, Sumangali had cursed her with ‘demonspawn’—and now she was her mother's ‘precious love’? *Could a purse of gold alter a person's attitude so easily?*

“Eat this, please,” Sumangali begged, returning with a bowl of watery gruel she attempted to spoon into Ishvari's parched mouth. Ishvari pushed her mother away, refusing the food. Sumangali gave up with a sigh and sat on the floor beside her mat. “Then go to sleep,” she coaxed sadly. “You must look well tomorrow.”

“Give his gold back to him, maa,” Ishvari moaned desperately, drawing her legs up to her chest. “I promise I'll work harder. We'll have better food, warmer clothes....”

Obalesh chose that moment to howl. “All will be well,” her mother consoled dully, putting the baby to her breast. “Remember what Lord Kushal said? Mahadevi herself protects you. Soon you shall have plenty of nourishment for body and mind and the monks will gladly answer all those questions you keep throwing at me. Here in Devikota, nothing but drudgery and shame await you.” She reached forward and kissed Ishvari’s perspiring forehead. “One day, beloved child,” she whispered, her eyes streaming with tears, “you will understand.”

But Ishvari turned away, numb with despair, hugging her bony knees to her chest.

ψ

Know that the Self is the lord of a chariot,

And the body is that chariot.

Reason is the driver and mind the reins.

The horses, it is said, are the senses.

—*Katha Upanishad*

RUDRALAYA

Bands of sun illuminated the flaking whitewashed walls of the cottage as Ishvari came grudgingly awake. Sapped by feverish dreams, she raised a hand to feel the strange smoothness of her skull, realizing once again that the god of the valley had spoken true. On the other side of the room, Sumangali sat before her altar, tears coursing down her cheeks as she gazed beseechingly at her precious Mahadevi. Ishvari inhaled the essence of her mother's misery, but instead of softening her heart, seeds of resentment rooted firmly within.

Footsteps sounded on the roughly paved path outside their door. Sumangali mopped her tears with her garment and stumbled anxiously forward, but Ishvari already knew it was Ghora, from a cloying blend of hina and patchouli he wore on special occasions. The priest flung the door open and stormed in. "Not ready yet?" he chided, his pudgy face ruddy with exertion. "Nobles don't wait for pariahs, you know." He glowered down at Ishvari. "Get dressed, *now*, demonspawn, or I'll give you the whipping you so richly deserve!"

Ghora's contempt stung Ishvari like a swarm of angry hornets; feeling too vulnerable to defend herself, she pulled the quilt over her face. Ghora aimed a kick at the worn *kusha* mat. "Rise this instant!" he shrieked. "You're not a *tantrika* yet, nor will you ever be!"

So the events of the previous day had really shaken this thick-skinned bully! Knowing she had humiliated him before all Devikota infused Ishvari with fresh spirit—throwing the quilt off her body, she leapt to her feet, crossing her eyes and sticking her tongue out at him.

"*Pariah to the end!*" Ghora roared. He spat a wad of phlegm on to the earthen floor, his eyes glittering with such malice that Ishvari shrank back in terror. "Be assured, slut," he smiled mockingly. "No matter how high you fly, one day I shall expose your base origins!"

Then, like the furious desert wind that raged through Devikota every summer, Sumangali darted across and slapped the priest's face so hard that he rocked right back on his heels. Ishvari gasped—her timid mother defending her against Ghora? "*Base origins?*" Sumangali hissed furiously. "We were made pariahs only by decree of the corrupt—and the envoy erased that wrongful taint in the presence of all! And even if we *were* pariahs, my daughter would still rank higher than a false priest." Her slender body trembled as she faced the dumbstruck priest. "Come here just one more time, lecher, and you will be very sorry!"

Ghora massaged the red mark on his cheek even as his other hand clenched into a fist. Ishvari stiffened, ready to spring to her mother's aid, but there was no need—perhaps those who challenged royal authority were as good as dead, for Ghora did nothing more than glare at her mother. Sumangali pointed a trembling finger at

him. “Wait outside!” she ordered. “And never again pollute my home!”

A savage energy pulsed through Ishvari as Ghora slunk out of the cottage. Yet she knew that the battle was far from over—the priest was a vengeful rogue who would bide his time. Sumangali would have to be on high alert from here on. Wriggling out of her threadbare tunic, Ishvari marched naked to the clay basin to splash her face with water—there was no time to bathe or eat. Sumangali patted her skinny body dry and slipped a fresh tunic over her head. Obalesh awakened with a loud wail. Impulsively, Ishvari ran across to kiss his little mouth, fighting back tears as she tasted the sour mother’s milk that had collected at its corners.

“Go with my blessings, child,” Sumangali whispered, planting tremulous lips on Ishvari’s forehead. “I shall light oil lamps and pray to Mahadevi every single day for your wellbeing.” She waited nervously for Ishvari to bid her farewell, but Ishvari spun around and dashed into the courtyard, right past the livid priest.

“Slow down,” Ghora barked, grabbing at her arm. “It is my duty to instruct you on how to bow before the envoy, how to prostrate before the monks....”

“First teach a goat how to fart, Ghora-pora,” Ishvari retorted, giggling madly at his flabbergasted expression. Exhilarated by her own daring, she raced ahead on the winding path she knew so well. Much too soon, the village square loomed. Only then did she permit the panting priest to close the distance between them.

Lord Kushal’s chariot thundered into the square, flanked on both sides by the royal guard. Atop the chariot, the Melukhhan royal

flag flew proudly in the morning breeze, a rare and remarkable sight for the inhabitants of Devikota. Propelling Ishvari before him, Ghora threw himself at the foot of the chariot door, making her wish fervently she'd saved some of the bile she had spewed the night before to desecrate his white garments. Ignoring both the priest, as well as the sullen headman, Lord Kushal stepped down and gently lifted Ishvari into the chariot. The chief guard approached him. "No need to accompany us, Daruka," Lord Kushal said. "I shall escort the aspirant to Rudralaya."

"Bandits abound in these parts, my lord," Daruka cautioned.

"No bandit could attack a chariot traveling at lightning speed," the envoy retorted complacently. "And you're far too conscientious for such a spectacular morning." He winked conspiratorially at the giant guard. "Why not stop off at Alamkar, eh? Ravishing adepts of love reside there, I hear, ready to please royal warriors." He drew a handful of gold coins out of his pocket and handed them to Daruka. "Go rejuvenate your spirits, my friend," he encouraged with a broad smile. "Consider it a fair reward for your unstinting devotion to Melukhha." And with a curt nod to the assembled villagers, a few too irate to hide their displeasure even from such a grand personage, Lord Kushal leapt back into the chariot and signaled for the driver to proceed. As they rode out of Devikota, Ishvari turned around for a final look—the mounted guardsmen appeared as part of a glorious painting, and, as the chariot gained speed, the throng of Devikotans began to shrink to the size of wooden figurines. Only Ghora's face stood out, his expression so venomous that she shivered, causing Lord Kushal to cast his cloak over her.

“You’re the twelfth aspirant to be selected, Little Goddess,” Lord Kushal informed her courteously, as the chariot shot along a narrow country road and onto a tree-lined highway. “And it should please you to know that *you* alone have merited a royal envoy as escort.”

Ishvari swallowed drily; she longed to ask just why he called her ‘Little Goddess’ and whether he was in league with the omniscient god of the valley, but his proximity paralyzed her tongue. Lord Kushal studied her wretched face with wry amusement. “Take my advice,” he said, patting her scrawny thigh. “Leave the past where it belongs. Brooding drains the vital energy you will surely need to face the challenges that lie ahead.”

She stared down at her dusty feet, the hellishness of recent times coming up in a sudden rush of feeling. Ashamed to let him see her cry, she buried her face in his cloak.

“Sometimes just being alive hurts,” Lord Kushal remarked crisply, turning her chin towards him. “You have already endured much, Ishvari, and only the gods know what is yet to come for us all—and yet it is suffering that blasts open the doors of the spiritual heart.” He patted her hand consolingly and a tantalizing blend of sandalwood and musk wafted into her nostrils. “Let me assure you that your fury will fade once you meet the noble *tantriks* destined to be your guides. I wager it will not be long before you are thanking your mother for setting you free.”

Oh, but he was so wrong! True, her mother had sprung to her defense against Ghora only this morning, but could anything compensate for selling one’s own flesh and blood?

“Dry your tears,” Lord Kushal ordered, handing her a kerchief. But her face was so contorted with hurt that he reached into a metal chest clamped to the floor of the chariot and drew out a clay amphora and a copper cup. “Drink every drop,” he urged as he poured out a green liquid and handed it to her. “This is *bhang*, prepared by our royal astrologer from the buds of his own *ganja* plants.” He watched indulgently as she drained the cup. “Trust a stargazer to know I would soon be escorting a very upset girl to Rudralaya! I myself avoid intoxicants, except for the occasional tankard of Egyptian beer, or that Laodicean wine Takshak hoards in his cellars, but I’m told that Devadas’s recipe for *bhang* deeply relaxes body and mind.”

The liquid was sweet and milky with an agreeable herbal aftertaste. As it coursed down her throat, Ishvari felt a strange sense of comfort. She turned her attention to the vista of rolling hills and emerald valleys splotted with vivid colors, her mood lightening as a pretty doe flapped its ears at her from a rocky outcrop.

“Can you tell me something about Rudralaya?” she asked timidly.

“Ah, well,” the envoy said, flashing a broad smile. “Rudralaya is perhaps the most charged spot on earth, for it is where the Wild God appeared quite frequently to our *rishis*. Many consider it the perfect place to unite spirit with body and mind in service of Rudra, which I believe is our highest duty as Melukhhans. Certainly it does not pay to displease our God—the agony of his psychic whip has driven many to insanity, even to death.” The envoy smiled. “He has many

faces, this great God of ours, and many things to do. Only a reckless fool would tax him further.”

“What things must a god do?” she asked curiously, forgetting her own misery.

“Oh, well, let me see....first Rudra aids his brother god to create—not just humans, animals and plants, but also the patterning of the heavens, earth and the netherworlds. Second, he must preserve his multitudinous creations, and third, he destroys everything, just so the cosmic cycle can begin all over again.”

“But why would a god destroy his own work?” she asked, mystified.

“Now *that's* a question you must put to your *gurus*—for only the enlightened can see the whole picture.” The envoy smiled down at her. “What I can tell you is that Rudra is at his most seductive when he destroys—even the wives of great *rishis* have grown besotted with this haunter of cremation grounds! Finally, Rudra’s fourth task is to obscure, and here, he colludes with *Maya*, the feminine power of delusion. And if *I* am deluding myself that *you* have absorbed all I’ve just said, little one,” he added with a light laugh, “will you at least remember that it is Rudra’s grace alone that liberates one from suffering?”

Ishvari nodded gravely, thinking of the god of the valley. “What does Rudra look like?”

“Oh, our God’s form can span earth and sky, or he can come in the guise of a naked wanderer carrying a begging bowl. Yet no matter how he manifests, our God always inspires the most terrible awe.” The envoy laughed. “I recall my dear wife Sarahi claiming that

one aged *rishi* was so staggered by the sight of him that his hair instantly grew from white to black!”

Sumangali’s clay figurine with its fan-shaped dress and girdled loins came to mind. It was her mother’s prized possession, along with a *linga*, a rounded, vertical shaft of stone implanted in a circular base, for both were marriage gifts from the widower who had saved her life in Parushni. Sumangali claimed the *linga* represented the Great Gods, Shiva and Shakti, in union, Shakti being simply another aspect of Mahadevi, while Shiva had emerged from Rudra, the Wild God. The *linga* was therefore worshipped as a symbol of the whole universe. “What of Mahadevi?” Ishvari asked drowsily. “Does she too come in a thousand forms?”

The envoy’s smile deepened as he studied her sleepy face. “I think we’ve spoken enough for now, don’t you?” he murmured kindly. “Why not relax and enjoy Devadas’s potion?”

Impulsively Ishvari reached for his hand and gave it a grateful squeeze before turning to gaze out of the window. Soon, languor wrapped its arms around her slight body and all her hardships drifted away like summer clouds. She gaped in awe as a flock of parrots nesting in a banyan tree shot over the chariot in a blaze of bright green and flashing red then turned her adoring gaze upon the envoy, provider of this ecstasy-producing nectar, now engaged in inscribing careful marks on a soapstone tablet. Moments later, her eyes began to swim and her head fell towards her chest.

“Sleep deep, wonderful child,” Lord Kushal said softly, propping up her head with a pillow. “I shall wake you when we get to Rudralaya.”

As she sank into a magical sleep, the leopard of the valley molded his sinewy length to her body. Ishvari placed her throbbing forehead on his, feeling a silken growl rise up his throat and into his headspace. The handsome *sadhu* smiled down on their entwined figures.

The envoy's frantic shouting broke into her dream. "Faster, man, faster!" he was yelling at the driver as the chariot hurtled down the highway. "Whip the beasts harder, I say, *whip* them!" Lord Kushal was staring out of the carriage window in disbelief. Following his gaze, Ishvari cried out in delighted surprise—the *sadhu* of the valley was racing barefoot alongside the chariot! "Even *your* steeds will not win this race, O Kushal," the *sadhu* laughed, his fine head adorned with its matted coils bobbing alongside the chariot window. The envoy recoiled. "I come to ask a favor," the *sadhu* said gently, his dark eyes shining.

The envoy cocked his head, motionless though alert.

"I'm told Takshak honors your counsel and that you rank highest among the few who seek Melukhha's good," the *sadhu* continued. "If this is true, advise your Maharajah to annul all laws that contradict the code of the sages. Tell him his royal brother is concerned about his fate—should Rudra withdraw his love, Melukhha will perish!" Then the *sadhu* turned his deep gaze on her. "Fare you well, Little Goddess!" he said, and his dazzling smile pierced to the core of her heart. "The valley awaits your return." Then he turned away and simply disappeared.

"The dissenter at the village square!" the envoy cried. "I recognize the voice!"

Ishvari nodded, stars in her eyes. “Yes, *that* was the *sadhu* of the valley.”

“*What?* You know this fellow?” Lord Kushal’s tone was suspicious.

She nodded again, suffused with the pleasure of the drug. “I spotted him once in the valley that lies beyond Devikota. Hark to his counsel, my lord—even the wild leopard adores him.”

Lord Kushal’s brow furrowed. “He appears highbred despite his near-naked state,” he muttered. “And he is far too impressive to be a common *sadhu*.” He took Ishvari’s hands in his, absently rubbing warmth into them. “Did he not say he was Takshak’s royal brother? Perhaps he meant *tantric* brother? As I recall, Takshak’s *gurus* had many fine students.” His eyes gleamed with excitement. “Perhaps he was Rudra himself, in one of his infinite disguises?”

“Oh, but this man is no god, my lord,” Ishvari said, recalling the gigantic luminous being who had straddled the valley. “Just a *sadhu* of much power.”

He looked down at her tenderly. “Perhaps we are all lost in some fantastic dream...for how could *any* human outrace my steeds without even breaking a sweat? Indeed, the dealer who drove them down from Khotan swore I would not find faster stallions anywhere on this earth...and then he called you ‘Little Goddess,’ which is *my* name for you...and did he not say ‘the valley awaits your return’?” The envoy’s eyebrows came together in so distrustful a frown that she did not dare share with him that he was not first to address her as ‘Little Goddess’. “By Rudra’s whip, child!” he cried. “Do you intend to escape the monks?”

Instinct warned her sharply that it would be unwise to speak of her mystical experiences in the valley to anyone, not even to this kind nobleman. “How could I have made any such plans when you chose me just yesterday?” she asked, smiling innocently up at him. “The powers of holy men come from the gods, my father used to say, and ordinary folk can only marvel at them.”

He patted her hand even as he continued to brood. “I truly cannot conceive of any rustic *sadhu* knowing the inner workings of the Melukhhan Council. Even more curious was the force of his spirit...it drew me strongly to him, Ishvari, moth to flame.” He turned eagerly to her. “Did you feel it too? Yes? Come to think of it, I could barely resist reaching out to touch his face, just to make sure he was not some uncanny trick of the light.” He smiled buoyantly at her. “I am convinced he came for *you* as well, Ishvari. Devadas is right—I do believe you were born with the potential to transform our errant king. And perhaps it is indeed a good thing that Takshak is going wild now—in seven years, I wager he will be disillusioned enough with the pleasures of *samsara* to welcome a *real* goddess into his arms.”

Lord Kushal pointed to a vast clearing faintly visible through the surrounding jungle. “Ah! Here is Rudralaya.” The driver brought the steeds to a halt and jumped down to unlatch a wooden gate etched with curious symbols. Then he climbed up to his seat again and the stallions took off, cantering down a cobbled road and into a courtyard; in the fractured gold and orange of twilight, a rambling brick building began to take shape. Ishvari sat upright as two monks in saffron robes appeared at the doorway. The taller man stepped

forward as the chariot rolled to a halt. Lord Kushal stepped down, bowing low before the unsmiling monk before turning to lift her out of her seat. “This is Ishvari of Devikota, our twelfth aspirant,” he announced. “Child, meet Atulya, head monk of Rudralaya.” The force of Atulya’s aura struck Ishvari, still reeling under the spell of the *bhanga*. She blinked, awed—no comparison was possible between this commanding ascetic and Devikota’s mean apology for a priest!

Then the second monk came forward and she was enveloped by the love blazing from his eyes. “Welcome, Ishvari. I am Hariaksa, the second of your tutors.” He inspected her face with warm concern, and she stared bravely back, appreciating his stout homeliness. Placing his hands on his hips, Hariaksa bent low in order to gaze directly into her eyes. Ishvari tittered—the adult world seemed to be taking her very seriously ever since the god of the valley had spoken! “So your tryst with the big cat went well, eh?” Hariaksa inquired softly. “And then the *sadhu* came to bid you farewell, did he not?” He grinned at her bemusement. “Now come, say farewell to Lord Kushal—you will not be seeing him for a long time to come.”

Before she could obey, Lord Kushal was grasping her bony shoulders. “Excel in all you learn here, Little Goddess,” he urged in an intense whisper as he bent low to touch his forehead to hers in blessing. “If that *sadhu* spoke true, our Maharajah will soon be in urgent need of your healing fire.” Then he leapt into his waiting chariot, ordered the driver onward to Melukhha and was off.

Ishvari reached for Hariaksa’s hand as he led her to one of the smaller buildings, a dormitory divided into cells. She followed him through a corridor and past a communal bathroom with cubicles for

private use. A burnished sheet of copper hung against its far wall, serving as a mirror, and she stopped to admire her reflection. Smiling at her delight, Hariaksa beckoned for her to follow him to the furthest cell and threw open the door with a theatrical flourish. “Your palace for the next seven years, your Majesty,” he announced, standing on tiptoe and turning up his nose.

She cast happy eyes about the clean space, enjoying the sight of the swaying *arka* trees growing right outside her window. Beside the window was a sleeping mat, upon which had been set a pile of new garments. On a shelf above the mat she spied an open lacquer box containing a string of *rudraksha* meditation beads. A low desk stood at the other end of the room, complete with clay tablets and a stylus. Taken aback by the simple splendor of the dwelling, she uttered the first thought that came to mind—“But I cannot write!”

Hariaksa chuckled. “I wager you’ll soon be doing a lot more than just writing, sweetling.” He selected a white tunic from the pile on her bed and tossed it at her. “Now wash up and change—I’ll be waiting right outside to escort your Majesty to the dining hall.”

Ishvari followed him into a dining hall attached to the main building. Her stomach growled—she had eaten nothing all day and the *bhang* had intensified her hunger. A group of extraordinarily pretty girls sat on *kusha* mats around a low rectangular table. Three clay jugs of spiced yogurt garnished with sprigs of fragrant herbs stood in the center of the table. Earthenware bowls filled with steaming mounds of rice, lentils and vegetables were placed before each girl. As eleven curious faces turned to get a better look at her, she quailed.

“Meet Ishvari, ladies, Devikota’s contribution to Melukhha,” Hariaksa announced. “This is all new to her, so be kind, be kind.” He led her around the table. “This is Dalaja, the giggler.” Dalaja pointed at Ishvari’s shaven head and tittered. Ishvari cringed as others joined in. Hariaksa tugged hard at Dalaja’s long braid and she yelped. “You be careful,” he warned. “I’ll chop this right off if you tease any of your sisters, understand?” The laughter subsided and Ishvari squeezed his hand to indicate her gratitude. Hariaksa moved on to the next aspirant. “This is Charusheela, a sparkling creature when she chooses to be. And here sits Archini of the jeweled eyes.” Archini looked up with a sweet smile and Ishvari’s heart brightened instantly—the fragility of the girl aroused the same rush of protective love she had felt for her baby brother.

Hariaksa patted the cheek of the next girl. “Behold Makshi, the mischief-maker, and Brijabala, the tongue-tied, who seems to consider speech an unnecessary skill. Now the inseparables—Urmila and Tilotamma, cousins from Ghotphal village.” Urmila glared at her and Ishvari flinched, unnerved by the girl’s blatant hostility. Clutching at Hariaksa’s hand, she followed him closely as he moved around the table. “Meet Gitali of the cow-eyes who spends every spare moment gazing into space.” Gitali blushed as Hariaksa pinched her rosy cheek. “Here’s Ikshula, perhaps the only lady in our midst, for she knows when to seal her lips, and solemn Kairavi, who enjoys her own company best of all. Finally, meet Gandhali, who already questions every syllable I utter.”

Dalaja giggled again, inspiring an outburst of laughter that took the edge off Ishvari’s nervousness. Hariaksa pointed to a cushion

beside Gandhali. On the table before it stood an earthenware bowl heaped with delicious food. “Sit and eat, Ishvari,” he invited. “Plenty more where that came from, plenty more. Just make sure to chew every mouthful thirty times on each side or your digestion will suffer.”

ψ