

Nayantara - Echoes of the Taken

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Chapter 1

The sun was high and hot, beating down on the city streets as a black Mercedes-Benz S-Class sped through. Its tires hummed loud against the pavement, drawing attention, before it turned into the shaded driveway of Maa Vindhyavasini Medical Center. The hospital stood big and modern ahead—glass and steel shining, its tall center tower flanked by wide wings that stretched out like a busy maze. At its heart was the corporate office, sharp and sleek, with palm trees swaying softly by the entrance.

The car rolled to a stop, gravel crunching under its wheels. The driver jumped out—a skinny guy with gray hair under a cap, his gloved hands quick as he opened the rear door. Dr. Anirudh Kashyap stepped out—Ani to his close friends—a man in his sixties with a face marked by years and something heavier. His dark hair had streaks of white, combed neat, and his tailored suit fit him well, but his eyes were restless, like something big was stirring inside. He moved past the driver without a word, his shiny shoes clicking on the ground, briefcase swinging like it was counting down to trouble.

Inside, the lobby hit him with a mix of smells—sharp antiseptic and sweet lilies from a big vase by the desk. It was busy but neat—doctors in white coats walked fast, talking about research money in short, sharp bursts; men in suits held briefcases, whispering deals; medical reps hung around with glossy flyers, waiting for appointments. The receptionist, her hair pinned tight, looked up as Ani rushed through, phone to her ear. “The MD’s here,” she said quietly into it, sounding a little tense. “He looks extremely tied up—should I check with his secretary?” She paused, then smiled. “Good afternoon, Dr. Kashyap,” she called, her voice bright but thin. A guard by the elevators nodded quick. Ani didn’t stop—his finger hit the elevator button hard, and when the doors opened with a soft ding, he stepped in, the mirrors showing a man who looked ready to break.

The ride up was quick, the elevator's hum lost in his racing thoughts. His fingers tapped the railing, antsy, like he couldn't shake what was coming. The doors slid open on the twentieth floor, and he hurried down a hall of frosted glass and quiet power. Offices glowed on either side, their brass nameplates catching light. His steps sped up, shoes snapping on the tiles. A doctor with a stack of papers said hello, but Ani kept going, leaving the greeting behind. At the end was a big oak door, dark and polished. The nameplate read: *Dr. Shridhar Varma, Director*. He stopped for a second, took a shaky breath, then knocked twice—hard.

“Come in,” a steady voice called from inside, calm and clear.

Ani pushed the door open and stepped into a room that felt different—warm and full of books. Shelves lined the walls, stuffed with old leather spines, their titles worn. A rug stretched across the floor, soft in the low light, and a wooden desk sat in the middle, covered with papers, a silver pen, and a steaming cup of chai. Behind it was Dr. Shridhar Varma—Shri to the few who really knew him—a man in his late fifties with a quiet strength. His dark hair had silver at the sides, and his face was sharp but kind, softened by years. He wore a suit that fit just right, and gold-rimmed glasses sat on his nose, making his warm eyes sharper when they met Ani's—until they clouded over.

“Ani!” Shri said, his voice friendly as he started to stand, pointing to the chair across the desk. “What's got you rushing in like this? You look rattled.”

Ani didn't sit. He dropped his briefcase with a thud that bounced off the walls, leaning forward until his hands pressed the desk, knuckles pale.

“Have you heard anything from Shivalkot?” His voice was rough, low, like he was holding something back.

Shri's smile faded, his forehead wrinkling as he sat back down. "Shivalkot? No—what's going on?" His hands came together under his chin, a little tense now.

Ani's eyes didn't move, locked on him. "Dr. Pratap's no more."

The air went still. Shri's hands dropped, his glasses slipping as he stood up fast, the chair creaking. "What?" His voice broke, rough and stunned.

"When?"

"This morning," Ani said, quieter but heavy. "Before dawn. I got the call as I was heading out."

Shri pulled his glasses off, setting them down with a shaky hand. He sucked in a breath, loud and rough. "God... rest his soul." It was soft, almost lost in the room. Pratap—Dr. Pratap Sharma—had been a titan, a man who kept Shivalkot Hospital alive for over thirty years, his laugh a light they'd all leaned on once.

Ani pressed his hands harder into the desk. "I need you to go there, Shri. To Shivalkot. Take care of things."

Shri's head jerked up, eyes wide like he couldn't believe it. "Me? Ani, no—you're not going?"

"I can't," Ani said, his voice tight, almost sorry. "I've got a plane to the U.S. tonight—conference starts tomorrow."

Shri blinked, then nodded slow, remembering. "The conference... yeah." He rubbed his jaw, the sound scratchy. "But Shivalkot—I can't, Ani. You know what that place means to me. I haven't been back in years."

"I know," Ani said, stepping closer, his shadow stretching across the desk. "I wouldn't ask if I had another choice. That hospital—it was everything to my dad, Shri. The Chairman built it from scratch, and Pratap kept it going. We'd owe you big if you'd go, just this once."

Shri's jaw went tight, his hands balling up on the desk. "Owe me? It's not about that, Ani. It's... too much. You don't get what you're asking me to walk into."

"I do," Ani cut in, low and firm. "I know more than you think. But there's no one else I'd trust with this. No one who gets what it meant—to him, to us."

Shri's eyes flickered, caught between hurt and something else, like a storm he couldn't hold back. "And after? You just want me to stay there?"

"We need someone," Ani said, softer but still pushing. "Pratap's gone, and that village can't make it without a doctor. Just hold things together until we find someone—someone crazy enough to take it on after what he did for almost thirty years."

Shri's breath caught, short and bitter. "Thirty years... and now this. Ani, I can't—you're asking me to face stuff I've spent my life trying to forget."

Ani leaned in closer, his voice dropping low. "I wouldn't if there was any other way. Not after..." He stopped, the room feeling heavy with what he didn't say. "Not after thirty years."

Shri's face went pale, his eyes locking on Ani's like they could break something. The air got thick, almost loud with what they weren't saying. Thirty years. It hit hard, stirring up old stuff. Shri's hand twitched, knocking his glasses crooked, his breathing uneven. "You—" he started, but the words got lost.

Ani stood up straight, his eyes softening, almost sad. "I'm sorry, Shri. I've got to go. I'll put out an ad for a doctor—someone desperate enough for that nowhere job. Hope someone bites." He picked up his briefcase, slow and final. He waited a second, then turned and left, the door clicking shut behind him.

Shri sat alone, the chai cold now, no steam left. He looked out the window at the city stretching below, busy and clueless. Shivalkot. Pratap. Thirty years. The words spun in his head, pulling up things he'd buried deep. His fingers dug into the desk, nails scraping wood. Something was waiting out there—more than just a dead man's memory. He grabbed the intercom, hands shaking, knowing he couldn't say no to Ani, even with the dread tightening around him. As the sun sank, he felt it pulling him in—a trap he couldn't dodge.

Chapter 2

Shri's office didn't feel solid anymore—like the walls could cave in any second. The lights buzzed overhead, sharp and annoying, as he grabbed at his desk, hands shaky, and hit the intercom button. “Anil,” he said, his voice rough and low, “get in here.” The door opened fast, and his secretary stepped in—Anil, thin and wide-eyed, holding a notepad tight. Shri's words came out quick and messy. “Cancel all my appointments. No—pass it to the juniors. All of it. Book me a flight to Nagpur tomorrow—early. And a car—I need one waiting there at the airport.” Anil scribbled fast, glancing at Shri's sweaty face, then looking away quick. “Yes, sir,” he said soft, slipping out like he didn't want to stay.

Shri slumped back in his chair, breathing hard. The room felt like it was closing in. He left late, grabbing his briefcase like it could hold him up, his arm aching from its weight. Outside, the car waited, its engine humming quiet. He fell into the backseat, the leather cold against his damp skin. The city blurred by—neon lights smearing into the dusk, horns blaring far off. Fear squeezed his chest tighter with every breath. *How did it come to this? What did I do to deserve this?* The questions clawed at him, relentless. The car slowed, and his bungalow came into view, small and plain but somehow dark and heavy tonight. The driver opened the door with a click, and Ramu, the caretaker, shuffled out, grabbing the briefcase with rough hands, his eyes down like he knew something was wrong.

Inside, Shri threw himself onto the bed, the springs groaning under him. He held a glass of whisky, hands shaking so bad it spilled a little. He stared out the window at the garden—roses and marigolds glowing soft under the night lights. They looked pretty, but it didn't help—the emptiness inside was too big. He got up, glass still in hand, and stumbled to the window. The night air hit him, cool and sharp, cutting through his foggy head. The

flowers moved in the breeze, their shadows shifting on the grass. Then the past hit him hard, pulling him back.

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Dust kicked up around a younger Shri as he walked a hot, dry path. Ahead, the village garden burst with color—wild flowers stretching up like they wanted the sky. The cottage beyond looked old, its walls cracked and stained, the roof sagging low. Sweat stuck his shirt to his skin as he got closer, his heart pounding with excitement and nerves. This was it—his big chance—but the air felt heavy, like the house didn't want him there. He pressed the bell, the sound fading into quiet. He waited, each second dragging, until the door creaked open. A middle-aged man stood there, his face lined deep, his eyes blank. "I'm Dr. Shridhar Varma," Shri said, his throat dry. "Here for Dr. Pratap." The man grunted, nodding him inside, and Shri stepped into a dim room that smelled old and worn.

The living room was a mess—cushions spilling stuffing, a scratched-up table. Shri sat on a shaky chair, feeling uneasy as shadows moved in the corners. The man put a glass of water down with a thump, muttering, "Saheb'll come," then disappeared. Shri sipped the water—it tasted off, metallic—and looked around at the cracked walls, an old oil lamp flickering weird shapes. Something didn't feel right, an itch at the back of his neck he couldn't shake.

Then Dr. Pratap walked in, a guy in his forties with a smile that didn't quite fit. "Sit, sit," he said, his voice warm but sharp underneath. "This place isn't much, but it's mine now." Shri smiled back, trying to relax as Pratap flopped onto the sofa. "Not many come out here," Pratap said, eyeing him close. "You saw how despairing it is on the way here, right? Bus late?"

"Four hours," Shri said, letting out a small laugh.

Pratap grinned bigger, like he knew something. “So, right on time.” They laughed together for a second, but it felt thin, like it could snap.

The caretaker came back with a tray—tea steaming, biscuits falling apart. Shri grabbed a cup, the heat burning his hands as Pratap watched him steady. “Tell me,” Pratap said, leaning in, his voice dropping, “why’s a young doctor like you picking this nowhere spot?”

Shri looked at him straight. “You, sir. Your work is an inspiration—it’s why I’m here.”

Pratap laughed loud, sharp and empty. “Me? My reasons weren’t so high and mighty.” His smile twisted a little, something dark peeking through. Shri pushed a bit. “I’d like to hear, if you’d tell me.”

Pratap’s face went cold, his jaw tight, eyes cloudy. “Another time,” he said quick, hands moving like he wanted it gone. “Dinner—what do you want?” The switch was fast, shutting something off, and Shri’s stomach twisted at the shift.

“I was thinking I’d go to my quarters,” Shri said careful. “They said there’s a room—”

“Not ready,” Pratap cut in, short and hard. “Dirty, falling apart—we didn’t think you’d show. Tomorrow, Prakash’ll fix it. Tonight, you stay here. Spare room. Small, but fine.”

Shri nodded, keeping his questions down. “Okay.”

The room was cramped, choking with old tribal junk—masks gaping wide like they’d scream if you touched them, spears leaning in corners with tips glinting sharp under the faint light, tapestries hanging ragged, threads pulling loose like they’d seen too much. But one thing hit harder than the rest: a dark wooden statue shoved against the far wall, its carved face all jagged edges and wild lines, caught somewhere between a god and a damn

nightmare. Shri couldn't peel his eyes off it as he dropped onto the cot, the thin mattress sagging under his weight like it was tired of holding anything up. Moonlight stabbed through a cracked window, jagged and cold, catching the statue's rough curves, making it look alive—too alive.

Exhaustion clawed at him—the bus ride had been hell, a rattling, dusty grind that left his bones aching and his head pounding—but that thing, it sat heavy on him, pressing down like a fist on his chest, daring him to look away.

He didn't want to sleep, not with that staring at him, but his body gave out, dragging him down fast. His eyes fluttered shut, the dark swallowing him whole, and for a second it was quiet—just the hum of the night outside, the creak of the cot settling. Then—a sound ripped through it, low and rough, like gravel scraping under a boot, yanking him awake. His heart slammed hard, a wild thud against his ribs, and he bolted upright, breath catching in his throat. The room was pitch now, the moonlight a thin, pale slash barely cutting the black, and there—right there at the foot of his bed—was the statue. Except it wasn't wood no more. It was tall, lean, *alive*, towering over him, its eyes two burning red slits glowing hot in the dark, locking onto him like they'd already claimed him. Its skin glistened, slick and wrong, like it'd crawled out of something wet and rotting, and when its mouth cracked open—slow, deliberate—it showed teeth, sharp and busted, jagged edges catching the faint light.

Shri's scream stuck, lodged somewhere deep, his whole body frozen as fear clamped down like iron. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe right, just sat there, pinned under those eyes, his pulse hammering so loud it drowned everything else. The thing leaned in closer—too close—its head tilting like it was sizing him up, and its breath hit him, cold and sour, stinking of damp earth and something dead. It whispered, low and garbled, words he couldn't grab, slithering into his ears like smoke he couldn't shake. The air turned thick, heavy, pressing on his chest 'til it hurt, and the walls—they started

bending, warping inward like the room was collapsing, squeezing him in with it. His hands clawed at the blanket, fingers shaking, sweat beading cold on his neck as he stared into that red glow, waiting for it to lunge, to rip him apart. Every creak of the cot, every rustle outside, spiked the dread higher, his mind racing—*what the hell is it, what does it want, why me?*—and still, he couldn't yell, couldn't fight, just sat there, trapped in its pull.

Then—snap—it was gone. Like a rope cut loose, the weight lifted, the air thinned, and the room snapped back, walls straight, moonlight steady. The statue was just wood again, back against the wall where it belonged, still and silent, its carved face blank under the pale glow. But Shri was wrecked—shaking hard, breath coming in short, ragged gasps, his shirt sticking to his skin with cold sweat. He swung his legs off the cot, feet hitting the floor loud in the quiet, and stared at it, chest heaving. Was it real? A dream? His head spun, the line between sleep and awake blurring into a mess, but those eyes—those red, burning eyes—stuck in him, branded deep. He stumbled to the window, shoving it wider, gulping the night air like it could wash the stink of that thing off him. Outside, the wind hissed through the trees, low and restless, and he leaned there, hands gripping the sill, waiting for his heart to quit racing, for the room to feel safe again. But it didn't. That statue sat there, dark and heavy, watching him still, and he knew—sleep or no sleep—something had shifted, something was awake now, and it wasn't letting go.

Back on the cot, he sat stiff, eyes locked on it, waiting. The moonlight shifted, shadows stretching long and thin across the room, playing tricks—every flicker a hint of movement, every gust outside a whisper of that voice again. His mind churned, digging up stories he'd heard about Shivalkot, half-remembered scraps from years back—curses, spirits, things tied to the land that didn't let go. Was this one of 'em? Had Pratap known?

The thought hit hard, tying this to why he was here, to the call that dragged him back. He rubbed his face, hands rough against stubble, trying to shove it down, but the weight stayed, pressing heavier now, like the statue wasn't just wood—it was a door, and he'd cracked it open.

Chapter 3

Shri had hours before his early morning flight to Nagpur, but sleep wasn't coming easy. He jolted upright, chest heaving, the echo of a guttural growl still ringing in his ears. The bungalow lay shrouded in darkness, the only light the crimson glow of the clock piercing the gloom—3:17 a.m. He was sprawled across the bed, sheets twisted like restraints around his legs, his shirt clinging to him with the chill of sweat. His mind was a void, no trace of the dream that had ripped him from sleep, just an unsettling blank where something monstrous should have been. Had it tracked him down after all these years, that thing from the village night? A flash of crimson eyes slashed through his mind, and he shoved the image away, lurching to his feet.

He stumbled through the morning, every move a fight against shaky hands and legs. The shower was hot, steam filling the bathroom, but it didn't warm the chill inside him. His toothbrush hit the sink loud, unsteady, and the mirror showed a worn-out man—dark circles under his eyes, skin tight and pale. The broken whisky glass sparkled on the floor, ignored as he packed—clothes stuffed into his suitcase, the zipper loud in the quiet. The bungalow creaked like it didn't want him to go. Ramu stood at the door, mumbling goodbye half-asleep, but Shri was already out, rushing to the car waiting in the gray dawn, its engine pulling him away.

The airport was bright and loud—lights glaring, people talking fast. Shri sank into his plane seat, the take-off hum calming him a little. Sleep came quick, giving him two hours of rest, his body limp against the window as clouds passed below. The landing woke him with a jolt, Nagpur's heat sneaking in. A car waited outside, the driver quiet in a neat uniform, sunglasses on. Shri got in, phone to his ear, giving short orders—work stuff, anything to keep him steady. The city faded, turning into open land, the

road cutting through fields and bare trees. He looked out, trying to find bits of that trip almost thirty years ago—the rickety bus, the dust in his throat. Nothing fit; time had wiped it clean, leaving something strange and heavy.

The car bounced over rough patches, each bump rattling his nerves. Hours stretched ahead to wherever he was going, a place he felt more than knew. His mind slipped back to Dr. Pratap—those sharp eyes, that warm smile—and then the flood came: that night, the statue, its living skin and whispered words.

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Shri shut his eyes tight, praying like a kid: *Make it a dream, make it go away*. Time dragged, his heart pounding, until he looked again. The room was quiet, lit by pale moonlight. The statue was back on the shelf, just wood, like it'd never moved. Was it all in his head? Just too tired? He breathed hard, sweat sticking his shirt to him, but sleep was gone. He pulled the sheet over his head, wrapping himself up, the cloth thin against whatever was out there. His breathing was loud in the dark, fast and shallow, as he tried to calm down.

The night crawled on, and somehow he fell back asleep, deep and blank. Then a knock woke him—steady, loud, banging through the small room. His heart jumped, each hit ringing in his head. The statue sat still in the corner, mocking him. Who was at the door—or what? His legs shook as he got up, the floor cold under his feet. The knocking stopped, then started again, harder. He grabbed the knob, sweaty hands slipping, and turned it slow, the hinges creaking loud.

Relief hit him hard—it was Prakash, Dr. Pratap's assistant, standing there in the dim light. "Saheb," he said flat, "breakfast's ready. Get cleaned up and come. Doctor Saheb's waiting." Shri nodded, too shaken to talk, and watched Prakash walk off down the dark hall. The room felt tighter now, the masks and spears closing in. He splashed water on his face in the tiny

bathroom, the mirror showing a guy he didn't know—eyes sunk, skin pale. The statue stayed in the corner of his eye as he dressed, quiet but heavy.

The hall was brighter—sun coming through cracked windows, dust floating in the light. Dr. Pratap sat at an old table, a plate of hot parathas and curd in front of him, smiling warm but off somehow. “Sleep okay?” he asked, his voice light but digging, looking Shri over.

“Well... yeah,” Shri lied, forcing a smile as he sat. The food smelled good—ghee and spices—but his stomach wasn't ready.

Pratap laughed, a sound that didn't match his eyes. “New place—takes a bit to get used to. Eat up, then we'll go to the hospital. It's close. Your room'll be ready by tonight.” He turned to Prakash, who came in with tea mugs. “Fix his quarters by dusk. Do it right. And pack the gift—put it in his room later.”

Prakash mumbled okay and left. Shri frowned. “Gift?”

Pratap's smile grew, a spark in his eyes—fun or something else? “You're new here. Gotta welcome you with something from around here.” He leaned back, arms crossed. “A little piece of this place for you.”

Shri laughed a bit, though it felt tight. “Thanks, sir. I should've brought something too.”

“Don't worry,” Pratap said, waving it off, his grin softening but still sharp. “You showing up's enough for me.” His words hung there, heavy with something Shri couldn't figure out—nice, but maybe not.

The tea burned his tongue as he sipped, a quick distraction from the questions piling up. What gift? Why'd Pratap sound so pushy about it? And why'd the air feel thicker now, like the house was holding something back? Shri glanced at the hall, half-expecting the statue to show up—not wood,

but alive, those red eyes still on him. The paratha sat there, untouched, the morning light not enough to shake the unease growing inside him.

They walked to the hospital down a dusty road, and Shri's senses woke up, taking in everything he'd missed last night. Old trees lined the path, their twisted branches letting sunlight spill through in patches. Beyond them, mountains rose up, covered in thick forest, big and quiet in a way that hit him deep. It was rough, sure, but alive—birds chirping, leaves rustling, the air smelling of dirt and pine. He couldn't stop looking, caught by how wild and pretty it was, so lost in it that Pratap's voice barely got through.

“Shri... Shri...”

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“Sir... Sir...” The words snapped him back, loud and sharp. Shri gasped, sitting up straight in the car, the sound of tires on the road rushing in. His heart thumped, confused, as he blinked into the daylight pouring through the windshield. The driver had pulled him out of the past, his shape stiff behind the wheel. Shri rubbed his eyes, the memory sticking like dust. He was still in the car, rolling through a quiet stretch where towns felt far away. Trees stood tall on both sides, their shadows long and thin, like the ones he'd walked under with Pratap years ago.

“Yes?” Shri said, his voice scratchy, the past heavy in his head.

The driver looked at him in the mirror, his sunglasses showing a quick flicker of worry. “Sir, can I stop for a minute? Have to relieve myself.”

“Oh, sure,” Shri muttered, waving a hand as the car slowed, gravel crunching. It stopped on the side of an empty road, dust settling around them, the place feeling familiar but off—like something he half-knew. Shri grabbed his water bottle, the plastic cool in his hand, and drank deep, the water steadying him. He rolled the window down, and fresh air rushed in—crisp, earthy, with a hint of rain. It woke him up, easing his nerves, but it

pulled up flashes: the bumpy bus ride, the hospital against the mountains, Pratap's odd smile. Years away had blurred it all, but now it was coming back sharp.

The driver got back in, shutting the door with a thud, and started the car. "Almost an hour to Shivalkot, sir," he said, his voice even but quick.

Shri nodded, leaning toward the open window. "Keep the AC off. This air—it's real."

The driver gave a small smile, teeth flashing in the mirror. "Yes, sir."

The car moved on, the breeze messing up Shri's hair as he pressed closer to the window. He looked out, trying to grab onto his past—those trees, those mountains—but time had kept the beauty and lost the details. The road curved, the forest got thicker, but nothing clicked. Just nice trees swaying soft, and faint mountain outlines against a darkening sky. Then something caught his eye—a quick shape, gone too fast to name. "Stop," he said loud, sharper than he meant.

The driver braked, tires skidding a bit, and Shri was out before the car stopped, crossing the road fast, not sure why. His shoes crunched on dry ground as he headed into a clearing, the forest closing around him. The driver called out, "Sir?"—worried now—and followed, his steps unsure. Shri kept going, branches tugging at his sleeves, until he stopped short, breath catching. There was a small temple-like building, its stone worn but solid, vines wrapping its base. He stared, not believing it—how was it still the same? Twenty eight years out here, open to weather, but it looked untouched, like time skipped it.

The driver caught up, breathing a little hard, eyes wide behind his sunglasses. "You've been here before, sir?"

Shri turned to him, a small smile pulling at his mouth, though his heart raced. "Yeah. Almost thirty years ago."

The driver's jaw dropped, surprised. "How'd you even find it? This temple—you can't see it from the road. No one knows it's here unless..." He stopped, looking at the trees like they might say something.

Shri turned back, his heart jumping as he saw the road was gone, hidden by thick leaves. The clearing felt cut off, the temple its center. Fear hit him quick and cold, holding him there as he stared at it. The air got heavy, and then—a sound. A soft hum, sweet and quiet, weaving through the silence. It was nice, pulling at something he couldn't name. He tilted his head, listening hard. "You hear that?"

The driver, pale now, his hands fidgeting, blinked fast. "What, sir? Hear what?"

"Someone humming," Shri said low, his eyes on the temple. "A tune... real nice..."

The driver's face tightened, panic creeping in as he looked around the empty clearing. "No, sir. Just the wind—I only hear wind. We should go. I've gotta get back to the city after dropping you."

Shri barely heard him, the hum growing, wrapping around him, drowning out the leaves. He stepped closer to the temple, touching the cool stone, brushing a vine aside. Flowers were scattered at the base—marigolds, bright against the gray, like someone just left them. Who? He picked one up, its smell sharp and sweet, and put it on the altar, a quiet wish in his chest—for answers, for calm. The driver copied him, quick and nervous, dropping a flower with a mumble before stepping back.

"Can we go now, sir?" the driver asked, his voice tight, eyes jumping to the trees.

Shri nodded slow, the hum fading fast, leaving an empty ache. He walked back, the clearing letting him go slow, branches brushing him like whispers. The car waited, a way back to Shivalkot, but the temple stayed in his head—unchanged, forever, tied to a past he couldn't shake. The driver started the engine, the rumble weak against the quiet, and Shri leaned on the window, the fresh air now mixed with something scary, something that wouldn't let go.

Chapter 4

“Shri... Shri, what’s wrong?” Dr. Pratap’s voice cut through the quiet, playful but carrying something heavier. “This village’s charm got you hooked already?” He chuckled low, the sound bouncing off the dusty path they walked, stirring the warm air. “Don’t let it pull you in too fast, though.”

Shri blinked, the words sticking in his head. *Too fast?* It felt odd, like Pratap was hinting at something under the surface. Was there more to this place than it showed? He glanced at the hills rolling out ahead, green and bright under the sun—too peaceful, almost staged. A chill ran through him, quick and sharp, even with the heat all around. He shook it off, focusing on the crunch of dirt under his shoes, but the feeling stayed, nagging at him.

The hospital came into view, rising up through the haze like an old ghost. Calling it a hospital felt generous—it looked old, tired and worn from years of standing there. The walls were faded, yellowed by time, with hints of something fancier underneath: arched windows chipped at the edges, fancy trim covered in vines and dirt. Shri squinted into the sunlight bouncing off it, trying to see how this beat-up place could help anyone. It didn’t feel like healing—just stubborn and broken.

“This,” Pratap said, swinging an arm toward it with a big gesture, “used to be a king’s getaway—a summer place. The government took it from the family way back, figured it’d do some good for people.” His voice had a dry edge, and Shri caught a quick smirk—like Pratap knew more than he was saying. Before Shri could ask, his eyes landed on a huge statue in the courtyard—a tall, dark bust carved from rough stone. Its face was worn smooth, but its stare hit hard, heavy and quiet, like it owned the place. Shri’s breath caught, a jolt running through him. It didn’t fit here, but it felt alive, watching.

Pratap noticed him staring, his smirk fading into something harder to read—maybe tired, maybe uneasy. “Always around,” he muttered low, like the ground swallowed half of it, “but not really here.”

Shri tilted his head, confused. “So... Mr. Kashyap doesn’t visit much?”

“Few times” Pratap said, dropping his voice like it was a secret, “the longest stay during the opening. Cut the ribbon, smiled for the cameras, and left. His son, Dr. Anirudh, pops in sometimes, though. This place meant everything to his dad.”

Shri frowned, curious now. “Then why doesn’t Dr. Anirudh stick around?”

“He’s after his MS degree,” Pratap said, shrugging like it didn’t matter, though his eyes flickered. “And honestly, he’s not cut out for this backwoods spot. Don’t blame him.” He paused, then perked up quick. “Oh—Ani’s coming by in a couple weeks. You’ll get along—he’s a good guy. Bet you two’ll hit it off.”

Shri managed a small smile, but that statue’s stare stuck with him, pressing on his chest as they walked into the lobby. The air changed fast—warm outside, damp and cool inside, sinking into him. The place was half-alive: a couple of nurses in worn uniforms whispered by a desk, an orderly shuffled by with a clattering tray, a few patients sat in odd chairs, their faces blank, eyes tired like the peeling walls. Bits of old fancy stuff showed through—faded paintings under cracked paint, a hint of what it used to be. It was stuck between something grand and something falling apart.

“Look around,” Pratap said, tapping Shri’s shoulder hard enough to make him jump. “I’ve got patients waiting—can’t leave ’em hanging.” He nodded to a skinny orderly nearby, his eyes deep-set under a slouch. “Show him the place.”

The orderly nodded quick, jerky, and waved Shri along. They walked through halls where the floors creaked loud, like soft moans in the quiet.

The past was everywhere—fancy doorframes in bad shape, carvings blurry from damp, cobwebs hanging like old flags. It was a shell, stripped down, left to fade while it tried to help people.

They stopped at a ward—five beds, two taken, the air sour with sickness. Shri grabbed a clipboard from one bed, his doctor side kicking in, and scanned it: fever, dehydration, maybe dysentery. The patient—an old woman with thin hair and hollow cheeks—stared up at nothing, breathing shallow. Shri’s grip tightened, the clipboard digging into his hand. This wasn’t a palace anymore—just a thin thread holding on.

“Do we get medicine on time?” he asked, setting the clipboard down with a quiet clack that sounded too big.

The orderly nodded, his voice scratchy but sure. “Plenty in stock, Doctor Saheb. Mostly water related complications here—dysentery, typhoid. Some kids not eating right too. Every few years, a big sickness comes through—takes out half the villages if we’re not fast. Last two years have been calm, though. Dr. Pratap’s the one who keeps it together—goes out to the villages, shows them how to stay clean, stay alive.”

Shri looked at him, respect sparking. “No other clinics or hospitals around?”

“Just us,” the orderly said, a grim kind of pride in his tone. “Eighteen villages, plus a tribal hamlet deep in the woods. Only place for miles.”

“Tribal hamlet?” Shri leaned in, interested.

“Yeah. Forest people—cut off, mostly. Only come out if it’s bad. Real superstitious too.” The orderly glanced sideways, nervous, like he didn’t want the walls to hear.

They kept going, hitting a small room marked as the operating theater—just the basics. A rusty table sat in the middle, a flickering lamp buzzed

overhead, and dusty tools lined the shelves. Shri stepped in, looking it over sharp. A scalpel glinted, too clean in all the mess, like it was waiting.

“Who does surgeries?” he asked, turning. “Dr. Pratap’s no surgeon.”

“He’s not,” the orderly said, scratching his neck with a wince. “But emergencies don’t care. He steps up when he has to—got steady hands. Bad cases go to Nagpur. Thing is, most of his make it through fine. People talk about him like a hero around here.”

Shri’s mouth twitched into a half-smile—Pratap’s name carried weight.

A few steps later, they hit a staircase, dusty and sagging. “Where’s this go?”

“First floor,” the orderly said flat. “Morgue up there, some rooms full of old junk—nothing useful. Rest are locked.”

“Locked?” Shri raised an eyebrow, hooked now.

“No one’s opened ’em since this place started,” the orderly said, scratching his arm again. “No one bothers. Keys are gone, probably.”

Shri took a couple steps up, the wood groaning under him. “What if we need more room?”

The orderly laughed dry, almost sharp. “Ground floor’s barely used, Doctor Saheb. What’d we do with more? The open ones are morgue and storage—rest can stay shut.”

Shri stopped, looking up into the dark, then stepped back down, the air feeling thick. “That’s it, then?”

“Want tea, Doctor Saheb?” the orderly asked, a small grin breaking through. “Canteen’s this way.”

Shri followed, more to explore than for tea. The canteen was big and dim, windows grimy, keeping the light out. Old tables sat scattered, plastic chairs

wobbly like they'd collapse. An old woman ran the counter, her face lined deep, her younger helper nearby—two quiet watchers moving slow but steady.

“Order tea, Saheb?” the orderly asked, nodding to the counter.

“No,” Shri said, soft but sure. “I’ll have it with Dr. Pratap later.”

“Okay, Saheb,” the orderly said with a nod. “Let’s get you to your cabin.”

They ended at a decent-sized room—Shri’s spot. The orderly stopped at the door. “Doctor Saheb, this is yours. We set it up like Dr. Pratap wanted, but if you need anything, ring the bell by the desk. Someone’ll come.”

Shri stepped in, giving a tired smile. “Thanks. What’s your name?”

The orderly stood a bit taller, a flicker of pride in his sunken eyes.

“Ramesh, Doctor Saheb.”

“Alright, Ramesh,” Shri said, his smile warming up. “I’ll call if I need you.”

Ramesh nodded quick, then left, his steps fading down the hall. Shri turned to check out the room—plain but workable, a beat-up desk, a creaky chair, a small window letting in thin light. It’d do for seeing patients, a start in this weird place.

Tiredness hit him hard, dragging at him from no sleep and old memories. He dropped into the chair, its creak matching the hospital’s groans, and leaned back. The room blurred as his eyes closed, exhaustion pulling him down fast. Sleep took him quick, deep and sudden.

He woke with a jolt, feeling a hand on his shoulder.

Chapter 5

“Sir... Sir, we’ve reached Shivalkot.”

The driver’s voice yanked Shri awake, his head jerking up as the car stopped, gravel crunching loud. He blinked, groggy, the world outside sharpening slow. The hospital looked different—its old, crumbling walls now patched with fresh paint and new fittings, a sign of years gone by. Shri’s breath caught, surprised—it wasn’t the wreck he remembered; it stood proud now, fixed up. Next to it was a small cottage, neat and new, like it grew there naturally beside the hospital.

The courtyard was packed, villagers crowded tight, their low voices a mix of sadness and respect. These were Dr. Pratap’s people—folks he’d patched up, lives he’d held together, hearts he’d won with his steady care. Shri’s chest tightened as he stepped out, the air heavy with marigolds and tears. They not only admired Pratap—they loved him, a doctor who’d been their rock for decades in this wild corner.

He’d been everything to them. When fever hit hard, Pratap had walked through mud and dark, lantern swinging, bringing medicine and hope where no one else went. When the river turned bad, making people sick, he’d sat by them, talking soft, pulling them back from the edge. Mothers grabbed his hands, thankful, when their kids got quiet again; fathers cried silent when he got them through rough nights. He’d shown them simple stuff—boil water, dig pits for waste, use soap—not big, but it kept them going. Now he was gone, his laugh quiet, and the hole he left showed in every worn face Shri passed. Their grief was loud and real, a messy mix of love and loss that hit him hard.

Dr. Pratap’s body lay on a low wall in the courtyard, covered in white, a spot for people to say goodbye. Villagers pushed in, hands shaky as they laid flowers—marigolds, jasmines, wild ones from the woods—piling them

around him. Tears ran down dusty faces, shining in the afternoon sun, each one a mark of what he'd meant. Shri's throat burned, his eyes blurring as he moved through, their chants wrapping around him. He got to the wall and looked down—Pratap's face was calm, peaceful, but empty now. Shri's breath shook, tears falling as he stared at the man who'd shaped him, haunted him, brought him back after twenty eight years to be precise.

An old man stepped out of the crowd, his bent back familiar. He waved Shri inside with a rough hand, pressing some wilted flowers into his palm. Shri knew him—Ramesh, older now, his eyes faded but still sharp. No time for hellos; the sadness was too heavy. Shri moved forward, hands trembling as he set the flowers on Pratap's chest, bright against the white. A sob broke out, loud and messy, and he wiped his face with his sleeve, stumbling into the lobby. The cool damp hit him, and he dropped into a chair, the wood creaking. Ramesh sat next to him, letting out a tired breath that carried years.

“Doctor Saheb,” Ramesh started, his voice low and rough, “this was coming. He got old—older than he acted. But he went easy, happy. I'm glad he didn't end up stuck in one of these beds, fading slow. He'd have hated it.”

Shri turned to him, eyes wet, tears cutting lines in the dust on his face.

“And Prakash?”

Ramesh looked down, his face darkening. “Gone two years back. After that, Dr. Pratap... he pulled inside himself. Kept to himself, you know? I could feel how alone he was, but he never showed it—not to us, not to them.” He nodded toward the courtyard, where the villagers' sadness still buzzed.

Shri swallowed, the hurt digging deeper. “Thanks, Ramesh. Glad you stuck with him. When's the last rites?”

“Soon,” Ramesh said, steady now. “We waited for you. I know you two were tight. He’d want you here. If only those incidents hadn’t—” He stopped fast, mouth shutting tight, like he’d said too much. His eyes flicked away, sorry, and he shifted. “I can get tea. You look beat.”

“No, it’s okay,” Shri said, firm despite the shake in his voice. He grabbed the change in topic, dodging whatever Ramesh almost let slip. “Let’s not wait till evening for it.”

The procession was huge, bigger than anything Shivalkot’s villages had seen—people pouring out from the hospital, winding through dirt paths to the cremation ground. Almost everyone from the eighteen villages showed up, their steps heavy on the ground. Shri walked with Pratap’s bier, sharing the load, the air full of incense and women’s cries. His eyes wandered, catching shadowy figures by the trees—tribals, half-hidden, watching quiet. They stayed back but were there, honoring Pratap in their own way. Shri squinted, something familiar in two older ones, but tears blurred it, and he kept going, the bier rocking with each step, Pratap’s absence cutting fresh.

Back at the hospital, after the fire was done, Shri pushed the memories and sadness aside, his doctor side taking over. With Ramesh and some nurses following, he checked the wards, looking at patients like it could keep him steady. The old woman from years ago was gone—new people now, sweaty and weak, same old water problems Pratap fought. He wrote orders quick—fluids, medicine, rest—hands solid even with the mess inside him. Work held him up, kept him from falling apart.

In the lobby, he saw trainees in fresh uniforms running around, nurses moving fast, new gear shining under the lights—stuff Pratap must’ve pushed for, a mark he left. Shri’s old room was taken now, a young trainee at his desk, papers everywhere. Ramesh led him to Pratap’s office instead, a place that hadn’t changed.

The door creaked open, and it hit him—warm wood walls, a scratched desk, a faint chai smell, like Pratap was just out for a minute. But the life was gone—the laugh, the steady feel of him. Shri stopped, then sat in the patient chair, not touching Pratap’s spot—it felt too big for him. The first rites were over, the villagers gone, the night quiet now. The driver had left hours ago, the car’s sound long faded, leaving Shri stuck here—or maybe rooted—for good. He had to stay until someone took Pratap’s place, someone tough or crazy enough to run this spot.

Shri turned fast, shuddering as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He’d been bent over the desk, papers spread out—patient files, forms, Pratap’s last work he’d been digging into, needing something to focus on.

Ramesh’s voice broke the quiet, soft but firm. “Sir, it’s almost eight. Your old cottage is for the interns now, but we fixed up the one next door—where Dr. Anirudh stays when he’s here. Small, two bedrooms, but nice.”

Shri nodded, thankful, and followed Ramesh out, the tremor in his chest easing a bit. “You can head home, Ramesh,” he said, forcing a small smile. “I’ll be fine.”

“No, sir,” Ramesh said, shaking his head. “It’s alright. This hospital’s like home to me anyway. And no one here knows you better.”

Shri’s smile grew, a rare break in the day’s weight, and he nodded. “Okay. Get cleaned up and grab some food. Let’s eat together.”

Ramesh gave a tired smile back, nodded, and walked off, his steps quiet in the hall. The cottage bathroom was clean—new tiles, a clear mirror, hot water that washed off the day’s dirt. Shri came out fresher, hair damp, and met Ramesh in the canteen. The food was simple but good—dal with cumin, rice with ghee, roti that softened the edges of his tiredness. They ate quiet, spoons clinking soft in the night.

Back in the cottage, Shri sank into the bed, the mattress soft under him. Ramesh set up on the couch outside, grabbing a thin mattress and pillow from somewhere in the hospital. The bedroom door stayed open a crack, a thin line of light cutting through, but the silence was thick, pressing on Shri's ears.

His body wasn't tired—his hands could still work, his legs could move—but his mind was shot, worn thin by two brutal days. Grief, ghosts, coming back to a place he'd sworn off—it was too much. Shivalkot wasn't just a village; it was a graveyard, full of echoes he'd buried thirty years ago. He'd run to Bombay to escape—the screams, the groans, the shadows—but Pratap's death pulled him back, no way out.

His thoughts spun wild. The flight had been a short break, its hum blocking out the mess inside. The car ride—long, bumpy, the land blurring past—had worn him down more. Then that temple—unchanged, humming a tune only he heard, tying now to then. In the quiet, those old sounds broke loose. Screams rang in his head—pain, fear, voices he'd shut out with time. Groans rolled deep, hitting him in the gut, from a day he couldn't name but felt. He shot up in bed, sweat dripping, shirt soaked, breathing fast and shallow.

Outside, the hospital was still—no noise, no steps, just a heavy quiet. But inside him, it was loud, breaking through walls he'd built over years. The longer he stayed, the more it came back—memories, terrors, things he'd run from. He knew it then, cold and clear: the more time he spent in Shivalkot, the less he'd get out in one piece. This place wasn't just holding him—it was tearing him apart, and something was waiting to take what was left.

Chapter 6

Shri woke with a shudder as he felt someone's hand on his shoulders—a firm grip, warm and steady, laced with the faint scent of chai and tobacco. His eyes snapped open, the dim glow of a flickering oil lamp spilling jagged shadows across the cramped cabin—his new office in the slowly decaying husk of Shivalkot's hospital. The air hung heavy with the musty tang of old wood and damp plaster, the walls pressing in as if exhaling the palace's faded breath. He'd slumped over the desk, his cheek pressed against a stack of patient charts, ink smudging under his weight. The hand lifted, leaving a chill that prickled his skin, and he turned, heart thudding, to see Dr. Pratap standing there, his presence a jolt against the stillness.

“How's your new office?” Pratap asked, his voice steady, warm, cutting through the fog of Shri's disorientation. His shirt was pristine despite the day's dust, his dark eyes glinting with a mix of curiosity and amusement under the lamplight, a faint smile tugging at his lips.

Shri straightened, rubbing his neck where stiffness had crept in, the charts rustling as he pushed them aside. “Sorry,” he murmured, voice rough with sleep, “I must've dozed off. Yes—it's a nice place. Scope for improvement, but functional.” The words felt automatic, a shield against the unease gnawing at him—had Pratap felt him flinch? Did that hand carry a weight beyond waking him?

Pratap settled onto the couch with a casual ease, its worn frame groaning under him, the faded fabric a stark contrast to his polished demeanour. The door creaked open, and Ramesh stepped in, balancing two chipped mugs of steaming tea, the aroma of cardamom and ginger curling through the heavy air. His deep-set eyes flicked between them, a quiet deference in his stoop as he set the mugs on the desk. “Saheb,” he addressed Pratap, his raspy voice cutting the silence, “lunch is ready in the canteen. Shall I ask them to put out the plates?”

Pratap's gaze shifted to Shri, his smile softening, though a shadow flickered beneath it—something unreadable, fleeting. “What say, Shri? Let's have lunch in a bit, then you can head to your residence—take a nice bath, relax. At night, I'll have Prakash send you dinner. You can start afresh tomorrow.”

Shri nodded, the weight of the day pressing against his temples—travel, terror, the hospital's oppressive state all coiling into a knot he couldn't unravel. “Yes, I think I need to lie down a bit. By tomorrow, things should be fine.” His voice trembled with a fragile hope, a plea for respite from the night that still gnawed at him—the figurine's ember eyes, its rancid breath.

Pratap turned to Ramesh, his tone firm yet kind. “After lunch, accompany Doctor Saab to his residence. I think Prakash is already there, tidying up.”

Ramesh dipped his head, a sharp nod of assent, and shuffled out, his footsteps a muted echo against the corridor's groaning floorboards. Shri watched him go, the cabin settling into a tense quiet—the faint sputter of the lamp, the distant hum of voices from the canteen, Pratap's steady breathing beside him. He sipped the tea, its heat scalding his tongue, grounding him in this brittle moment. The hospital beyond the door remained the sagging relic he'd explored hours ago, its royal past a hollow shell. Pratap's presence steadied him, yet that hand on his shoulder lingered—a real touch, not a dream, but heavy with an intent he couldn't place.

Shri's residence stood just a few meters from the hospital, a stone's throw from Pratap's own house—a modest cottage etched into Shivalkot's rugged embrace. Its low roof sagged under a shroud of moss, its gray walls weathered by years of rain and neglect, but it offered a solitude that tugged at his frayed nerves. The kitchen greeted him with chipped tiles and a faint whiff of kerosene, flanked by a bedroom and a washroom that exhaled damp earth and lime. It was small, unassuming, more than enough for a man alone. Prakash had worked diligently—the floors swept clean, a single

bulb casting a warm glow, the air cleared of the dust that had clung to his arrival the night before.

“Saheb,” Prakash said, his wiry frame filling the doorway as he adjusted a thermos on the kitchen counter, “I’ve kept a hot cup in here—tea, fresh—and some snacks. I’ll come back tonight with dinner.”

“Thank you, Prakash,” Shri replied, forcing a smile through the fatigue that gnawed at his bones. “I think I’ll just hit the bed now.”

“Fine, saheb,” Prakash said, stepping toward the door, his hand pausing on the knob. “And yes—Bade Saheb sent you a gift. I’ve placed it in the corner of the bedroom.”

Shri’s smile lingered, a faint warmth cutting through his weariness. “Okay, Prakash. I’ll look at it sometime. Thanks.”

The door clicked shut, the lock sliding home with a reassuring thud. Shri stumbled to the bed, the mattress creaking under him as he collapsed, too drained to shed his dust-streaked clothes. After a night of terror—of wooden flesh and whispered curses—this promised peace. His eyes fluttered shut, and sleep descended swift and heavy, a dreamless tide that swallowed him whole, a rare mercy in this village’s shadowed grasp.

Dusk cloaked the cottage in amber and shadow when Shri stirred, the grogginess of afternoon yielding to a restless vigor. He rose, the ache in his limbs dulled by rest, and stepped into the washroom. The water was cool, a sharp relief against his skin, washing away the day’s grime and the lingering chill of that first night. He poured himself a cup from the thermos—tea, still warm, its bitterness sharpened by a hint of clove—and glanced at the plate of snacks Prakash had left: biscuits, crisp and plain, alongside a scattering of namkeens, their salt a faint tease on the air. He covered them again, appetite absent, and carried the tea to the living room.

A small television flickered to life with a hum, its grainy screen spilling news into the stillness—distant voices droning about monsoons and markets, a tether to a world beyond Shivalkot’s reach. Shri sank into a worn chair, sipping slowly, the tea’s heat seeping into his palms. His eyes roamed, restless, and snagged on a shape in the bedroom doorway—a box, modest but deliberate, its edges catching the TV’s faint glow. *The gift*, he realized, curiosity sparking through the calm. He finished the tea, set the mug aside, and crossed to retrieve it, bringing the box back to the living room with a casual ease that belied the storm about to break.

He settled into the chair, the box balanced on his knees, and pried it open with a flick of his fingers. The air fled his lungs in a sharp, ragged gasp. Inside lay a wooden figurine—dark, jagged, its carved features a cruel echo of the one that had come alive in Pratap’s house that first night. Shock seared through him, a white-hot jolt that froze his blood and yanked his heart into his throat. The same ember eyes—now lifeless wood—stared up at him, the same sinewy form that had loomed over his bed, its breath a rancid chill against his skin. Was this a cruel jest? A deliberate taunt? Of all the gifts Pratap could have sent, why *this*? Did he *know*—had he witnessed the terror that night, sensed the scream Shri couldn’t unleash?

Rage surged, molten and blinding, tangling with a confusion that clawed at his mind. He slammed the lid shut, the thud reverberating like a gunshot in the quiet cottage, his hands trembling as he shoved the box onto the table. His breath came in shallow bursts, sweat prickling anew as he paced, the room shrinking around him. Then—a knock at the door, sharp and sudden, halting his heart for a breathless second. The sound repeated, louder, accompanied by a voice that pierced the haze. “Saheb, it’s me—Prakash. Are you still asleep?”

Shri froze, the figurine’s stare burning into his periphery. Slowly, he set the box aside, its weight a silent menace, and crossed to the door. His hand

hovered on the knob, trembling, before he turned it, opening the door just enough for Prakash to slip inside, a dented tiffin box tucked under his arm, the faint aroma of spiced curry wafting from it. No greeting, no words—just the creak of hinges and the thud of his own pulse as he stepped back, eyes locked on the box.

Prakash entered, setting the tiffin on the table with a soft clank, his wiry frame filling the dim space. His gaze snagged on the gift, and a smile broke across his face, warm and unassuming. “Oh, so you’ve already seen it?”

Shri’s temper flared, an ember igniting into a blaze. “What does Pratap Sir mean by sending me this?” he snapped, voice rising with each word. “Is this some kind of practical joke? What is this nonsense? Get rid of it—now!”

Prakash’s smile faltered, a flicker of surprise crossing his weathered face, but he steadied himself with a calm that bordered on unnerving. He picked up the box, opened it, and studied the figurine with a quiet curiosity before closing it gently. He sank to the floor, cross-legged, his eyes steady on Shri. “Saheb, please—calm down. Tell me what happened.”

Shri’s rage wavered, the heat draining as he caught the genuine concern in Prakash’s gaze. Was he overreacting? Had he misjudged this entirely? He sank onto the couch, breath ragged, hands clenched as he wrestled the words out. “You have a similar thing in your bedroom—and it’s terrifying.”

Prakash’s brow creased, surprise deepening into something like awe. “Terrifying, sir? Why?”

Shri hesitated, the memory a jagged shard piercing through him. After a long, taut pause, he spoke, his voice trembling as he recounted that night in Pratap’s house: the figurine’s transformation, its flesh pulsing where wood had been, its ember eyes boring into him, its breath a rancid chill that stole his scream. Prakash listened, his face still but his eyes widening faintly, a

ripple of unease breaking his calm until Shri finished, the silence thick and electric between them. Then, abruptly, Prakash leaned forward and touched Shri's feet, a gesture so sudden it jolted him upright.

Shri recoiled, startled. "What are you doing, Prakash?"

"Saheb," Prakash said, his voice soft but fervent, pulling back with a sheepish nod, "this isn't just a *thing*. It's meant to be Lord Vajradhar—protector of the forests, savior of the tribals, benefactor of those he chooses."

Shri's shock sharpened, his mind reeling. "What are you saying?"

"You're new here," Prakash continued, his tone steadying into a cadence alive with conviction, though a faint tremor betrayed his awe. "It's a story in these parts—Lord Vajradhar shows himself only to those marked for something greater."

"Greater?" Shri's voice cracked, disbelief warring with a creeping dread.

"I've never heard of it moving like that," Prakash admitted, his eyes glinting with a mix of wonder and unease, "but it means you're touched—chosen, maybe. You shouldn't fear him. In these forests, they say he holds sway over all."

Shri shook his head, clinging to reason. "That's just a tale, isn't it? There's no proof—"

"Not everything's about proof, Saheb," Prakash cut in, his calm returning, though his fingers twitched faintly. "Lakhs of villagers believe—especially the tribals. Let me tell you what they say happened, some three hundred years back." He leaned forward, voice dropping to a hushed, urgent thread, as if the cottage walls might shudder. "This whole region—villages, hills, rivers, as far as the horizon—belonged to King Adhiveer, a tribal king. Forests swallowed everything, streams carved the valleys, and the people

lived simple, happy with little. But then city folk crept in, mixing with the border villagers, dangling shiny things—coins, cloth, promises. The tribal ways started fading, greed seeping in like rot. Adhiv eer saw it—the threat to his people’s soul. Then the British came, their red coats flashing, lured by tales of this land’s wild beauty, egged on by villagers who sold out for a handful of silver. This hidden place was about to fall.”

Shri listened, pulse quickening, a faint memory stirring—something from a history book he’d skimmed in college, a dry note about British campaigns stalling in Maharashtra’s western forests, their men lost to rivers red with blood, chalked up to ambushes or fever. Prakash’s tale wove into that shadow, giving it flesh. “Adhiv eer took his loyal men—near a thousand—deep into the forest’s heart, bracing for war. The British were relentless, muskets gleaming, swelled by traitors who knew every secret path.

Outmatched, Adhiv eer and his warriors fell back to a sacred grove, praying nights under a canopy that moaned with old winds. They lit yagnas, flames spitting embers skyward, calling the Lord of the forests. And then—they say it turned, in ways no one can pin down. The British took villages, boots pounding the dirt, but they couldn’t breach the tribal core. Whispers tell of trees waking—roots bursting from the earth like twisted hands, snaring soldiers and turncoats, holding them fast till their cries died out. Thousands of bodies—redcoats and locals—washed down the river, a bloody flood staining the banks for days, a mark of something steel couldn’t touch. What really happened is lost, a secret the forest guards, but the whispers linger: Lord Vajradhar answered, and the land fought back.”

Shri’s breath caught, the tale sinking into him, that history book echo flaring vivid—those vanished expeditions, the retreat no one explained. It wasn’t proof, but it gripped him, quieting the questions clawing at his throat. He forced his voice out, hoarse. “But where did these idols come from?”

Prakash's face softened, pride flickering as he shifted. "Dr. Pratap was called by the current tribal chief to treat his youngest son. Two boys, one girl; the little one was fading, fever eating him alive. The witch doctor tried—chants, herbs, ash smeared on bones—but the kid was slipping. The chief sent for Pratap, desperate. He went, worked three days and nights—barely slept, mixing tonics, wiping the boy's brow. Now he's running strong again. The chief gave him an idol—carved from sacred wood, they say, handed down generations. That's the one at his house."

Shri's brow creased, eyes darting to the box. "And this one?"

Prakash's smile returned, a touch sheepish. "This? You grab these at village fairs—hawkers churn 'em out, rough little carvings for a few rupees. The one at Bade Saheb's is the real deal. This—it's just a keepsake, nothing special."

Shri's mind reeled, relief clashing with a gnawing unease. A fair trinket—not the nightmare that moved, not sacred—just wood, cheap and lifeless. Had he conjured that terror, then? His pulse thudded, the history book's echo—those rivers of blood—mingling with Prakash's calm words, dulling his need to argue. The figurine—Lord Vajradhar or a hollow mimic—sat silent, its eyes dull now, yet a shiver lingered, whispering he'd seen *something*. Outside, a low rustle stirred the trees, a faint groan echoing through the dusk, and Shri's gaze snapped to the window, the forest's shadow pressing closer.

Chapter 7

The next few days rolled out slow and bright, sunlight cutting through Shivalkot's rough hills, slicing into the thick forest with a sharpness that felt bold. For Shri, it hinted at something lighter—a chance to shake off the fear that hit him when he got here. He was settling in, the place starting to feel real: the cottage's creaky roof waking him up, its mossy walls telling stories he was getting used to. He shoved aside the mess in his head—the figurine's stare, the forest's creepy hum—and focused on what he came to do. This was his job now: fix people, help out, make a spot for himself in this wild place.

The hospital buzzed, alive despite its old bones. Shri dove into work, hands steady as he patched up villagers and patients inside. The wards smelled sharp—antiseptic mixed with sweat, covering up the damp past. He stitched cuts from farm tools, gave medicine for kids' fevers, listened to old folks coughing from the wet air. Each person was part of Shivalkot—farmers with rough hands, women with tired eyes, kids laughing through thin faces. He did what he could with the hospital's supplies, pushing through the limits with quiet grit. Work kept him going, pulling him away from that first night's terror, giving him something solid to hold onto.

He couldn't stop watching Dr. Pratap, pulled in by how easy he made it look. Pratap moved through the wards smooth, swapping his suit for a worn kurta, his voice low and calm over the noise. Shri hung back in doorways, seeing Pratap kneel by a shaky mom, hand light on her shoulder, talking simple about her kid's fever—no fancy words, just real. He'd slap a farmer's back, laughing at a grumble about rain, then pull a coin from a kid's ear, grinning at her smile. The villagers leaned into him, their faces easing with a trust deeper than doctor stuff—a tie built from years in the dirt together. It warmed Shri up, loosening the knot from that night of

wooden eyes and living shadows. Pratap wasn't just a doc here; he was part of this place, and Shri wanted that too, to fit in.

Days melted together—charts scratched under dim lamps, bandages tied with flies buzzing, Ramesh grabbing water, Prakash hauling gear. They were swamped, time slipping fast. That morning, Pratap was stuck in the operating room, hands steady with a rusty scalpel, fixing a farmer's leg smashed by a tree—blood thick in the air. Shri and Pratap didn't notice time passing, too deep in patients to hear tires on gravel or an engine humming through dusk. They didn't know Anirudh Kashyap would show up, stepping into their mess.

The ward door creaked loud, cutting the noise, and Shri looked up, pen stopped over a chart. A tall guy stood there, sharp in a fancy coat against the fading sun—Anirudh Kashyap, Ani to some. His shiny shoes clicked on the floor, hair catching light, dark eyes scanning quick before landing on Shri. He smiled, warm and sure, walking over with a hand out—smooth but real. “You're Dr. Shridhar, right?”

Shri blinked, thrown off, wiping ink on his coat as he shook Ani's hand—firm, a city guy meeting rough work. “Dr. Anirudh—welcome,” he said, smiling through tiredness. “Nice surprise. Let me wrap this up, then we'll talk.”

Ani's grin grew, eyes sparking. “Take your time, Doctor. I'll be in the legend's cabin, cleaning up.” He nodded at Pratap's office, a quick tip of respect.

Shri chuckled soft, tension easing a bit, and nodded. Ani turned, coat swishing, and headed off, leaving quiet behind. Shri went back to his chart, pen scratching again, but curiosity pulled at him—Anirudh Kashyap, the son of the guy who made this place, here out of nowhere.

It was late afternoon before Shri got a break, the ward calming as the last patient left with medicine. He stretched, back popping, and walked to Pratap's cabin, door half-open, warm light spilling out. Inside, Pratap and Ani talked loud—Pratap's laugh deep, Ani's voice quick and city-sharp. Papers covered the desk—reports, scripts, a chai mug steaming—smelling faintly of Pratap's tobacco, cozy against the old wood.

“Come in, Shri,” Pratap called, sleeve rolled up, grinning big as he waved him over. “You met Ani—Dr. Anirudh Kashyap.”

Shri stepped in, shutting the door with a thud, locking in the room's warm feel. “Good to see you again,” he said, nodding to Ani, who leaned back, coat off, shirt sleeves up, dusty now.

Ani stood, smile bright, pointing at the door. “Let's grab lunch in the canteen—try some of Doctor Sir's home cooking.”

Pratap laughed, loud and full. “If I'd known you were coming, I'd have told Prakash to make extra. He's been feeding me and Shri—keeps us alive these long days.”

Ani's eyebrows shot up, eyes lighting up. “Wow, Shri gets Prakash's home stuff too?”

They all smiled, laughing together—Pratap's deep, Ani's quick, Shri's tired but warm. They got up, chairs creaking, and headed out, the hospital's noise fading. The hall glowed orange in the late light, and Shri felt the forest hum outside—a rustle, a shadow moving. Ani being here stirred something, a hint of the world beyond, and Pratap's quick look said more was coming.

The canteen was busy but dim, tables scattered with families, air thick with dal and fried onions. They took a corner spot, Pratap unpacking a tiffin—golden parathas with ghee, sharp pickle, warm peanuts. The cook brought plates—steamy rice, thin dal, spiced okra—and they ate, spoons clinking soft.

Ani leaned in, spoon over a paratha, grinning at Shri. “So, how’s a top student—who fought his way into a big med school—end up here in the middle of nowhere?”

Shri stopped, veggies halfway to his mouth, caught by the question. He put it down, wiping his hands, meeting Ani’s eyes steady. “Honestly, without a scholarship, my folks couldn’t pay for that school—I’d be farming, not fixing people. But really, you learn life out here. City hospitals can wait—this—” he nodded at the cracked window, forest hazy outside—“this is something else.”

Ani’s smile stayed, but his eyes flickered—was that scholarship bit a dig at his rich dad, or just real talk? He chewed slow, unsure, the air tensing up until Pratap jumped in, warm and smooth. “Ani’s no slacker—he’s a great doc. Doing his MS now, making us proud.”

Shri grabbed the chance, smiling easier. “Yeah, I’ve heard. Teach me a few tricks if you’re up for it.”

Ani grinned back, real this time, relieved. “Anytime, Dr. Shridhar—can I call you Shri?”

“Sure, Dr. Anirudh,” Shri said, chuckling a bit.

Pratap waved a hand, laughing loud. “Cut the formal stuff, guys—Shri and Ani’s fine with friends.” He tossed a peanut in his mouth, grinning wide.

They laughed again, the sound cutting through the canteen’s noise, warming things up. But before they finished, noise hit outside—loud voices from the lobby, sharp like wind in the trees. They froze—Shri with a paratha, Ani with a spoon, Pratap with a peanut—their eyes locking, food dropped fast. They got up, washed hands quick in the dented sink, warm water no match for the pull, and rushed out, steps loud on the tiles.

The lobby was a mess—twenty tribal folks packed in, yelling and begging, faces tight with panic. A stretcher sat on a bench, a guy twisting on it, gasping hard, pain all over his lean body. His chest was bare, sweaty, bloody—a deep cut across his ribs, nasty and wild-looking. Shri’s gut twisted, the air heavy with blood and fear.

Pratap moved first, pushing through fast, dropping by the stretcher, hands ready. Ramesh and two nurses jumped in, pressing cloths to the wound, quick but sure. “What happened?” Pratap asked, voice thick with shock and something sadder, staring at the guy’s twisted face.

Ramesh, hands red, looked up, out of breath. “Hunting past the river—a boar went crazy, got him bad.”

Pratap’s jaw locked, eyes hard. “OT—now!” he yelled, voice cracking sharp, nurses moving fast. “Get it ready—go!” The stretcher jerked up, tribals pushing in, hands grabbing, voices loud. Ramesh blocked the door, arms out. “Wait here! It’ll be okay—stay back!”

The OT doors banged open, swallowing them into its dim, clean guts—rusty table, flickering lamp, antiseptic biting over blood’s smell. Ani stepped up with Pratap, sleeves folded, hands steady, calling for gauze and saline. Shri followed, adrenaline pumping, grabbing tools—scalpel, forceps, thread—backing them up quiet. The guy’s breaths got weak, skin pale under sweat, and Ani’s voice cut through. “Who is he?”

Pratap leaned in, grabbing the guy’s bloody hand, firm but soft, voice low in the chaos. “Mrigendra—the tribal chief. Hold on, friend—it’s gonna be okay.” Their eyes met, a flash of knowing through the pain, a tie Shri couldn’t guess.

Shri moved fast, passing Ani a drip as Pratap pressed the wound, blood soaking through. The OT buzzed—nurses running, tools clinking, Mrigendra’s breaths rough and steady. Outside, tribal voices chanted low

through the walls, words blurry but heavy—a prayer maybe. The forest rustled sharp outside, a groan matching the chief’s hurt, and Shri’s heart sped up—was it random, or something else out there?

It felt like forever before the OT doors opened again, the noise inside dropping to a tense quiet—saline dripping, bulb humming. Ani and Pratap stepped out, clothes bloody and sweaty, faces tired but solid. The tribals rushed up, hands out, voices tight, wanting news. Shri stayed back, finishing up—bandaging Mrigendra’s stitched ribs, fixing the drip with shaky hands. The chief’s breathing steadied, slow under medicine, and Shri stepped away, wiping blood on a cloth, red bright on white.

Pratap raised a hand, voice calm despite the hours. “He’s okay—no worries. He’s sleeping now, we have given him medicines for pain. Keep him here two days, we’ll watch him. Then he can go home.”

The crowd mumbled, relief mixing with nerves, and Shri walked out, cloth in hand, when a voice stopped him—a soft, desperate plea. “Can we stay? Till he’s ready?” It shook, strong but fragile, and Shri’s eyes snapped up, locking on her—the chief’s daughter, by the stretcher, hitting him like a spark.

She stood out, glowing like dusk and dawn mixed, stealing his breath. Her skin was warm dusk, sun-touched, shining soft like it lit itself—a princess mark. Her eyes were big, hazel with gold flecks, wet with tears that caught light like stars—fierce and gentle, heavy with her roots. Her hair flowed dark and wavy, loose around her face like a crown, a few beads glinting quiet—an easy grace showing who she was. Her tunic was earthy—browns and yellows with silver threads—hanging light on her slim frame, brushing her ankles where stone anklets jingled soft with her words. A necklace of amber and bone sat at her throat, glowing against her neck, and her voice—low, sweet, raw—hit him deep, like the forest calling. She wasn’t just

anyone—a wild princess, her beauty lifted by something inside, like the sky and earth made her together.

Shri froze, cloth slipping to the floor with a thud, everything shrinking to her—her glowing skin, starry eyes, her voice hooking him tight. His heart pounded wild, drowning the OT's hum, his head blank as she hit him hard. She was beyond anything—city lights, clean wards, old faces fading next to her. Like an angel, not from above but from Shivalkot's soul, her pure strength breaking him open, leaving him shaky. He couldn't move, stuck staring as if she'd tied him there, her beauty raw and huge—wild but holy, a light he couldn't shake.

The tribals pressed in, voices hopeful, but no one caught Shri's daze—except Ramesh, by the OT door, his face tightening as he saw Shri's stare. Their eyes met quick, and Ramesh looked away fast, back to the stretcher, like he didn't want Shri caught. Shri blinked, neck hot, steadying his hands, wiping them on his coat as Pratap spoke. “Yeah, two can stay—there's room in the ward. He's safe here.” But Shri's ears rang, her plea echoing, her glow sticking with him, pulling at something deep and wild he couldn't name—like the forest's pulse calling him in.

Chapter 8

Back in his cabin, the hospital's noise faded to a low buzz, Shri dropped into his chair, its creak matching the day's heavy toll. The air smelled sharp—antiseptic and old sweat—while the oil lamp threw shaky shadows over his messy desk: charts, a morphine vial, a bloody cloth from earlier. His hands still shook a bit from the operating room, but his mind kept sliding to her—the tribal chief's daughter, her plea cutting through everything. She'd lit a fire in him, wild and unexpected, and now, in the quiet, it burned louder than the OT's clatter.

Knowing she was close, in the ward with her brother Gajendra, watching over Mrigendra, sent his heart racing—a hard, uneven beat. Her face stuck with him: warm dusky skin glowing soft, hazel-gold eyes full of pain and strength, her voice weaving through his head like a stream in the woods. He wanted to go out there, catch another look, see if she would hit him that hard again. But duty, manners, and a fear of what this pull meant kept him stuck. He pressed his hands flat on the desk, fingers digging into a wrinkled report, trying to stop the shaking, push her out.

It bugged him—almost scared him—that she didn't seem to shake anyone else. Pratap stayed steady, Ani kept his city focus, Ramesh moved quiet—none of them stopped like he did. Did her beauty slide past them, or was it just him, hooked like a bug to a light? Was he losing it, this wild place unraveling him? The idea chewed at him, mixing doubt with awe—Shivalkot felt alive with something strange, and she was it, a storm he couldn't dodge. He was so caught up, her face haunting him, that he almost missed the knock on the door.

The sound snapped him back, breaking the quiet as Ramesh stepped in, his old frame filling the doorway. "Saheb," he said, low and firm, "Pratap Saheb wants you in his cabin."

Shri blinked, her image fading as he pulled himself together. “Okay,” he said, throat dry, “I’ll head over.”

Ramesh nodded, his deep eyes holding a second too long—did he see the mess inside Shri?—then stepped out. “Alright, Saheb,” he said, shutting the door with a creak, leaving Shri with his pounding heart.

He stood, smoothing his stiff coat, crusted with sweat and Mrigendra’s blood. The hall was dim and still as he walked to Pratap’s cabin, the hospital calming down, patients settling in. The forest outside rustled loud, a groan rolling through the trees like it was waiting too. He opened Pratap’s door, warm light spilling out, the air thick with chai and tobacco—a safe spot in the chaos.

Pratap sat at his scratched desk, sleeves rolled, face worn—lines deeper, eyes tired but strong. Ani slouched across from him, shirt wrinkled, sleeves up, sweat shining on his face, his usual polish gone. “Sit, Shri,” Pratap said, voice rough, waving at a chair.

Shri sat, the chair creaking, tiredness heavy on him. Pratap leaned in, elbows on the desk, eyes steady. “Mrigendra’s doing okay—stable now—but we need to watch him close for a day. Ani’s beat—he jumped in right off the road. I’ll take him home. Can you stay and handle it?”

Shri nodded, duty cutting through his haze—her face flashed again, tempting, but work held him. “Sure, don’t worry,” he said, firm despite the ache. “Ani’s been at it since he got here—let him rest. You need sleep too, Sir. I’ve got it.”

Pratap grinned, easing his tired look. “With you here, I’ll sleep easy. Come on, Ani—let’s go. Your driver can drop us and bring the car back for emergencies. I always walk up, you know—keeps me tied here.”

Ani stood slow, nodding, his worn eyes meeting Shri’s with a small, real smile. “Thanks, Shri,” he said, voice rough from yelling orders. Shri shook

his hand—quick, solid, a bond from the day. Pratap steered Ani out, their steps fading, leaving Shri with the night ahead—and her pull, a storm beating close.

As they left, Shri jumped up, chair scraping, rushing to the ward where Mrigendra was. The hall felt long, lamps weak, air cool and thick with night. He pushed the ward doors, creaking loud, and stepped in—soft light, sleeping patients, the drip’s steady sound. Mrigendra lay at the end, chest moving slow under a blanket, face calm from medicine. Gajendra sat by him, big and quiet, tunic dirty, and her—on a stool, a glow in the dark, rolling a gem from her necklace in her fingers, watching her dad.

Shri’s breath caught, her hitting him again, but he shoved it down. “He’s stable,” he said, sharp, to Gajendra only, eyes off her. “No worries. Rest up—I’ll send tea.”

Gajendra nodded, gruff. “Thank you.” She looked up quick, fingers stopping, then moving again.

Shri turned fast, walking out before she could pull him apart. He grabbed an orderly—a skinny kid with tired eyes—by the door. “Tea and snacks for them,” he muttered, then bolted, the ward’s noise dropping behind.

All day and night, Shri worked hard, keeping his word to Pratap. He checked Mrigendra’s signs—pulse good, breathing fine, no infection—hands steady, notes tight. But every ward trip, he braced himself, eyes on the chief, the charts—never her. He stayed clear of her stool, voice short with Gajendra or Ramesh, who hung around with cloths and water. He dodged her look, her shape blurry at the edge, her heat burning him anyway.

She’d caught that first stare he threw in the lobby—wide, stunned, something she didn’t get. Back then, it got lost in her dad’s bloody gasps, her people’s cries. Now, with Shri coming back, she saw it—him turning

away, talking only to Gajendra, eyes anywhere but her. He was dodging her, clear as day, and it sparked something under her worry. What was up with him? Did she throw him off, or was it more—a guilt, a fear she couldn't guess? She watched him sideways, hands in her lap, necklace stones glinting, her own storm brewing quiet.

Morning came pale through the ward's cracked windows, the forest rustling soft, smelling of wet dirt. A few tribals slipped in, steps quiet, faces easing as they crowded Mrigendra's bed. He was awake, voice rough but alive, talking low—Shri couldn't hear, but their relief showed it. His color was back, breathing solid, moving slow under the blanket. They were happy, murmuring thanks—some patting Gajendra, others bowing to the chief—and Shri, at the ward's edge, felt a spark of pride through his tiredness. Mrigendra was better, the night paying off.

Pratap showed up early, kurta fresh, moving fast to check Mrigendra—pulse, bandage, drip—nodding approval before finding Shri. Shri stepped out of his cabin's bathroom, water dripping, coat off, shirt loose, eyes dark and skin pale from no sleep. Pratap frowned, worried. “You look rough, Shri. Go rest—I've got it. Ani's back by noon, no problems.”

Shri nodded, exhaustion sinking in, her face and voice still loud in his head. “Yeah,” he said, hoarse. “I'll go. Thanks, Sir.” Rest made sense, maybe quiet her storm, but he wasn't sure it could.

The walk home blurred, the forest's morning hum far off. He stumbled into the cottage, floor creaking, and fell onto the bed, mattress groaning. Sleep hit fast, deep and dark—her hazel-gold eyes fading last, a spark in the black.

Knocking woke him, loud and sharp, pulling him up. He groaned, heavy, and dragged to the door, feet scuffing. He opened it—Prakash, tiffin under his arm, cumin and ghee drifting up. “Saheb,” Prakash said, wiry in the doorway, “no lunch? It's past two.”

Shri blinked, sleep sticking, rubbing his face. “Oh—yeah. I was tired, crashed.”

Prakash stepped in, setting the tiffin down with a clank, eyeing Shri—shirt messy, hair wild, still pale. He turned to go, stopping. “Hope the chief’s better.”

“Yeah,” Shri said, leaning on the wall, automatic. “He’s getting there—out tomorrow.”

“Good,” Prakash said, smiling faint. “Poor thing’s in pain—needs home.”

“He’s resting,” Shri said, voice firm. “No worries.”

“No, Saheb,” Prakash said, softer, “I mean his daughter.”

It hit Shri hard, breath stopping, her glowing eyes flashing back, stirring the storm he’d buried. Why her, not Gajendra? His mind spun, heat climbing his neck. Did Prakash know—see that first look, how she broke him? “Oh, her,” he forced out, tight, faking calm. “They’ll go tomorrow.”

Prakash nodded, eyes staying too long, a hint of something—curiosity?—flickering. “Okay. Take care, Saheb—you look off too.”

“I’ll be fine,” Shri said, brushing it off, heart thumping. “Thanks.”

Prakash left, door clicking shut, leaving Shri with that punch—did everyone see him slipping? Was it obvious, leaking out? It clawed at him, mixing fear and want, her pull too strong.

He hit the bathroom, cold water clearing sleep but not the mess. He ate the tiffin—dal, rotis—tasting nothing, her voice and glow spinning wild.

Restless, he got up, dressed fast—shirt tucked, coat on, shoes tied shakily—and headed back, steps quick on the dusty path. The forest groaned loud in the afternoon heat, like it knew he was running back to her.

At the hospital courtyard, Gajendra stood by the entrance, solid among tribal buddies—worn faces, patterned tunics, voices low and glad. They nodded at Shri—“Doctor Saheb,” “Namaste”—warm thanks for Mrigendra’s recovery. Shri smiled back, nodding, their trust heavy as he walked in.

The hospital hummed—orderlies with trays, glass clinking, patients talking low—but his steps slowed, pulling him to the ward. He glanced over casual, through the open door, and saw Mrigendra propped up, voice rough but strong, face pale but alive. She sat close, hands on her knees, tunic catching light, necklace glinting with each nod.

She felt him—her head turned, hazel-gold eyes hitting his across the ward, warm and deep with thanks and something softer. Shri froze, air gone, her beauty crashing in—wild and bright, reigniting everything. He couldn’t move, mind blank, her pull locking him there. He turned fast, heart slamming, ready to run, when her voice cut through—sweet, earthy, wild-born. “Doctor Saab. One minute, please.”

It stopped him cold, legs stuck like she’d tied him. He turned slow, nodding stiff, throat tight, stepping in—careful, staying clear of her, her heat too close. “Yes?” he said, low, rough, eyes on Mrigendra’s blanket, then hers.

“We can leave tomorrow, right?” she asked, voice pure, cutting deep.

Shri swallowed, smile shaky, fighting her gaze. “I’ll check with Dr. Pratap about discharge,” he said, steadier than he felt, hands clenched tight.

“Okay,” she said, eyes holding his, warm and curious. “Doctor Saab,” she added.

His smile flickered, unsteady, and he nodded quick, turning to bolt before she pulled him back. He rushed to the canteen, her voice ringing—Pratap’s laugh, Ani’s sharp talk pulling him in—needing something to hold against her storm, now louder than ever.

Chapter 9

The next day started gray, clouds low over Shivalkot's rough hills, softening the light on the hospital's old walls. Shri walked in steady, dust crunching under his shoes, but a restless buzz hummed in his chest—her echo wouldn't quit. The air smelled wet from the forest, its rustle loud, a steady moan trailing him like a ghost. He stepped inside, door creaking, and headed to the ward, coat still wrinkled from yesterday, hands calm but mind wandering.

Mrigendra lay propped up, blanket thin over him, breathing slow and strong—a sign he was pulling through. Shri checked him with a cool eye—pulse at sixty, no fever, stitches tight under new bandages. He tweaked the drip, its drip steady in the quiet, and squeezed Mrigendra's hand—weak but there, no infection creeping in. Good to go home, Shri figured, no trouble ahead—a win from that bloody night. He nodded at Gajendra, standing guard by the bed, solid among the tribal folks whispering relief. “He's set,” Shri said, low and sure. “You can take him home today.”

Gajendra nodded back, heavy with thanks, and Shri turned to the details—a beat-up tempo, the hospital's ambulance, waited outside, creaking as orderlies tossed in blankets and a stretcher. He scratched out meds—painkillers, antibiotics, wound cream—pen sharp on paper, hiding the storm inside. He handed it to Gajendra, muttering, “Twice a day, with food; keep it clean,” then bolted, steps fast to his cabin. He couldn't watch her leave, couldn't face those hazel-gold eyes or that voice that stopped him cold yesterday. The door clicked shut, a weak shield against the pull in his chest, and he dropped into his chair, its creak matching his sigh.

Time dragged, every second long as he waited for the tempo's rumble—the end of this mess, a storm he'd just survived. He stared at his desk—charts, cold tea, ink on his fingers—hoping relief would kick in, slow his heart still racing for her. She'd be gone soon, back to her woods, and he'd get his

head straight. He was close, tension easing, when a knock hit—sharp, yanking him up, heart in his throat. “Come in,” he said, voice shaky, cracking his calm.

The door creaked, and Ramesh stepped in... but she was there too, stealing his breath. The tribal princess stood in the doorway, skin glowing warm in the lamplight, hazel-gold eyes hitting him with thanks and something deeper. Her fingers rolled a gem on her necklace, tunic catching the flame’s flicker—she filled the room, a storm he couldn’t dodge. “Doctor Saheb,” Ramesh said, low, “she wanted to see you before they go.”

Shri’s throat locked, hands gripping the desk. “Yeah,” he choked out, barely loud. “Okay.”

Ramesh nodded, eyes flicking to Shri, then slipped out, leaving her there—alone, watching him. She didn’t step closer, just stood, her gaze holding him tight, warm and deep, shrinking the room. “Doctor Saab,” she said, voice soft and clear, fingers pausing on the gem, then moving again. “You weren’t around, so I came to thank you before we leave.”

Shri’s breath caught, her words stirring the storm he’d buried, but he forced a wall up, voice stiff. “No need to thank me—it’s my job. Just make sure he takes the meds on time.” His eyes jumped to the desk, charts—anywhere but her, though her light burned at the edge.

“Yes, Doctor Saab,” she said, soft but solid, then paused, adding, “You too—take care.”

It threw him, warmth cutting through his guard. “I’m fine,” he shot back quick, hand brushing his coat to hide the shake, to push down the chaos she fired up.

She tilted her head, eyes steady, wet but warm—tears held back by something strong, seeing right through him. “We’re forest kids, Doctor Saab,” she said, voice low, accent hitting deep. “Not much stays hidden

from us.” Like she saw it all—his shaky looks, his dodging—knowing him without saying it, no push, just truth that stripped him raw.

Her hands pressed together in a namaste, stones glinting as she lifted them, eyes locking his—hazel-gold on dark—for seconds that stretched forever, the world gone, just her glow, her quiet heat, her goodbye. Then she turned, tunic brushing the floor, door clicking shut soft behind her.

Shri stood stuck, stunned, hooked—heart pounding wild, breath short, her voice ringing in the quiet, a tune stuck like the forest’s hum. Happy? Yeah, a spark from her thanks, her care—but empty too, an ache where she’d been, a gap he couldn’t name. He dropped back, hands shaky on the desk, her glow flashing in his head, her words—“not much stays hidden”—cutting deep. His thoughts spun—her eyes, her voice, her seeing him—and relief hit when the door creaked again, Ani stepping in, pulling him from the storm’s edge.

“Hey, Shri,” Ani said, voice bright despite a tired edge, shirt crisp, city shine back. He grinned easy, sitting across the desk as Shri sat up, shaking hands quick—a lifeline to now. “Pratap’s with patients, so I’m here to hang out.”

“Great, Ani,” Shri said, a faint smile cutting his haze, company soothing the mess inside. “These last two days were brutal—Mrigendra, the others... You’ve been here before—what’s Shivalkot to you?”

Ani leaned back, laughing sharp, breaking the quiet. “A puzzle, right? Never pinned it down—one time it’s the forest’s wild noise, next it’s the people’s grit. Always shifts. I quit trying and just worked.” He chuckled, eyes sparking. “You should too.”

Shri nodded, her leaving still pulling, but Ani’s ease helped. “Yeah,” he said, steadier. “I’m starting to get it.”

“By the way,” Ani said, leaning in, grin growing, “you explored Shivalkot yet—outside the hospital, your place?”

Shri stopped, caught off-guard, laughing soft. “Nah—never had time, never thought about it.”

Ani’s eyes lit up, mischief in them. “When it’s quiet, I’ll take you out—show you spots I love. You in?”

“Sure, why not?” Shri said, curiosity flickering—something past these walls, past her echo. “Let’s ask Pratap too.”

Ani laughed, shaking his head. “He’s seen it all—doesn’t bother. Used to roam alone, taking it in his way. But with you here, we can make it a real trip.”

“Sounds good,” Shri said, smiling real, a pull away from the storm’s grip.

“Come on,” Ani said, stretching up, energy catching. “Let’s see if Pratap needs us.”

Night fell by the time Shri left, sky dark with the forest’s black shape, its hum steady in the quiet. Pratap and Ani had split hours ago, voices fading as they headed to Pratap’s place, leaving Shri to finish—charts done, a kid’s fever dose set, ward calm. He walked home, path cool underfoot, and stepped in, floor creaking. The bath washed off the day—hot water, steam on the cracked mirror—but her voice stuck, her glow lingering in the fog.

He’d slipped into an old shirt, waiting for Prakash’s tiffin knock, when it came—sharp, loud, cutting the stillness. He opened the door—Prakash, lit by the lantern, hands empty, no tiffin. “Bade Saheb wants you for dinner at his place,” Prakash said, voice warm, eyes on Shri’s worn look.

“Oh—okay,” Shri said, surprised breaking his daze. “Five minutes.”

Prakash nodded, stepping back as Shri rushed—shirt swapped for a kurta, hair fixed, shoes on fast despite the tiredness. He followed Prakash through the dark, forest rustling loud, a chorus in the thick night. Pratap’s house glowed ahead, lantern light spilling out, laughter humming—a pull to something easy.

He walked in, warmth hitting—woodsmoke, spice, glasses clinking with the fun. Pratap and Ani lounged in low chairs, whisky shining between them, faces red from letting go. Pratap’s laugh boomed, Ani’s quick one followed, and they grinned wider as Shri came in. “Come, Shri,” Pratap called, voice deep, waving him over. “Drink, relax—Prakash’ll finish dinner soon.”

Ani nodded, pouring whisky, its glow catching light as he slid it to Shri. “Join us—chill out.”

Shri sat, chair creaking, taking the glass—its weight steadying his shaky hand. The whisky burned slow down his throat, softening the mess—her voice, eyes, goodbye still storming. They talked easy at first—patients, plans—Shri tracing Mrigendra’s recovery, Ani dropping some tips, Pratap adding years of know-how, their voices dulling Shri’s ache.

Then Pratap shifted, voice low, eyes curious. “Shri, Nayantara was looking for you—did she find you?”

Shri froze, glass halfway up, the name—Nayantara—hitting like a quiet bolt. “Who—Nayantara?” he asked, voice breaking, whisky clashing with a cold rush.

Pratap’s grin eased, knowing something. “The chief’s daughter.”

Shri thought hard, the name sinking in—Nayantara—perfect, bright like her glow, sharp like her eyes. He stared at the whisky, her flashing back—warm skin, voice in his soul—and nodded slow, voice quiet. “Yeah, sir. She thanked me.”

Pratap leaned back, chuckling warm, a hint underneath. “Good people, those tribals—never forget a favor. She thanked me too, but she was after you—glad she got you.”

Shri forced a shaky smile, lips twitching, setting the glass down, fingers trembling on the table. Why him, not just Pratap? Why hunt him down, her voice pulling when he’d let go? His head spun—did she see his hurt, his mess, the storm she started? Was it—God—love? It crashed in, wild and raw, heart pounding. Am I in love? It burned through the whisky, leaving him open.

“Shri,” Pratap’s voice broke in, pulling him back, “dinner’s up—should I get Prakash?”

“Yeah, sir, please,” Shri said, distant, mind lost in her echo—Nayantara, wild and bright.

Pratap got up, calling Prakash, who brought steaming plates—dal with cumin, golden rotis, spicy greens—but Shri barely smelled it, tied to her. “By the way,” Pratap said, pouring more, “we’ll check Mrigendra in a couple days—at the hamlet.”

Shri’s heart jumped, breath gone—Nayantara. Would she be there, glowing in the woods? Would she see him—his storm, this love he couldn’t name? Time would tell, and those two days stretched long, a restless quiet where her name—Nayantara—would haunt him, a storm he couldn’t shake.

Chapter 10

The night pressed hard on the cottage's cracked window, rattling with the forest's restless groan—a sound that'd followed him for years, cutting deeper now in the quiet. Shri slumped in his old chair, whisky in hand, its glow flickering in the lantern light as his shaky grip wavered. His mind jerked to now, snapping from a past that stuck like wet dirt—Nayantara's hazel-gold eyes, her fingers on that amber gem, her goodbye 28 years back when she left his cabin. Why'd his head keep circling there, to a time he'd buried under work and miles?

He set the glass down with a soft clink, the burn fading, and grabbed the phone—a bulky landline, cord twisted, his only link where cell signals died. His fingers paused, then dialed Ani's cell, the whirl loud before static crackled and Ani's voice cut in, bright but tired. "Hey, Shri—yeah, back from the conference. How's it there?"

Shri leaned back, chair creaking, voice low despite the ache. "Alright. Pratap's rituals are done—everyone's settling in." He stopped, Pratap's death hitting heavier—a truth he'd faced in the chants two days ago, pulling him back to this place he'd ditched 28 years ago.

"You coming here?" Shri asked, hope sparking through the buzz.

"Yeah, in a week—Neha and the kids won't let me go easy," Ani said, firm but flat. "Ads are out too—hope we get someone soon." He'd posted them before the US trip—calling for a doc brave or broke enough to take Shivalkot, to free Shri from this job he never wanted back.

"Good," Shri said, softer. "My cell's as good as dead here—gotta go farther to get connection. You've got the landline. Call when you head out."

"Sure, Shri," Ani said, a faint grin in his voice, a lifeline in the dark. "Take care—we'll get you out soon."

Shri chuckled, easing the quiet. The line clicked off, dial tone humming as he set it down, fingers lingering. He grabbed the whisky, swirling it, Ani's words replaying—a tie to Bombay, a life left behind—but it didn't touch the loneliness eating him. Too empty here, where her glow once lit everything. If only... Her name—Nayantara—hovered, a whisper he couldn't say, her amber gem flashing in his head.

A loud knock jolted him up—Ramesh's voice slid through. "Saheb, food's ready. Come on."

"Be there in a sec," Shri called, steadying as he stood, glass down with a clink. He smoothed his kurta, worn but neat, and headed out, the hall dim, forest moaning outside.

The canteen glowed faint, tables scattered with orderlies. Ramesh sat in the corner, hunched over a tray, waiting. Shri slid in across, chair creaking, and Ramesh served—hot rotis, dal with spice, greens from a banged-up pot. Spoons clinked as they ate, talk turning to Pratap's rituals two days back—a heavy wave since he passed. "Everyone felt it," Ramesh said, low and rough. "Loss hit hard—patients, staff, even tribals showed up."

Shri nodded, chewing slow, food grounding the hurt. "Ani's here in a few days," he said, shifting gears. "Back from the conference—week tops."

Ramesh's eyes sparked faint. "Good—he'll liven it up." They ate quiet for a bit, canteen noise soft, till Ramesh's voice dropped, heavy. "If Mrigendra was stronger, he'd have been there—those rituals meant everything to him, to them."

The name stung Shri, a door he'd dodged since coming back—Mrigendra, Nayantara, that hamlet a scar unopened for 28 years. Ramesh cracked it, and Shri couldn't duck. He swallowed, voice tight. "What's up with the chief?"

Ramesh paused, spoon hanging, eyes far off. “He’s not chief anymore. Barely leaves the hamlet—strength’s been slipping...” He faded, years in the quiet, but Shri cut in, dodging deeper. “I think I saw Veerendra at the funeral—with some others.”

“His younger son?” Ramesh asked, brow creasing, spoon down.

“Yeah,” Shri nodded, picturing Veerendra—lean, like Gajendra but quieter—among the mourners.

“Oh, damn,” Ramesh said, eyes wide, memory hitting. “That reminds me—Veerendra left a bag for you with me.”

Shri’s heart skipped, a chill cutting the whisky’s heat. “When?”

“Two days after you went away,” Ramesh said, voice low, regret creeping.

“Forgot it—almost 30 years now.”

“Where’s it at?” Shri asked, sharper than he meant, a sudden need gripping—Veerendra, Nayantara, a piece of that time.

Ramesh shook his head, guilt lining his face. “Gotta search, Saheb—too long. Maybe the shed, or...”

“Forget it,” Shri snapped, faking calm, spoon tight in his grip. The bag—what’d it hold after all this?—felt like a trap he couldn’t face, a link to her he’d cut.

Ramesh opened his mouth, curious, ready to push, but a nurse broke in, voice sharp. “Doctor Saheb, quick—patient’s in bad shape, needs you.”

Shri stood fast, relief hitting, spoon clattering. “On it,” he said, steady now, glad to run—from the talk, from the ghosts Ramesh stirred. He followed her to the ward, canteen warmth gone, forest moaning after him, Nayantara’s glow flickering back—a shadow he couldn’t shake.

Young Shri stepped from the ward, antiseptic biting the air as he hit the dim hall. The hospital's hum—nurses whispering, beds creaking—faded as he reached his desk. Charts waited, and he sat, pen flying, notes tight and sharp. His mind pulled back—to the ward, Nayantara's echo lurking. He shook it off, finishing as Ani's car rumbled outside, gravel crunching.

He stopped, glancing at the cracked window, dusty light spilling in. He waited, charts ignored, till Ani popped in, grinning wide. "Ready to go out?" Ani asked, mischief in his tone.

Shri nodded, smiling faint. "Just done. Let's check on Pratap."

They headed to Pratap's cabin, air thick with chai and tobacco. Pratap looked up, eyes crinkling. "Both troublemakers at once," he said, laughing deep, Ani and Shri joining in.

Ani leaned on the door, grin growing. "It's the weekend—slept in, then heard there's a fair in a village. That true?"

Pratap's laugh eased, knowing. "Yeah, every few months in one spot or another. Went once—crowds, junk not worth buying."

Shri's brow lifted, curious. "Why's that?"

Pratap shrugged, dry with an edge. "Nothing's real, food's off, and I'm too old for the Ferris." He eyed them. "But go if you want—no emergencies today, I hope. Just get back quick."

Ani's eyes sparked, kid-like. "Perfect. I'll show Shri what these fairs are really like."

Pratap waved them off, grinning. "Fine—but don't dawdle."

Ani turned to Shri, buzzing. "Change into casuals—meet me in fifteen."

"Cool," Shri said, a thrill cutting his unease. "See you."

The ride was rough—dusty, bumpy, the road a mess shaking them up. The car’s AC kept the heat out, fields and forest blurring past.

It wasn’t far. Stepping out, Shri gaped—the fair was huge, alive, swallowing the clearing. Tents of old canvas and bright silk popped up messy, flapping in the breeze. Lanterns hung on bent poles, glowing soft even in daylight, promising night magic. The air buzzed—smoky corn, sharp meat, earthy animals penned off.

People packed the dirt paths, voices blending—laughter, haggling, songs. Women in red and yellow saris moved smooth, baskets of mats and jars, bangles ringing. Kids ran wild, dust flying, yelling over the noise. A Ferris wheel creaked at the center, rusty but spinning high. A carousel turned slow nearby, wooden horses chipped but bold.

Shri froze, breath short, taking it in. “Didn’t see this coming,” he muttered, lost in the roar.

Ani slapped his shoulder, grinning big. “Just the start—let’s jump in.”

They waded into the crowd, dirt and straw crunching underfoot. Stalls lined up, vendors shouting—cloths, brass lamps, bone and wood trinkets shining. One caught Shri—a shaky table with wooden figures, rough, ember eyes blank. His pulse jumped—echoes of Pratap’s idol, his nightmare. A chill hit, heat fading.

Ani tracked his look, casual but sharp. “Those? Tribal charms—keep spirits off. They’re everywhere here. Want one?”

Shri shook his head, forcing a thin smile. “Nah—just threw me off.”

Ani shrugged, pulling them to a tea stall, steam rising, cloves and ginger cutting the chaos. They sipped from clay cups, hot and rough, and for a second, the fair’s beat—drums, frying chips, laughter—drowned Shri’s nerves.

“There...” Ani said, grin back, cutting the noise.

Shri blinked, heart kicking. “Who?”

Ani nodded at a worn stall, red fabric frayed like an old tale. “The palmist—villagers swear he’s dead-on.”

Shri’s eyes landed on him—old, lined deep, eyes sharp like they saw past now. Silver charms clinked at his neck, stall full of stones, feathers, bones glowing under lanterns. A small crowd watched, quiet, a bit scared.

Shri’s gut twisted, dread sparking. “A palmist?” he said, doubtful.

Ani slapped his back, laughing loud. “Come on—he’s legit. Never wrong, they say.”

They joined the group, the palmist sending off a pale girl, her fate heavy. Their turn hit, and his sharp eyes locked on Ani, recognizing him. “Saheb, back?” he growled, rough as dirt. “Good—but your palm’s done.”

Ani grinned, shaking his head. “Not me—him.” He pushed Shri up, mischief full. “Go, Shri—he’s good.”

Shri froze, feet stuck, the palmist’s stare pinning him—too deep, too knowing, urging him to bolt. But Ani’s push won. He stepped up, breath tight, hand out, palm open.

The palmist took it, fingers rough but sure, tracing lines slow. Quiet hit, fair fading, his eyes digging in. Then he spoke, low, weaving into the night.

“Smart... sharp as a knife,” he said, thumb on a line to Shri’s wrist.

“Climbed high yourself—respect follows, grows more.” He paused, brow creasing at another mark. “Work... big. Money, yeah, but honor too.”

Then his face went white, lantern catching a twitch in his jaw. His fingers stopped on a jagged line—dark, messy, slipping away. He squinted, like it

wouldn't clear, breath catching, eyes darting off, hands shaky. Shri felt cold creep in, Ani shifting, both catching the old man's nerves.

Ani jumped in, lightening it. "What about marriage, kids—see that?" He tossed it out, easing the strain.

The palmist's lips thinned, faking calm. "Nothing clear... just a shadow," he muttered, but it rang fake, dread coiling underneath.

Shri's pulse raced, voice low. "What's there?"

The palmist shook his head fast, looking away. "Nothing, Saheb—too blurry." But his tremble sold the lie, air thick with questions.

The palmist breathed out, grabbing it, voice steadying. "Marriage..." He traced near Shri's heart, calmer. "Messy, Saheb. One, two, none—can't tell, too twisted." He let go, faint smile sorry, shadow still in his eyes.

Shri laughed thin, hiding the shake. "No problem," he said, shoving a note in the palmist's hand. The man took it, nodding quiet thanks, fingers lingering like he didn't want to let go.

Ani pulled him off, cheery but forced. "Don't sweat it—half's just show." Shri's smile was weak, the palmist's words twisting—too complicated. What fate was that tangled?

They moved on, crowd pulling them. Shri tried shaking it, eyeing stalls—potters shaping clay, weavers threading color—but the palmist stuck, an echo he couldn't kill. Then a flash—ochre fabric, amber glinting through the crowd. His heart stopped, feet locked. Nayantara? It was quick, half-lost, but that color—her tunic—yanked him hard.

He spun, eyes cutting through faces, but it vanished, leaving an amber spark that died fast. Shri's breath sped, pulse loud. Her? Or his head playing tricks, pulling shadows from want and fear? A chill sank in, Shivalkot's wild stare pressing from every corner.

Chapter 11

By the time Shri and Ani got back to the hospital, the afternoon sat still, sun dipping low, throwing gold flecks across the dusty courtyard. Lunch was a memory, the usual buzz down to a hush. One case broke it—a woman in her forties, face lined, lay in the ward, breathing rough but steady. She'd come in sick from fair food, guts wrecked by too much. Dr. Pratap had started her care, and now nurses watched her pull through.

In the canteen, Dr. Pratap joined them, his calm vibe anchoring the day's leftover strain. The room hummed soft—worn tables scratched up, steel plates clinking low. He slid into a chair, eyeing Shri and Ani with tired warmth. “Hope you didn't eat at that fair,” he said, teasing with a sharp edge.

Ani shook his head, grinning fast. “No.”

Shri raised a brow, curious past his exhaustion. “That's what got her—the fair stuff?”

Dr. Pratap nodded, fingers tapping light. “Ate way too much at the fair yesterday—went overboard. She's feeling better now.”

Ani laughed, bright and free, cutting the weight. “Good we skipped food, hit a palmist instead.”

Shri's gut twitched, the old man's stare flashing back. “Please,” he muttered, scoffing it off. “Guy was fake.”

Dr. Pratap's lips quirked, mischief in his eyes. “The one who read your love and work?”

Ani grinned big. “That's him.”

Shri leaned in, half-doubting, half-hooked. “You never said what he saw for you.”

Ani stretched back, casual but smug. “More school, engagement this year.”

Dr. Pratap chuckled, deep and warm. “Both happened.”

Shri’s eyes narrowed, unease stirring. “Couldn’t read mine,” he said, annoyance slipping out.

Dr. Pratap’s look softened, voice easy. “Not every palm’s clear—or meant to be.”

Shri nodded slight, tension easing. Just a sham, he thought, switching gears. “So, Ani, what’s your fiancée up to?”

Ani’s smile went soft, eyes glowing. “Neha’s a journalist—met her at Dad’s conference.”

Shri smirked. “Oh, a love tale.”

Ani grinned back, a quick spark.

Dr. Pratap cleared his throat, voice dropping serious. “By the way, Mrigendra’s trip’s tomorrow.”

Shri’s heart jumped—disappointment and relief mixing. “When?” he asked, keeping cool.

Dr. Pratap met his eyes, steady. “Morning. So that we can be back early.” He turned to Ani, trusting. “Can you hold it here?”

Ani nodded sharp, voice bright. “Don’t you worry.”

Talk faded, the canteen’s warmth wrapping them. But under Shri’s calm, a restless wave rolled. Tomorrow loomed, big with unknowns he couldn’t pin.

Next morning, Dr. Pratap and Shri headed to the hamlet, hatchback rumbling through Shivalkot’s wild grip. It was packed—bandages, antiseptics, antibiotics for Mrigendra. The forest closed in deep, trees tall,

branches weaving a dark roof. Sun cut through in thin lines, flashing on the dash, while the road turned rough, jolting them hard.

Shri looked out, the shifting view pulling him. He glanced at Dr. Pratap. “How do you navigate this? No signs anywhere.”

Dr. Pratap’s eyes crinkled, smiling faint, hands sure. “Gets easy once you know it. Watch the trees—the variety changes every few hundred meters. See it?”

Shri squinted at the green blur. “Not yet—will though.”

Dr. Pratap’s voice warmed. “Forest gives clues if you look.” He nodded ahead. “After the bend, keep the stream left.”

Shri locked in as they turned. Trees split, showing a shiny stream over smooth rocks, its song threading the air. Hills lined the path, green with wildflowers swaying. It felt hidden, alive with sharp green and a quiet that hit deep.

For an hour, they tracked the stream, trail tightening as the car rattled. The forest thinned, smoke curling up, thatched roofs poking out. Near the hamlet, a huge statue rose—Vajradhar, dark stone, guarding the way. Worn but solid, its carved eyes held a quiet power pulsing in the air.

Shri’s breath caught, a chill running up. The statue felt real—protection and riddle. Dr. Pratap stopped the car, and Shri stepped out, dirt soft under his boots. Woodsmoke and wet earth hit his lungs, the stream humming far off. He glanced at Vajradhar, its shadow stretching, stirring something he couldn’t name.

Two tribal kids, lookouts, saw the car first. They grinned big, running up barefoot, yelling loud, voices bouncing. The hamlet woke, excitement spreading. Gajendra came out, broad and nodding warm, steadying Shri.

His pulse kicked, chest tight with hope. He clenched his jaw, bracing, and followed Dr. Pratap and Gajendra to the chief's place, eyes hunting her.

Mrigendra sat on a cot outside, sun easing his rough face. He moved to stand as they neared, but Dr. Pratap got there, hand gentle on his shoulder. "Stay down, Chief—not all there yet."

Mrigendra's lips twitched. "I'm good."

Dr. Pratap raised a brow, dry but kind. "Since when are you the doc?"

The chief laughed rough, then gave in. "Fine, Doctor—your call," he said, easing back with a grin.

He waved off the growing tribals. "Let 'em rest—later." They split fast, back to the hamlet's flow.

Gajendra dragged over bamboo stools, scraping dirt. Dr. Pratap and Mrigendra talked health, Shri's eyes roamed—kids in dust, elders by fire, shadows between huts—searching for Nayantara. Her absence bit.

Dr. Pratap opened the hatchback, and with Gajendra, they grabbed supplies. The docs checked Mrigendra—bandages off, new ones on, glad his recovery stuck. His grip was stronger, eyes clear. Done, they sat on stools, talk slowing. But Shri's gaze drifted, restless for her.

Then, like a pull, he turned slightly—and there she was. In the window, Nayantara's shape glowed, hazel-gold eyes on him. Shri's breath stopped, heat rising. Caught looking, shame stung—till he saw her face. No blame, just warm openness, spiking his pulse. Their eyes locked, sharp and silent, the hamlet fading. She slipped away shy.

Mrigendra called for snacks, snapping it. Shri blinked, heart racing, as Nayantara stepped out after forever, tray in hand. She moved smooth, tunic brushing dirt, setting it on a rough table. Tea and fruit smelled good, but Shri didn't care. She was near, undoing him.

She stayed by the door, quiet, close.

Gajendra coughed. “Hey, Doctor, we’ve got a celebration on full moon night—thanking Vajradhar and you all for saving the chief.”

Nayantara’s eyes flicked to Shri, a quiet invite shining, face still.

Mrigendra added, “Want Dr. Kashyap too—heard he showed up and worked hard that day.”

Dr. Pratap nodded, thinking. “I’ll tell him, Chief, but hospital needs a doc.”

Shri’s chest squeezed, heavy. “I’ll stay—handle it,” he said, steady but sinking. “You and Ani go.”

Nayantara’s face froze. She turned fast, tunic whispering, gone inside, steps quick with feeling. Shri’s gut dropped—did he mess up?

Silence hit, airtight. Dr. Pratap’s eyes lingered on the empty door, then slid to Shri. “Thanks, Shri,” he said, even but loaded. “That’s commitment.”

After stiff small talk, they got up to go. Shri’s eyes hit the window—Nayantara there, pale, giving a fragile smile. It stretched endless to him, locking him in her pull.

Then it hit—if he stayed, he’d spill everything. He broke off, rushing after Dr. Pratap to the car, throwing quick goodbyes to Mrigendra and the tribals, voice calm, mind wild.

The hatchback bumped along the forest track, engine growling under thick trees. Shadows flicked across the windshield, light breaking through old branches whispering secrets. Inside, the air hung heavy, full of unsaid stuff. Shri sat stiff, staring out, green blur not wiping Nayantara—her pale face, her fast exit after his dumb offer. His fingers twitched on his knee, circles showing the storm inside.

Dr. Pratap's voice cut through, low, careful. "Shri... you've been quiet since we left."

Shri flinched, pulled back. He blinked, throat tight. "Just tired, sir," he mumbled, words weak, falling apart.

Dr. Pratap's eyes flicked over, sharp but warm, back to the road. "More than that, right?" His tone was soft, pushing gentle, but knowing, pinning Shri. "Saw how you looked at her—and how she stopped when you spoke."

Heat climbed Shri's neck, gut knotting. He shifted, seat creaking loud. "Didn't mean to upset her," he said, voice thin, fraying. "Just thought... hospital can't be empty."

Dr. Pratap nodded slow, hands steady. "You were helping—I get it." He let it sit, tires humming like a pulse. "But it's not just the hospital, is it? Something's up—with you and Nayantara."

Shri's heart slammed, fists clenching. He could dodge, lie—but truth pressed hard. "I... like her, sir," he blurted, raw, unguarded. "Don't know what she thinks. Barely talked."

Dr. Pratap's face eased, eyes still digging. "How often you seen her?"

Shri swallowed, mouth dry. "Just... hospital, her goodbye, today." His voice cracked, breaking a bit.

Dr. Pratap's brow creased, worry showing. "Sure it's not... just a quick thing?"

Fire sparked in Shri, nerves flaring. "I'm not a kid, sir," he snapped, jaw tight. "It's real."

Dr. Pratap breathed slow, grip loosening. "Not doubting you, Shri," he said, steady, solid. "But tribals—they're different. Honor's big, especially for daughters." He glanced over, firm but kind. "If you mean it, respect that."

Shri nodded, words sinking deep. “I do, sir,” he said quiet, steadier. “She matters—more than I can say. Wanna do it right.”

A small smile hit Dr. Pratap’s lips, easing his face. The car’s air lightened, tension slipping. “I’ll back you if it comes up,” he said, almost sly. “For now, the secret...it’s ours.”

Shri let out a shaky breath, held too long. The forest rolled on, shadows alive with chance. The road curved ahead, unknown but less heavy, his confession carving room for hope.

Chapter 12

Back at the hamlet, dusk draped the air in a warm amber haze, the faint crackle of the cooking fire threading through the stillness. Outside the cottage, Mrigendra rose from his cot with a low groan, his weathered frame trembling as he tested his strength. A slight limp marked each step as he shuffled toward the doorway, his cane tapping the packed earth floor—a steady beat against the fading light. Nayantara stood by the hearth inside, her slender hands stirring a pot of simmering stew, steam rising in delicate curls like fleeting spirits. But her eyes were far off, clouded with a storm she couldn't pin down, her motions stiff, as if her soul had wandered beyond the wooden walls.

Mrigendra stopped at the threshold, his gaze settling on her—his youngest, his pride, now a shadow of her usual fire. Old and weathered, he'd seen enough of life's silent struggles to spot the weight dragging at her heart. He moved forward, limp more noticeable, aiming for the rough wooden chair by the table. Nayantara's head jerked up at the sound, her breath catching as she saw him waver. The spoon clattered to the floor as she rushed over, hands shaking as she steadied him. "Baba, you should've called me!" Her voice cracked, sharp with worry, guiding him down. "I'd have brought you in."

He waved a gnarled hand, a faint smile warming his face, though his eyes glinted with quiet knowing. "It's alright, little one. I'm feeling stronger..." His words faded, softening. "But you—I can't say the same."

Nayantara froze, hands still on his shoulders. "Me?" she whispered, brow creasing, confusion flickering in her hazel-gold eyes. "What's wrong with me?"

Mrigendra tilted his head, his stare piercing yet gentle. “You tell me,” he said, voice low and solid, like the ground they stood on. “Since the hospital, you’ve been lost in shadows. What’s pulling at you?”

She stepped back to the hearth, grabbing the spoon like a lifeline, her fingers unsteady. “Nothing, Baba,” she said too fast, voice fragile. “I’m just... off today. I’ll be fine by morning.”

He watched her, firelight tracing the deep lines of his face—years of grief and love etched there. His chest tightened, missing the wife who’d once filled these gaps, now gone. “Listen, my heart,” he said, voice softening to a near-plea. “I know you’d have told your mother some things easier. She’s not here, and I’ve done my best—God knows—to raise you three right.” He leaned in, voice dropping, raw with care. “Tell me what’s eating at you. Maybe I can help, maybe not—but you’ll feel lighter.”

Nayantara’s hands stilled, the spoon slipping into the pot as her shoulders sagged. Her eyes shimmered, caught between fear and yearning. “Baba...” she started, voice a whisper, breaking under the weight. “I don’t know how to say it—or what to say.”

Mrigendra’s lips curved into a teasing smile, mischief sparking in his tired eyes. “If it’s that doctor, I’ll get it, dear.”

Her breath hitched like thunder struck. With a soft cry, she threw herself into his arms, trembling as she pressed her face to his chest. His warmth wrapped her up, his heartbeat steady under her cheek. “You think no one saw?” he murmured, teasing but tender, his love a quiet force.

She gripped him tighter, arms locking around him like he could hold off her chaos. “I don’t know,” she whispered, muffled and shy against his tunic.

He chuckled, rough with affection, and gently eased her back, guiding her to face him. “Does he feel the same?” he asked, voice soft but digging, eyes searching hers.

Nayantara turned her head, cheeks flushing, biting her lip. “I don’t know,” she said, barely audible, a shy ache twisting his heart.

He reached out, calloused hand brushing her arm. “Come here, sweetheart,” he said, nodding to the stool beside him. She hesitated, then covered the pot, steam curling up like a sigh. She sank onto the stool, hands clasped tight, eyes down.

Mrigendra leaned in, voice low and serious. “Do you see how different your worlds are?”

Her eyes lifted, meeting his with quiet sadness, and she nodded, the weight settling heavy.

“You’ve felt it already,” he went on, voice thick with a father’s grief. “His hospital—his duty—it’s his life. I respect him for it, truly. But even if you stood with him as his wife—and it’s a big if—you’d always be second to that. Could you take it?”

Nayantara’s shoulders shook, eyes glistening with tears she held back. “It’d be okay, Baba,” she said, voice cracking but fierce. “He’s a doctor—patients should come first. And anyway...” She faltered, breath catching. “It’s so far off. I don’t even know what he wants.”

Mrigendra’s heart twisted at her brave front. “That’s alright, sweet,” he murmured, soothing. “We’ll know soon enough.” He pulled her close, cradling her head against his chest, arms tight like he could shield her from the unknown. Her quiet sobs muffled against him, the fire’s crackle a frail echo to the storm inside.

Back in his cabin, Shri slumped into his chair, paperwork spread out in neat stacks. He’d finished it—charts, notes, prescriptions—but the day’s weight clung like damp air. He leaned back, eyes closing against the worn leather. The day flickered in pieces: Nayantara’s shy gaze, her quick exit, the pull he couldn’t shake. Matters of the heart don’t stay buried long, he thought,

the idea cutting sharp. She was a chief's daughter, her world scarred by village greed—city folk like him were just outsiders, all shine and no trust. Worse, he didn't even know if she cared. A mess, raw and knotted, but Shri didn't back down from fights. This—whatever it was—he'd face head-on. Still, doubt chewed at him, a quiet sting under his grit.

A knock broke through. Ani swept in, grin brightening the dim room, flopping onto the couch with a sigh. "So, how was the hamlet?" he asked, voice light, curious.

Shri forced a smile, thin and fragile. "Fine. Chief's getting stronger. It's... a paradise—hard to put into words."

Ani laughed, free and easy. "Heard that before. Pratap says they invited us for the full moon thing. Too bad you're out—I could've stayed."

Shri shook his head, voice steady but distant. "Nah, it's cool. They wanted you there."

"Hmm," Ani said, grin stretching. "Think I'll bring Neha. She'd eat it up—loves snapping photos. She'll catch every bit." His chuckle filled the space, sharp against Shri's quiet.

"Good call," Shri said, a flicker of warmth breaking through. "Tell her tonight—full moon's close."

Ani jumped up, clapping Shri's shoulder hard as he passed. "Doing it now." The pat lingered, a quick tie of friendship, then he was gone, door clicking shut.

Shri stood slow, chair creaking like his heavy heart. He headed for his ward rounds, corridors dimming as dusk hit Shivalkot. Antiseptic stung the air, mixing with the earthy wet of rain-soaked fields outside. Patients lay under thin blankets, breaths soft, trusting him, while the outpatient hum faded as

twilight took over. His steps dragged, fighting exhaustion and the thoughts clawing him—Nayantara, always her.

Lately, he'd buried himself in work, a shield against the ache her memory brought. From dawn to starlight, he dove into the hospital—wards, clinic, Pratap's thick medical books. In his cramped cabin, he'd trace the pages, finger shaking, chasing comfort in the words. But too often, her hazel-gold eyes would flash, his focus breaking. He'd slam the book shut, jaw clenched, and dive back into tasks, the storm inside never settling.

Lost in that fog, he'd missed Neha's arrival. Ani had sent his car to grab her from the airport, and by the time Shri left the clinic—head full of cases—she was there, a burst of light in the gloom. He found them in the canteen, her laugh ringing clear. Neha stood out—sleek bob, sharp city edge, tailored kurta and jeans, designer bag slung loose. Polished nails, boardroom vibe, but her smile was warm, eyes friendly. Ani leaned beside her, grin easy, while Dr. Pratap sat across, steady as ever.

Shri stepped in, brushing off fatigue, offering a worn but real smile. Neha's eyes hit him, grin growing as she stuck out a hand. "Ani's been talking you up. Sounds like you two click."

"He's too kind," Shri said, shaking her hand, voice soft with weariness.

"You got a good one."

Neha laughed, bright, her gaze sliding to Ani with soft warmth. "True. They say it's all set up there," she said, tilting her head skyward.

Dr. Pratap's voice broke in, calm but firm. "Sit, Shri."

Shri dropped into the chair, exhaustion sinking deep. The canteen lady shuffled over, slippers brushing tiles in a quiet beat, setting down a steaming chai. Its spiced scent rose, warm and rich, curling around him like a soft hug. The heat seeped into his hands, easing the day's edges for a moment.

He sipped, chai warming him, coaxing a spark through his gloom. He glanced at Neha, a faint smile tugging, pride in his tired eyes. “Ani said you’re into photography. This place’ll spoil you—beauty everywhere.”

She patted her camera bag, grinning. “Brought extra rolls—won’t miss a shot.”

Ani chuckled, arm brushing hers. “Start with us—Shivalkot’s three musketeers.” His laugh bounced, light, but Shri’s smile stayed thin, mind on a moonlit night he’d miss.

Neha’s eyes softened, catching his shadow. “Thanks for letting me and Ani crash at your cottage. Hope Pratap’s not a pain at his.”

Laughter broke out, real and brief, cutting the quiet. Ani and Neha stood, hands brushing as they left for the cottage, their closeness a silent pang against Shri’s aloneness. The canteen hushed, just cup clinks and night murmurs. Shri stared into his chai, steam swirling like his thoughts, while Dr. Pratap’s steady gaze lingered, heavy with knowing.

For two days, Neha dove into her photography, camera always out as she and Ani roamed the woods, chasing Shivalkot’s wild heart. She was hooked—jagged peaks stabbing the sky, streams glinting silver, forests thick with green life. She snapped it all, excitement spilling as she showed them—wildflowers sharp, sun bleeding gold over hills. Shri got pulled in, a faint smile stirring as he saw his world fresh through her lens.

But the full moon celebration crept closer, a hollow ache growing in Shri’s chest. Dr. Pratap packed the car slow—shawl, carved box, gifts for the chief’s family, signs of goodwill. “It runs till dawn,” he said, voice low and warm. “Back by noon. Don’t push too hard.”

“Don’t worry, sir,” Shri said, forcing a smile that didn’t reach. “Enjoy it.”

Dr. Pratap's eyes held his, understanding flashing. "We'll miss you."

Shri nodded, voice tight. "Thanks, sir. Maybe another full moon."

He stood in the courtyard as dusk thickened, watching the car rumble off, taillights fading into the forest's dark grip. Silence pressed hard, unyielding, and for a moment, he let himself picture it—standing by her, moonlight on her face. Duty held him here, though, and the longing sank deep, a quiet cut that wouldn't close.

Chapter 13

Night had nearly fallen when Dr. Pratap, Ani, and Neha rolled into the tribal hamlet, the car's growl fading into the forest's song—crickets buzzing, leaves rustling, an owl's distant hoot cutting through. The full moon hung heavy and low, a silver disc spilling light over woven roofs and dirt paths, wrapping everything in a ghostly glow. Torches lined the trail, their flames flickering like restless spirits ushering the newcomers in.

The tribals waited, dark shapes against the moonlit sky. Mrigendra stepped up, his tall frame radiating quiet power, his face splitting into a warm, relieved grin. "Thought you'd gotten lost," he said, voice thick with jest and truth. "Was about to send my boys after you."

Neha climbed out, breath catching as she drank in the scene—shadows twisting, air rich with woodsmoke and wildflowers. "Oh, we wouldn't miss this for anything," she said, excitement trembling in her words.

Dr. Pratap chuckled, eyes crinkling. "That's Neha—Dr. Kashyap's fiancée."

Mrigendra's smile grew, hands pressing together in a namaste, a deep, respectful bow. "Welcome, all of you. Come, we've got a spot ready."

Dr. Pratap turned to Neha, gesturing gently. "Neha, meet Mrigendra—the hamlet's chief. A good friend and a generous host."

Neha smiled, curiosity sparking. "An honor to meet you, Chief."

Mrigendra's weathered face softened, eyes kind but firm. "The honor's ours, Neha. Glad you're here for this night."

He led them to a clearing decked out for guests—woven mats and cushions circled by torches, their golden light warm and inviting.

Nayantara stepped from the shadows then, a vision carrying a plate piled with bright powders and soft petals. Her tunic shimmered with tribal

stitches, beads in her hair catching the light like stars. She moved with purpose, dipping her fingers into the powder, brushing a tikka onto each forehead—a blessing, a welcome. When she reached Neha, their eyes locked, and Neha’s smile was soft. “Beautiful...”

Mrigendra beamed, pride glowing. “My daughter, Nayantara.”

“Beautiful... like her name,” Neha said, voice real and warm. Nayantara’s cheeks flushed, a shy smile tugging as she stepped back to set the plate down, her heart skipping under the praise.

They sank onto the cushions, the night’s chill brushing their skin as tribals in vibrant fabrics—feathers and beads flashing—moved among them, offering clay cups of a local brew. It gleamed in the torchlight, sharp and earthy, a puzzle Neha couldn’t solve.

She paused, fingers hovering. Mrigendra caught it, leaning in with a gentle grin. “You won’t want to skip this, Neha. Every girl and woman here loves it—it’s our joy, our spirit in a sip.”

Neha’s lips quirked, and she lifted the cup, warmth seeping into her hands. She sipped, eyes widening at the sweet-spice burst, tingling as it slid down. “Oh,” she breathed, hooked. She glanced at Nayantara nearby and patted the cushion. “Sit with me.”

Nayantara hesitated, then nodded gracefully, settling beside her, hands folded, gaze warm but guarded.

As night deepened, the celebration began with a sacred hush. Tribals formed a wide circle around an altar where Vajradhar’s statue loomed—dark stone softened by moonlight, stern yet serene. A priest stepped out, robes whispering, feathers in his headdress glinting. He raised his arms, his chant rising, weaving through the trees like a spell.

Neha, camera in her lap, leaned to Mrigendra, voice low with respect. “Is it okay to take photos? This is too stunning to miss.”

Mrigendra turned, smiling warm. “Go on, Neha. It’s a night to be remembered.”

She nodded, lifting her camera, shutter clicking soft as she caught it—the priest’s reach, flame flickers, bowed heads.

The tribals joined, voices swelling in a deep, haunting harmony—a hymn for the chief’s recovery, the earth’s gifts. Offerings came forward: baskets of mangoes and guavas, marigold and jasmine garlands, pots of shimmering oils. Each was placed at the statue’s base with care, incense thickening the air with devotion.

Ani leaned to Neha, whispering, “Thanking Vajradhar—for Mrigendra, the harvest.”

Dr. Pratap nodded, eyes on the altar. “Their guardian. This is holy to them.”

The prayers eased, and the mood flipped—drums kicked in, thudding like a pulse, fast and fierce. Young men stepped from the edge, bodies painted in ochre and white swirls, eyes blazing. They circled loose, then erupted—leaps cutting the sky, kicks slashing the air, spins blurring into shadows. The crowd roared, clapping with the beat, energy snapping like the flames.

Neha’s camera flew up, catching their raw power. “Unreal,” she murmured, voice drowned in the noise.

Ani grinned, nudging her. “Worth it, right?”

The display peaked—a warrior flipped midair, landing crouched, chest heaving, applause exploding. The drums didn’t quit, softening to a flowing beat, calling the women.

In crimson and gold skirts, bells jingling at wrists and ankles, the tribal women stepped up. Their dance told tales—hands arcing love and loss, feet pounding harvest rhythms, graceful but wild. Firelight threw their shadows wide, a living weave of spirit.

Nayantara stood sudden, pulled to the circle like a magnet. She joined, tunic swirling, face alive with passion, shedding her shy shell. Neha watched, caught, as Nayantara blended in, delicate yet fierce.

“She’s amazing,” Neha whispered to Ani, who nodded, eyes soft.

Dr. Pratap leaned in, voice low. “Dance is their tongue—honoring ancestors, the land.”

The dance flowed on, and Nayantara returned, breathless, glowing. Neha turned to her. “That was beautiful. It’s in your blood.”

Nayantara smiled, eyes bright. “Thank you. It’s... us.” Her gaze flicked to the path out, a shadow of longing crossing her.

Neha tilted her head, curious. “Ever wonder what’s out there? Beyond this?”

Nayantara’s smile flickered, voice soft. “Sometimes. But this is home.” She paused, fingers tightening, gripping something unseen.

Mrigendra, watching from across, caught it. His eyes warmed with pride, but worry flickered—he knew the pull of dreams, the world beyond.

Kids dashed in next, laughing loud, mimicking the warriors with wild flair, tumbling in playful mess. Adults chuckled, and Neha snapped shots, her joy catching.

After hours of relentless celebration, the energy ebbed, leaving them weary but full. Tribals emerged with a final gift—dinner, a sacred welcome. The spread stunned: wild boar roasted crisp, glazed with honey and herbs; rice

steamed in banana leaves, earthy and warm; lentils thick with forest greens. Flatbreads, edges charred, sat by fiery chutneys and tart berries, colors popping in the torchlight. Jars of cloudy brew gleamed, promising a bittersweet close.

Nayantara moved among them, graceful, serving with steady hands, tunic brushing dirt. She set rice before Dr. Pratap, eyes down but sharp, a quiet thread in the night.

Mrigendra, cross-legged beside Dr. Pratap, tilted his head, voice warm yet wistful. “Wish Dr. Shridhar was here. He’d have loved this, wouldn’t he?”

Dr. Pratap glanced at Nayantara, who froze at Shri’s name, hand trembling over a bowl. “Yeah,” he said, gentle but heavy, “he’d have loved it most.”

Nayantara’s eyes gave her away—longing and shy joy pooling under her lashes. She pressed her lips tight, fighting a smile that slipped out, soft and secret, blushing her cheeks. She ducked her head, serving again, but the shift rippled through, impossible to miss.

Neha saw it all, plate in her lap—Nayantara’s pause, the hitch in her breath, the glow at Shri’s name. Her lips curved, city-sharp instincts locking in. So that’s it, she thought, warmth blooming at this quiet love. She glanced at Ani, who raised a brow, but she shook her head, smile deepening.

Nayantara’s secret, safe with her for now.

The feast rolled on, utensils clinking, delight humming. Beneath it, a new thread pulsed—silent, rich, binding them all.

Chapter 14

By the time Dr. Pratap, Ani, and Neha rolled back into Shivalkot, exhaustion hung on them like wet soil after a downpour. The hospital's quiet halls greeted them with a faint hum, broken only by the soft groan of wooden floors. Shri stood there, eyes shadowed with weariness but steady, insisting he'd handle the hospital's load. "Take the day," he said, voice firm but heavy with something unsaid. "Rest up."

By evening, the trio regrouped at the hospital, refreshed from sleep. Shri sat in his cabin, an oil lamp's glow spilling over scattered journals—a flimsy wall against the thoughts churning in his head. Ani strolled in, warmth laced with a sly edge. The hamlet's celebration had peeled back layers he hadn't expected, and he wasn't letting it slide.

"Hey, Shri," Ani said, voice light but eyes keen. "You look like you've been wrestling patients. Go home, kick back."

Shri glanced up, fingers stalling on a journal's edge. "I'm good, Ani. No emergencies—Ramesh covered the clinic. How was the hamlet?"

Ani dropped onto the couch, grin stretching, teasing. "Oh, that? A real wake-up call."

Shri's curiosity sparked, voice lifting despite himself. "Yeah?"

Ani leaned back, milking it. "Never seen anything like it—wild, pure, alive. They missed you. Especially..." He dangled the word, watching Shri close.

Shri's breath caught, heart kicking. "Especially?"

Ani's grin sharpened. "You know—the chief... his sons."

Shri laughed it off, dodging the hook, scared his secret would slip. "Good folks. Chief doing alright now?"

Ani nodded, tone easing, probing. “He’s solid. But his daughter... she seemed off.”

Shri’s pulse jumped, worry breaking through. “What’s wrong with her?”

Ani paused, eyeing Shri with a mix of fun and focus. Then, with a quick flick, he snatched a book and tapped Shri’s head light. “You idiot,” he teased, warm but sharp. “Call me your friend and hide this?”

Shri blinked, caught, a sheepish grin tugging. “Hide what?”

Ani set the book down, face softening, real. “Come on—what’s up with you two?”

Shri’s shoulders slumped, guard dropping. “Ani, it’s nothing firm. I’ve got feelings for her—that’s all.”

Ani leaned in, voice low, sly. “Feels like more’s cooking than you’re saying. But I’ve got your back—Neha too.”

Shri’s eyes widened, heat climbing his neck. “Neha knows?”

Ani chuckled, rich and steady. “Think the whole hamlet’s clued in by now.”

Shri groaned, hands hiding his face. “Oh, no. That’s awful.”

Ani’s hand hit Shri’s shoulder, solid. “Listen—if you both love each other, nothing stops it. Relax. Let it play out.”

Shri looked up, hope flickering in Ani’s gaze. “You think?”

Ani’s grin was sure, bold. “I know. Don’t fight it.”

The cabin quieted, the lamp’s glow catching Shri’s faint smile. For the first time that day, the tightness in his chest eased a bit.

That night, Shri tossed on the narrow cot in Dr. Pratap’s spare room, the thin mattress creaking under him. The oil lamp flickered low, jagged

shadows dancing on the walls where a small Vajradhar statue stood, its stern eyes cutting through the dark. Questions ripped through him like a storm. What if her father and brothers hate me? he thought, chest squeezing. What if they won't let a city outsider marry in? What if they kill it now? The statue stared back, a silent jab at Nayantara's forest roots, her world so far from his. Shri's hands locked together, breath shaky as he whispered a plea into the gloom. Please... let this work.

Morning found Shri a shell—eyes sunken, skin pale, mind fogged with confusion. He dragged himself to breakfast, where Prakash had set out chai steaming, parathas slick with ghee, and curd spiked with cumin. Dr. Pratap, already there, caught the hollow look in Shri's eyes, the faint tremble in his hands as he grabbed the cup.

“You okay, Shri?” Dr. Pratap asked, voice low, steady, worry creasing his brow. “You look rough.”

Shri forced a thin smile, glancing at Prakash clearing a tray. “I'm fine, sir,” he murmured, voice brittle. “Just... a lot on my mind.” His eyes flicked to Dr. Pratap, begging quiet.

Dr. Pratap got it, mind clicking. “Get ready,” he said, calm but firm. “We're leaving soon.”

Shri nodded, eating in stiff bites, taste lost. He slipped to the washroom, cold water splashing his face—a sharp snap against his inner mess.

Dr. Pratap stayed at the table, chai cooling, replaying last night's late talk with Mrigendra. The chief's words lingered—quiet, firm, loaded. This knot was tightening, honor and hope twisting fast.

In Dr. Pratap's cabin, alone, the air thick with old books and antiseptic, he broke it open. “The chief talked to me last night,” he said, deliberate, eyes locking Shri's.

Shri's heart slammed, dread pooling as he stared back. "They don't want to drag this out," Dr. Pratap went on, voice steady, heavy, dropping Shri's stomach.

"So, they're ending it," Shri thought, panic spiking, raw. "God, what've I done?"

Dr. Pratap's brow creased, catching the fear, then shook his head. "They want to talk to you. Face-to-face."

Shri blinked, breath snagging. "Me?"

"Of course," Dr. Pratap said, a faint smile tugging. "Who else?"

Shri's head spun, panic tangling with hope. "I can't face them alone, sir," he stammered, voice breaking.

Dr. Pratap leaned in, gaze firm, kind. "I've done my part, Shri. Now it's yours. If you love her, you'll stand up to them."

Shri went quiet, fists clenching as he fought the words. His eyes hit the window, morning light spilling over Shivalkot's hills, daring him. "You're right," he said finally, voice steadying, resolve cutting through fear. "I've got to face it."

Dr. Pratap nodded, pride glinting. "They're probably on their way. Pull it together—meet it head-on."

Shri exhaled hard, heart racing but jaw set. The cabin closed in, the moment's weight pressing, yet a fire sparked. He'd face whatever came, not a ghost but a man fighting for her.

While Shri worked the clinic, the air outside grew thick. The chief arrived with his sons, footwear thudding on the porch, dust trailing. Dr. Pratap met them with a calm nod, greeting them warm. "Come, sit," he said, leading to Shri's cabin—cramped, stacked with journals, sharp with antiseptic. He

waved Ramesh over. “Chai and biscuits for our guests,” he said, low, firm, then smiled faint at Mrigendra.

Shri stepped in soon after, pulse hammering under his cool front. Sweat beaded from the clinic rush, but his jaw was tight, steady despite shaky hands. Dr. Pratap, chatting with the trio, rose smooth as Shri entered. “Take the seat,” he said, gentle but pointed, adding, “I’ll check patients.” With a knowing look, he left, handing Shri the moment.

Shri breathed deep, air sticking, and gave a warm smile as he sat. “Good to see you all,” he said, steady but nervy. Gajendra and the younger son nodded back, not cold but watchful, curiosity in their eyes. Mrigendra sat tall, commanding yet worn.

“Sorry to drop in,” Mrigendra started, gruff but real, hands on his knees.

Shri shook his head fast. “No bother, Chief. You’re welcome anytime.”

Mrigendra’s eyes sharpened, cutting through. “You know why we’re here.”

Shri swallowed, mouth dry. “I... think it’s about Nayantara,” he said, her name softening his voice, hope clashing with dread.

Mrigendra nodded, face tightening. “Yes, Doctor. This is new for us. Hard. No daughter’s ever married out—not in our history.”

Shri paled, breath thin, nodding silent, bracing for the no he’d dreaded.

But Mrigendra leaned in, voice low, searching. “I want to know what’s in your heart, Shri. What do you feel for her?”

Shri’s eyes widened, thrown. He paused, then let it out, raw. “Chief, I’m no good with words—not a poet. But my feelings... they’re real. Honest. I don’t even know if she feels it back, but I’d never hurt her—ever.”

Mrigendra’s brow furrowed, doubt roughening his tone. “You’re from different worlds. How’s that supposed to work?”

Shri met his gaze, steady past the shake. “If she wants it—if she’s willing—I’ll make it work. I’d do anything for her happiness.”

“She’s young,” Mrigendra shot back, voice firming. “Too young to know love.”

Shri’s jaw clenched, fire sparking. “If she’s old enough to marry, she’s old enough to feel it. And I’ve heard—nothing hides from forest folk for long.”

The words landed bold, sharp. Mrigendra blinked, caught off guard, his stern mask slipping. He glanced at his sons—Gajendra’s eyes widened, the younger one shifting—but they stayed quiet, leaving it to him.

Gajendra coughed, voice low, steady. “She’s our only sister, Doctor Saab. We’ve kept her close—safe. She doesn’t know your world, your ways. She’s simple, happy with little.”

Shri leaned in, earnest, near pleading. “Gajendra, if I wanted more—city flash, big things—why’d I be here? I’m no saint, but this life’s mine—I chose it.”

Gajendra’s eyes narrowed, digging. “What if you change? Pull her to the city later?”

Shri exhaled, voice leveling. “By then, she’d be my wife—my duty, my everything. I’ve got no plans to leave Shivalkot now. But no one knows about tomorrow, Gajendra. I won’t live scared of it.”

Mrigendra’s gaze softened, voice thick. “True... but she’s our heart, Doctor. You can’t understand that.”

Shri’s face eased, respect lacing his words. “I do, Chief—I see it in you, in them. But someday, you’ll have to let her go—to someone. It’s how it goes.”

Mrigendra's mask cracked then—eyes glistening, a father's ache breaking through. He looked away, pulling himself together.

Shri took the gap, voice soft, firm. "Can I ask something, if it's okay?"

Mrigendra nodded, throat tight. "Go on."

"Will she be happy with someone else?" Shri asked, cutting deep, eyes searching.

Mrigendra froze, stunned mute. His mind flashed—Nayantara at the full moon, her quiet hurt without Shri, the dim in her smile. He'd felt it, and the idea of more tore at him. He tried to speak, but nothing came.

"We know so little about you," he said at last, hoarse, sidestepping.

Shri smiled faint, warmth cutting his nerves. "Not much to know, Chief. Simple guy—humble start, scholarships, ended up here. Parents in the city, Dad's knees not too good. Dr. Pratap's my mentor—he knows me through."

Mrigendra's face shifted, relief peeking. "It's only after Pratap's talk last night we came."

Shri dipped his head, grateful. "Thankful for that."

Mrigendra straightened, voice firming. "Now, can we please have a word with Dr. Pratap alone?"

Shri stood, smile steady despite his racing heart. "Sure, Chief. I'll get him—if he's free."

"Thank you," Mrigendra said, eyes holding Shri's, respect and doubt mixing.

Shri stepped out, door clicking shut, heart pounding with hope and fear. He'd faced them—that was something.

Chapter 15

That night, Dr. Pratap's cottage glowed soft under oil lamps, the air thick with damp wood and the fading scent of chai. Shri slumped in a chair, exhaustion carved deep into his frame after a day that had squeezed his heart raw. The chief's visit left him teetering between hope and fear, but he couldn't muster the nerve to ask Dr. Pratap what went down—hoping instead the older man would crack the silence. Ani and Neha slipped in, steps light on the creaky floor, and Dr. Pratap waved Prakash over. “Drinks and snacks,” he said, voice calm but warm. “And clean their cottage after—let them rest tonight.”

Prakash shuffled off, leaving the four alone. Glasses clinked as amber liquid steadied them, its faint sting a quiet tether. Dr. Pratap leaned back, a rare smile tugging his lips. “We've got something worth a toast.”

Shri's heart jumped, a wild burst of joy cutting through his haze. He held his breath, eyes fixed on Dr. Pratap.

“Since Ani and Neha might not know,” Dr. Pratap went on, tone light but measured, “Shri's fallen for the chief's daughter.”

Neha's laugh rang sharp, knowing. “Who says we don't? The tribe's humming with it. You should've seen Nayantara when she heard your name—her face glowed like a Diwali lamp.”

Shri's head whipped to her, then Ani, eyes wide. Ani grinned back, broad and teasing, a quiet cheer in his look.

Dr. Pratap chuckled, easing in. “Well, that clears it up. Despite the odds—tribes and their old ways—the chief's come around. To her wishes... and Shri's.”

Shri let out a shaky breath, relief washing over him like rain on cracked ground. His shoulders eased, a faint smile breaking free.

Ani slapped his back, voice booming with laughter. “Congrats, Shri! Guess we’ve got a tribal doc for good now.”

Dr. Pratap’s eyes glinted. “The chief wants an engagement at the hamlet—if we’re ok.”

Neha leapt in, city energy crackling. “Oh, I’m in—let’s make it fast. I’ve got to bounce back to the city soon.”

Ani nodded, leaning forward. “Yeah, why wait? Moon’s still almost full.”

Shri paused, joy dimming under a sudden weight. “I haven’t told my parents,” he said, quieter, real. “Can’t do it without their okay.”

Dr. Pratap waved it off, steady. “No big deal. Book a trunk call tomorrow—I’ll be there. They can’t come, right?”

Shri shook his head, a shadow crossing his face. “No, sir. Dad’s knees pin them down.”

“So?” Dr. Pratap pushed, firm but kind. “Call, get their blessing. After the engagement, take her to meet them—get it in person.”

Shri nodded slow, resolve settling. “Alright. I’ll call tomorrow, see what they say.”

Dr. Pratap downed his glass, setting it with a soft clink. “Good. I’ll tell the chief where we’re at.”

The room hummed with quiet victory, lamplight flickering in their eyes—a fragile win, bright but thin.

Meanwhile, at the hamlet, night pulsed different. Inside Mrigendra’s cottage, woodsmoke and woven mats warmed the air. He sat across from Nayantara, voice low and soft, laying out the day—Shri’s words, his own slow yield, the hope taking root. Her eyes shone, joy spilling as she listened, her father’s rough warmth wrapping each word. She threw herself

into his arms, hugging tight, laughter muffled against his chest. Mrigendra stroked her hair, calloused hand tender, a rare crack in his stern shell.

Word had blazed through the hamlet, whispers lighting every nook. But not everyone cheered. As Mrigendra and Nayantara shared their moment, the door creaked, and Raghu—an elder with a lined face and hard eyes—strode in, his son Samar at his side. Samar, broad and twenty-five, stood firm, jaw locked with quiet will. Mrigendra rose, smile warm but cautious. “Raghu, Samar—come in,” he said, nodding to the mats.

Their nods were short, cold. Raghu’s eyes flicked to Nayantara, though he spoke to the chief, voice tight. “Need a word—alone.”

Nayantara’s gut twisted, a chill crawling up. She glanced at her father, seeking anchor. Mrigendra’s eyes softened, but his nod was solid. “Go,” he murmured. She slipped out, steps fading, leaving a heavy hush.

Mrigendra gestured again. “Sit, Raghu. What’s up?”

Raghu paused, unease tugging his face, then sat stiff across from Mrigendra. “Heard you’ve set Nayantara with an outsider,” he said, low, accusing.

Mrigendra’s jaw tightened, patience fraying. “I’ve done what’s right for her,” he said, cool but steady.

Raghu’s eyes narrowed. “Never happened—not in our time. Rethink it. My son—” he nodded to Samar, still as stone—“he’s ready. It’s our way.”

Mrigendra’s gaze hardened, voice even. “No law against it, Raghu. She cares for the doctor—he cares back. That’s what counts.”

Raghu leaned in, voice cutting. “I’ll take it to the elders. We won’t take it lying down. Samar loves her—he’s the fit.”

Mrigendra's eyes flicked to Samar, meeting his defiant stare, fists clenched. "Not your call—or theirs," he said, voice rising, fierce. "She's mine. Her happiness is mine to keep."

Raghu shot up, shadow stretching in the firelight. "Fine. Elders decide, then." He turned, Samar trailing, their exit a dark gust.

Mrigendra sank back, shock and rage clashing in his chest. The joy from before flickered, fragile against a growing storm.

That evening, the elders met at the sacred grounds—a rough clearing where a temple and an unusually large old tree loomed, branches clawing the darkening sky. Torches sputtered in the thick air, flames twisting, throwing sharp shadows across lined faces. Mrigendra marched in with his sons, footwear thudding, grim resolve in their stride. Gajendra's fists were tight, jaw locked with simmering heat. Across the circle, Raghu sat rigid beside Samar, whose eyes burned quiet and bold. The air snapped with buried anger, the forest holding its breath.

The elders rose to greet their chief, a low hum of respect before Mrigendra took his carved stool. The oldest, face etched like cracked earth, raised a shaky hand. "Raghu's got a grievance with your call, Chief," he rasped, voice dull but sharp.

Mrigendra met his eyes, unyielding. "I know," he said, tone steady, edged.

Another elder—wiry, silver-bearded—leaned in, eyes flashing. "She's our honor, Mrigendra! You should've asked us—given us a say!"

Gajendra snapped, surging up, voice a lash. "She's ours—our sister! We choose for her, not you!"

The clearing roared low, voices tangling in chaos. Mrigendra's hand clamped Gajendra's arm, hard. "Enough," he growled, deep and final. He faced the elders, gaze sweeping like a squall. "Fine—you should've heard

sooner. It moved too fast for fires and talks. We told you when it was real. Now you'd tear her joy apart for your pride?"

A younger elder, face bright with fire, cut in. "He's right—it's his girl! She'd flourish with a doctor. These city healers saved us—why block her?"

Murmurs rose—some nodded, reluctant, others glared, dissent carved deep. Torches hissed as wind hit, flames flaring, matching the council's split. No consensus came, just a raw rift threatening to crack the tribe.

Then the priest stepped from the dark—lean, commanding, raven feathers in his headdress, eyes like coals. "I've got a solution," he said, voice a thunderclap, slicing the noise. "Let Lord Vajradhar settle it."

Silence slammed down, thick and sudden. Heads turned, confusion rippling. Eyes darted—elder to elder, son to father—whispers sparking. "Vajradhar?" one muttered. "What's that mean?"

The priest's lips twitched, a faint, cryptic smirk. "Got a better plan?" he dared, tone sharp. "You can't snatch her happiness on a whim. Let the powers above judge."

The elders shifted, restless, debate swelling. Some scowled, skeptical; others, worn by the stalemate, nodded grim. One by one, reluctant or resolved, they agreed—the priest's call tipped it. Mrigendra exhaled, chest tight with relief and dread. He knew "Vajradhar's decision"—a trial, a test of grit and worth, tied to old rites. How could he pitch that to a city doctor?

As the council faded into the night, shadows swallowed by trees, Mrigendra lingered, face shadowed with purpose. Gajendra stood close, anger a low burn, and Veerendra shifted, restless. Earlier, Veerendra had watched the edges, sharp-eyed but silent. Now he stepped up, voice low, tense. "Father, how do we tell Shri?"

Mrigendra's gaze hit the path to Shivalkot, dark and veiled. Torches cast long shadows, the forest bracing. "I trust Gajendra," he said, words heavy, eyes on his eldest. Gajendra's jaw clenched, duty and unease flashing.

Veerendra pressed in, soft but urgent. "This won't be simple."

Mrigendra nodded, weariness cracking his stern face. "No, it won't," he said, voice deep against the night. The path stretched ahead, a thin line to the trials waiting.

Next day, Dr. Pratap called Shri from the ward when Gajendra showed up sudden at the hospital. His voice cut through the corridor's hum, sharp, pressing. Shri, caught off guard, froze as he entered the cabin—Gajendra on the couch, shoulders slumped, face etched with sorrow and confusion. The air thickened as Shri sank beside him, heart pounding.

Dr. Pratap stood behind his desk, usual calm shadowed by grimness. "What we feared is happening," he said, low, measured, words heavy.

Shri's breath snagged. "Wha—what's going on?" he stammered, eyes bouncing between them.

Dr. Pratap's jaw tightened, meeting Shri's gaze. "The council met yesterday. Some didn't like the Chief's choice."

Shri sat dumbstruck, mind spinning, managing a mute nod, dread coiling.

"They're letting Lord Vajradhar decide," Dr. Pratap said, deliberate, "to settle it."

Shri's brow creased, fear tangling with confusion. "How... how does that work? How's the Lord stepping in?" His voice shook, unease spilling.

Gajendra shifted, hands clasped tight, voice rough, reluctant. "Old way. When the tribe's split, they call Vajradhar. Haven't seen it since I was a kid.

Not sure what's coming, but the priest says the Lord brings justice. He'll pick the right one for Nayan."

Shri's heart lurched. "Right one?" he whispered, chill creeping up.

Gajendra paused, eyes flickering with regret. "There's another guy who wants her."

Shri blinked, words hitting like a fist. "Who?" he demanded, voice sharpening through the chaos.

"You don't know him," Gajendra said soft. "Samar."

Shri sat stunned, disbelief clouding him. Another suitor—now? His chest squeezed, the room closing in as his mind reeled. "What do you want from me?" he managed, voice quaking but edged.

Gajendra leaned in, urgency rising. "Be at the hamlet tonight before dusk. The priest'll lay it out. Could take hours—maybe more—for the word to come."

Dr. Pratap's face darkened, protective. "Shri, you don't have to do this," he said firm, almost pleading. "It's insane."

Shri shook his head, jaw locking, resolve surging. "No, sir. I'm not backing down. I won't let anyone hurt Nayan—not now, not ever."

Dr. Pratap's stern look softened, pride mixing with worry. "Your call," he said quiet, giving in. He turned to Gajendra. "Tell the Chief we'll be there. I'll go with Shri tonight."

Gajendra stood, relief washing his worn face. “Okay, Doctor Saab. Thanks,” he said, hands folding in a deep namaste before he left. The door clicked, silence settling heavy.

The cabin’s walls creaked faint, ward murmurs drifting in. Shri stared at his trembling hands, the unknown pressing like a storm. But under the fear, a fire burned—a silent oath: he’d face it, for Nayan.

Chapter 16

After a grueling day at the hospital, Shri slumped in Dr. Pratap's cluttered cabin, Gajendra's visit a heavy stone in his chest. The air stung with antiseptic and the musk of old journals, but it pressed in, thick with Samar's name—a rival he'd never seen. His hands clamped the chair's arms, knuckles white as doubt gnawed him. Dr. Pratap, coat rumpled from endless hours, leaned against his desk, exhaustion carving his face, yet his eyes blazed with iron resolve. He wouldn't leave Shri to face this strange abyss alone.

Neha stormed in, her voice slicing the gloom like a blade. "Shri, you're not solo on this," she said, her city-sharp edge softened by fierce loyalty. "Whatever this 'Vajradhar's judgment' is, we're in. I'm coming—I've got to witness it." Her eyes flashed, stance solid, hands on hips, a fire daring him to waver.

Ani trailed her, stethoscope pocketed, his broad frame a steady rock. He'd pulled the short straw to stay behind, but he crossed to Shri, hand landing firm on his shoulder. "You're tougher than you think," he said, voice deep, calm. "I've watched you sew up a guy during a storm, talk a kid through a busted leg—this is just another scrap. Nayantara's worth it, yeah?" His parting look carried trust, heavy as he stepped back, duty-bound but sure.

Dr. Pratap straightened, tone rough but grounding. "They're right. This ain't science—it's lunacy—but you've got spine. I've seen you pull lives from the brink. You'll do it for her too." He gripped Shri's arm, a rare glint of brotherhood in his eyes. "We roll at dusk. I'm with you."

Shri exhaled, the knot in his chest loosening as their words wove a thread of grit. He met their eyes—Pratap's fierce faith, Neha's bold spark, Ani's quiet steel—and felt a fire catch. "Thanks," he rasped, voice raw but firm. "I won't let her down."

As the trio set off, the sun hung low, painting the forest path in blood-orange streaks. Pine musk and a wild, feral tang filled the air—a hint of the night to come. Shri's boots crunched gravel, each step stoked by the courage his friends had lit.

They hit the hamlet as dusk melted into twilight, the sacred grounds alive with tribesfolk, faces tight under swaying torches. Mrigendra met them, sons flanking him like guards—Gajendra's jaw locked, Veerendra's eyes darting with unease. Nayantara was gone, locked in her cottage, grappling with a fate she couldn't sway—a trial she couldn't touch. Shri's chest ached, her unseen hurt a silent cut.

The council closed in, weathered faces hard, eyes like polished stone. An elder stepped up, voice a dry rustle. "Ready for the rite, Doctor?"

Shri's heart slammed, wild, but his friends' words steadied him. "I am," he said, conviction ringing over the dread twisting his gut. He knew nothing of what lay ahead, only that Nayantara's life—and his—balanced on this blade's edge.

A sparse meal came—clay cups of spiced tea scalding his tongue, charred corn crumbling tasteless. Neha pulled her camera, snapping the elders' gnarled hands on their cups, steam curling in torchlight. Dr. Pratap sat rigid, fingers drumming a tense rhythm, brow creased as the tribe's moves unfolded.

The priest emerged—a lean shadow, raven feathers trembling in his headdress, beads clattering on his rough robe. His staff, topped with a serpent's carved head, glinted amber-eyed. He guided them deep into the heart of the hamlet, where the temple and the tree loomed, and Vajradhar's statue stood guard—its granite form icy and unyielding, sculpted by time, weathered by relentless winds and countless whispered prayers.

Chants broke from him, deep and pulsing, as he laid marigolds and jaggery at its feet. A clay bowl of vermilion—bright as blood—sat waiting, its role a mystery. Neha’s shutter clicked, catching the priest’s zeal, the offerings’ glow.

In a dim corner, the priest called Shri and Samar, voice a harsh hiss. “You’ll be tied to the Tree of Truth,” he said, nodding to a massive relic—bark scored with strange runes, branches clawing skyward like bones. “Nayantara watches after her rite. Once it starts, it runs—hours, maybe more—till Vajradhar speaks. The tribe prays without end.”

Shri swallowed, throat parched, but his friends’ fire held. Samar’s jaw tightened, bravado cracking under the tree’s dark stare. Neither foresaw this forge, but backing out wasn’t an option.

The priest stripped them to bare chests, cold biting their skin. He crowned them with twig rings—sacred grove cuts, he said—rough edges scraping their brows. Neha circled, lens catching Shri’s tense frame, Samar’s strained smirk, the priest’s shaky hands setting the crowns.

His voice boomed: “Suitors lash to the Tree of Truth, one per side! Nayantara joins post-consecration. We call Vajradhar’s will—a vigil past dawn. Pray, for faith alone summons him!”

The tribe stirred, restless. Dr. Pratap’s fists balled, nails biting flesh, but Shri’s steeled will hushed any fight. Neha’s camera nabbed Pratap’s strain, then swung to the priest, his censer spilling sage in wild curls.

As the sun sank, Nayantara stepped into view—her white sari glowing pale in the dusk, her face drained of color, her wide eyes shimmering with silent fear. The priest’s chants slowed to a murmur as he dabbed red vermilion on her forehead. She flinched, a quick, sharp gasp that hit Shri like a punch to the chest. Neha, snapping photos nearby, caught Nayantara’s trembling hands on camera as she sank into the crowd, legs giving out.

Night crashed down fast. Torches blazed to life, spitting sparks into the dark. Shri and Samar stood tied up, ropes biting into their wrists, rough tree bark scraping their backs. The priest circled them, swinging a censer that poured thick myrrh smoke into the air, his voice booming—“Vajradhar, hear us!”—the words shaking the ground under their feet.

Hours crawled by, the cold sinking deep, the ropes rubbing their skin raw. Neha’s camera followed them—Shri’s face slick with sweat, Samar’s jaw locked tight, Nayantara’s soft pleas barely audible. Dr. Pratap prowled the edge of the scene, his coat flapping in the wind, his eyes stormy with doubt.

Then midnight broke everything apart. A wild gust screamed through, snuffing out the torches in one brutal sweep, plunging the place into pitch black except for a few flickering flames near the tree. Neha’s camera stuttered, useless in the dark. Nayantara’s body stiffened—she let out a scream that tore through the night, then crumpled to the ground, limp and slick with sweat. Mrigendra rushed over, splashing water on her face, his voice cracking—“Wake up, child!”

Shri and Samar yelled, their wrists bleeding, heads slumping as the ropes held them up. The priest’s chants grew heavy, suffocating, pressing down like a weight. Then the torches flared back to life, flames jumping high and fierce.

The priest snatched the vermilion bowl—it was almost empty—and shoved it at the council. Their faces went white, eyes wide with shock. A low rumble shook the earth, the big tree quivering, smoke curling up from nowhere, twisting into the shape of a warrior—huge, horned, towering over them. The tribe hit the ground, a terrified wail rising up. Neha’s camera whipped around, capturing it all, while Pratap stumbled back, nearly falling.

The priest whirled around, his voice rough and desperate: “The rings—check their crowns!” He staggered toward Shri and Samar, his shadow stretching long in the torchlight, hands trembling as he reached for the twig crowns on their heads. The crowd went dead still, the air humming with tension—whose crown held the mark? Who would Vajradhar choose?

Chapter 17

The head priest shuffled forward, raven feathers quivering in the dim lamplight, his lean frame throwing a sharp shadow over Samar. The young suitor hung slack against the tree, barely conscious, chest jerking in shallow gasps. Blood crusted his wrists where ropes had gnawed, his face ashen from the trial's toll. Raghu edged near, shoulders hunched with dread and defiance, eyes flicking between his son and the priest. The old man's hands trembled as he lifted Samar's twig ring, the crowd's hum surging as light spilled across his brow—clean, no vermilion trace.

A shockwave rippled through, disbelief and relief tangling in a low buzz. Raghu's jaw locked, heart plunging as he knelt to untie the ropes, fingers clumsy on the knots. Samar sagged into him, a crumpled shell, legs wobbling as Raghu led him off, limping through the throng. The tribe moved in silence, gazes shifting—some soft with pity, others sharp with impatience—to Shri, the last stand, the truth still cloaked.

The priest turned, shadow looming long and grim in the weak light, breath ragged with the moment's weight. Shri dangled on the tree's far side, body limp, head drooping, awareness a fraying thread. Blood streaked his arms, dark lines on pale skin, chest heaving with each strained pull of air. Silence bore down, thick and alive, tension a blade hovering.

Nayantara lingered at the crowd's fringe, heart pounding now that Samar was out. Her legs shook under her sari, itching to move, but fear pinned her—she couldn't step closer, not yet. Her hands gripped her shawl, knuckles bleached, eyes locked on Shri, willing him to hold on. Tears had cut dusty paths down her face, but hope flickered, frail and fierce.

The priest's shaky hand reached for Shri's ring, brushing the knotted twigs, the instant teetering. The tribe leaned in, breaths snared, a shared pulse stilled. Dr. Pratap stood taut nearby, fists balled, face raw with strain—pride

warring with dread for his friend. Neha hovered, camera poised, lens on the priest's trembling fingers against Shri's shadowed form, her own breath trapped.

The ring rose, and there it was—vermilion slashed across Shri's brow, stark and bold, a divine stamp. A gasp erupted, swelling into a roaring triumph that shook the clearing. The sound slammed like a tide, wild and free, as the tribe leapt up.

“Lord Vajradhar has judged!” the priest thundered, arms flung high, voice a torn hymn piercing the chaos. “The doctor is chosen!”

Shri stirred, vision blurring, the vermilion's heft a strange anchor on his throbbing head. His eyes cracked open, seeking Nayantara through the fog. She stood tall now, tears streaming, a fragile smile cutting her weariness—a light in the storm.

Drums burst alive, their fierce rhythm a primal pulse trembling the ground, each beat stoking the tribe into a joyous frenzy. Shouts split the night, torches spitting embers like fireflies in the dark. Gajendra and Veerendra charged through, blades glinting, slashing Shri's ropes with quick, sure cuts—snicks slicing the cords. The ropes dropped, coiling like dead serpents, and Shri's legs gave, knees cracking dirt as a gasp ripped from him. Adrenaline surged, molten and steady, and he lurched upright, the tribe's roar—raw, victorious—lifting his shaking frame, his pulse a war drum.

Nayantara stumbled forward, feet scraping earth, breath jagged as she shoved through the sweaty crush, sari whipping in her wake. Her steps wobbled but pressed on, driven by something beyond exhaustion—until she crashed into him, a desperate tangle of flesh. Her arms locked around his neck, sobs breaking free, muffled against his chest as her fingers dug in, clutching his reality—alive, here, hers. Shri's arms wrapped her, trembling hands pulling her close, one cradling her head, the other brushing the

vermilion on her brow—bright red, matching his, a sacred bond sealed under the Tree’s stern watch.

“You were always the one,” she whispered, voice splintering—raw with relief and wonder, breath warm on his skin as she eased back, eyes meeting his, tears glinting like stars in a tempest.

Shri’s throat rasped dry, voice a rough scrape as he held her gaze, hands tightening like she might fade. “I hoped—prayed—” he said, words spilling, unguarded, “but I didn’t know... not till now.” His chest heaved, a shaky breath escaping, then it came, soft but fierce: “I love you, Nayan.”

Her sob snagged, joy and ruin in one, and she pressed her forehead to his, fingers threading his hair. “And I love you,” she breathed, words a quiet storm, tying them tight as the tribe’s cries faded.

The scene stunned them—a triumph forged from torment, a win clawed from doubt’s jaws. The crowd pressed in, cheering throughout, but for Shri and Nayantara, the world shrank to their shared space, the din a distant pulse.

Mrigendra stepped up, a rock in the chaos, voice a deep hymn over the noise. “The gods have ruled,” he said, gaze sweeping the council, quelling their whispers with its heft. “This is law.”

Dr. Pratap closed in, gripping Shri’s shoulder hard, grin wild and raw. “You stubborn fool,” he said, voice thick, a laugh breaking free. “You made it.”

Neha lowered her camera, hands shaky as she stared at her shots. “This isn’t just a miracle,” she muttered, awe lacing her words. “It’s a damn legend.”

As the revelry flared—torches blazing, drums thumping victory—Shri held Nayantara closer, her warmth a lifeline to his waning strength. Against all odds, they’d won—and the night, alive with fire and faith, bore witness.

Dawn's light softened the grounds' harsh edges as the crowd thinned, joyous shouts fading to tired murmurs. Sage musk and the sting of snuffed torches lingered, echoes of the divine clash. Mrigendra, silhouetted against the rising sun, directed his sons with quiet command. Gajendra and Veerendra rallied men, setting mats outside their worn cottage, while Nayantara and Neha slipped inside, claiming the cool of its mud walls. Exhaustion clung heavy, and it wasn't till noon's golden haze draped the hamlet that they stirred, roused by clattering pots and rich food scents.

The women had woven a feast—steaming rice with cumin, lentil curry thick with turmeric and ghee, flatbreads crisp from the fire, edges charred and fragrant. The aroma pulled them to a low table, mats on the floor. Shri sat across Nayantara, eyes locking with hers as they ate. No words passed, but their looks sang—hers shy, radiant, his warm, steady, a vow threading their shared trial. The vermilion on their brows, smudged but bold, glowed like badges of their win.

Dr. Pratap and Neha, close by, picked apart the night's rites, voices mingling awe and disbelief. "I've read tribal lore," Pratap said, gruff but lively, rice paused midair. "But this—tied up, torches out? I'd call it nuts if I hadn't seen it."

Neha nodded, eyes wide, tearing bread. "Beyond anything I've known. The wind, her scream, that bowl near dry—we saw a god choose, Pratap. A god."

Her hands twitched, craving her camera on a nearby stool.

Mrigendra, at the table's head, chewed slow, face easing as he watched Shri and Nayantara's silent trade. He set his plate down, voice warm, rough. "Doctor Saab," he said to Shri, "with the gods so clear, shouldn't we plan the wedding soon?"

Shri blinked, caught, then smiled—tired, real. “Baba, just Shri, please,” he said, earnest. “Yes, we should. But I need my parents’ blessings first. They can’t come—Dad’s knees—so, if it’s okay, can I take Nayan to meet them? Gajendra and Veerendra could join.”

Nayantara’s gaze flicked up, cheeks flushing, fingers tightening on her cup. Mrigendra’s eyes twinkled, but Dr. Pratap cut in, grinning. “Shri called his folks this morning—trunk call. They’re dying to meet her—couldn’t hide the thrill.”

Neha glanced at Shri, teasing, warm. “Ani and I head to Bombay soon. Should I develop last night’s shots, show your parents a sneak peek?”

Shri shook his head fast, protective. “No, let them see her first—real, not through a lens.” His eyes hit Nayantara, softening as she smiled shy, lashes dipping.

Mrigendra laughed, deep and free. “I’ve no qualms with her going, Shri. What say you, Gaja?”

Gajendra, tearing bread steady, nodded quick. “I’ll go. Veeru can hold here.” His voice bore quiet duty, the elder brother’s shield.

Veerendra, softer but firm, dipped his head. “I’ll stay, Baba. You’ve got me.”

Mrigendra clapped sharp, decisive. “Done. I’ll talk to the priest about good dates for the wedding. We’ll make it proper—with the gods and the tribe.”

The meal wound down with thanks and clinking plates, women whisking scraps away. Shri, Neha, and Pratap stood, trading farewells with Mrigendra’s kin—handshakes solid, smiles worn but bright.

On the sun-scorched path back, a weight lifted, doubt's boulder crumbling. Shri felt it sharpest, chest light with each step, Nayantara's smile a lifeline. Pratap chuckled low beside him, tension shedding. Neha trailed, camera up, snapping the hamlet's fading outline against noon's sky—a relic of a night beyond belief.

For the first time in ages, they breathed easy—triumph theirs, the future a blazing dawn.

Chapter 18

The days after the trial unfolded like a rare treasure, a golden ribbon of light for Shri and Nayantara, their love blooming amid Shivalkot's rough sprawl. Neha and Ani had rolled off to Bombay, their car's growl fading as they left the hospital's weight on Dr. Pratap and Shri. Wards buzzed with ceaseless need—fevers spiking, bones snapping, voices clamoring—yet Nayantara became a steady thread. She'd slip in with a brother at her heels, Gajendra's solid shadow or Veerendra's keen eyes, and wait in the corridor, her tunic catching sun through chipped glass. Delays didn't faze her; she'd trace Shri's rushed steps with quiet grace, knowing this chaos would be her life too.

When the hospital relented, she'd drift to the woods beyond, where pines murmured and a stream cut a silver vein through the earth. Perched on a mossy rock, she'd hum—low, lilting, a tune spun from the forest's heart. Shri would find her there, escaping the sterile sting to sit close. The world shrank to their shared breath, the stream's ripple a soft underscore as they spoke—of the trial's wild night, dreams too shy to voice, a future glinting in their glances. Time bent, sweet and slow, her laugh a salve to his worn soul, his hand grazing hers in bold, fleeting brushes. Ramesh's shuffle would break it—“Sir, emergency—Ward Two fever,” or “Patient's waiting”—and Shri would sigh, her chuckle softening the cut, parting with a whispered “later,” her form a melody in his mind.

On quieter days, Shri hiked to the hamlet, boots crunching the familiar trail, air thick with woodsmoke and damp soil. Nayantara would meet him at her family's cottage, her smile a flare against rough walls, and they'd steal time—by the hearth, her fingers brushing his over a steaming cup, or pacing the hamlet's rim, hands near but not touching, the air electric with unspoken want. Shadows lingered, though—Samar's presence a dark gust. Their paths crossed at the well or pens, his eyes blazing resentment he

couldn't hide. Shri nodded each time—"Samar"—voice calm despite the glare's edge. He bore it steady; the Tree of Truth had judged, Vajradhar's will was set, and Samar's bile couldn't erase it. Still, the tension wove a taut thread through their golden haze.

One dawn, as gray light washed the hospital, a sharp rap jolted Shri from his desk. Hunched over case files, ink blurring under bleary eyes, the night's load pressed heavy. "Come in," he rasped, expecting Ramesh with another crisis.

The door creaked, and Nayantara stepped in, shutting it soft. Shri's head jerked up, warmth surging—then froze at her face. Her eyes, usually alight, were dim, lips tight, tunic stark against her pallor. Her hands twisted, nervous. "You?" he said, rising, worry sharpening his voice. "Sit. What's wrong?"

She sank onto the worn couch, stiff and shy, sparking his unease. He knelt beside her, hand hovering. "What's happened, sweetheart?" he asked, voice gentling. "My flower's wilted today."

Her gaze flicked to him, then slid away, hurt flashing. "You don't care about me, do you?" she murmured, words a quiet stab.

Shri's breath snagged, alarm clashing with confusion. "Of course I do," he said, hand settling on hers, warm on cool. "Why's my Nayan lost?"

She pulled back, arms folding, voice quivering. "Do you know what yesterday was?"

He blinked, mind scrambling—her birthday? No, months off. His? No. Mrigendra's, the brothers'? Nothing fit. His shoulders sagged, guilt creeping. "I'm sorry," he said, low. "I can't recall."

Her eyes welled, chin lifting with hurt and defiance. “It was Karva Chauth,” she said, words measured. “I didn’t eat—not a bite, not a drop—all day... till now.”

Shri’s heart sank, cold realization hitting hard. “Oh God,” he breathed, eyes wide. Karva Chauth—wives fasting dawn to dusk for their husbands’ safety, breaking it under their eyes. She’d done it for him, and he’d been lost in charts, blind.

“I thought you’d come,” she said, voice breaking as she stood, pacing a step. “I waited by the window, watching, thinking you’d be there to break my fast. But you weren’t.”

“I’m so sorry,” Shri stammered, rising, chest tight. He reached, then dropped his hands. “Let me get you food—now.” He turned for the door, desperate, but her voice stopped him.

“No,” she said, stepping close, tone softening as their eyes met. “It’s fine. I’ve seen you—that’s enough. I’ll eat at home.” A faint smile broke through, forgiving, her old light peeking out. Before he could speak, she slipped past, leaving with quiet grace, pinning him in place, her absence a sharp pang.

He slumped into his chair, hands raking his hair, papers forgotten. Her faith, her quiet strength, turning hurt into grace—it cut deeper than Samar’s stares. The golden days gained weight, fragile and fierce, and he swore silently: no more waiting alone.

Meanwhile, the head priest hunched over almanacs, feathers trembling, muttering prayers, tracing stars on yellowed pages. He emerged with dates—auspicious, he swore—but none near. The soonest loomed weeks off, chafing Shri’s haste yet honoring tribal rites. Mrigendra nodded, faith firm, eyes glinting at Shri and Nayantara’s stolen looks.

With the wedding delayed, Shri eyed the city. He'd set the trip soon—himself, Nayantara, Gajendra—to his parents' Bombay flat. Over a crackling call, his mother's "Bring her, beta," and father's gruff "We're waiting" lit his ears. Nayantara's forest soul meeting their simple urban world stirred him. Gajendra agreed to tag along, his shadow a balm, Veerendra staying with Mrigendra.

As the week neared, the golden days sharpened—each moment with Nayantara a gem, each break a nudge toward their future. Hospital clamor, Samar's glares, the priest's far-off dates dimmed against her hand grazing his, her hum echoing in his chest. For now, they had this—a radiant pause before the call forward.

The travel day broke crisp and golden, ripe with promise. Gajendra loomed in the hospital courtyard, steady beside Nayantara, who stepped up like a dream. She'd shed her tunic for a sari—emerald cotton laced with gold, draping her with grace that stole Shri's breath. It shimmered in noon light, her hair spilling dark, framing a face alive with shy joy. A forest flower refined, timeless and new, her pallu adjusted with nervous fingers, eyes catching his in a charged flash.

Dr. Pratap stepped from the porch, coat creased, smile warm. "Bless you both," he said, gruff with care, clapping Shri's shoulder, nodding to Nayantara. "Safe trip—bring her back whole, yeah?" Shri grinned, buoyed by his faith, as Nayantara dipped her head, cheeks blooming.

They hit the bus stand—a dusty patch rimmed by woods, air thick with diesel and chatter. The bus lagged hours, stretching patience, but Shri barely cared. He sat with Nayantara on a rough bench by a tea stall, world shrinking to their space. Her laugh rang over chai clinks, hand brushing his as she mused on the city—its clamor, its oddity, her thrill to meet his kin. "Will they like me?" she asked, soft, searching.

“They’ll love you,” Shri said, firm, fingers grazing hers. “How couldn’t they?” Her smile flared, bright and free, the delay a stolen gift.

Then—a flicker. A shadow darted through the trees behind the stall, swift, dark, gone. Shri’s head snapped up, pulse spiking, but the woods stood mute. He frowned, shaking it off—mind tricks, he thought. He turned back, her voice reeling him in, unease fading.

The bus roared in late, horn blaring, sparking chaos—passengers shoving, bags swinging, voices clashing. Gajendra cut through, barking “Stay close,” guiding Nayantara as Shri trailed, her sari brushing him. Inside, the air stank of sweat and hope, but Gajendra snagged seats—Shri and Nayantara together, him guarding behind. The engine growled, and the bus jolted off, woods thickening outside, branches clawing skyward.

They lost themselves in each other, the bus’s hum a drone. She leaned near, shoulder warm, teasing, “What if I get lost in your city?” He chuckled soft. “I’d find you,” he vowed, hand hovering. “Always.” Her eyes sparkled, blush climbing, miles blurring into whispers and glances.

Night fell unheeded, forest a black wall beyond, dim lights casting their glow. Then—chaos. A bang split the silence, bus swerving as tires blew. Nayantara gasped, nails biting Shri’s arm. The driver cursed, wheel bucking, but it skidded, metal screaming, flipping off the road with a bone-jarring crunch. Screams ripped through the air, glass burst outward, and bodies were thrown from the bus, landing hard on the narrow clearing before sliding down the slope toward the deep valley below.

Shri’s reflexes flared. He tried to grab Nayantara, but the crash ripped them apart. His hands snagged a vine on the slope, body slamming earth. The fibers cut, blood slicking his grip as he slid. “Nayantara!” he roared, voice lost in the din. He strained for her, Gajendra—nothing but chaos answered. Panic clawed—They’re safe—they must be.

Above, through dust and pain, a shape loomed—a weathered temple on the ridge: Vajradhar, stern, eternal. Shri’s breath hitched, a prayer tearing free. “Save her—save them,” he rasped, strength ebbing, faith his last hold. Then—vines coiled from the soil, wrapping his legs like divine hands, halting his fall. He trembled, anchored, suspended between life and ruin.

Eyes forced open, he peered down. The slope was a tomb—twisted metal, still bodies, groans rising. A wiry man with wild eyes scrambled near, hand out. “Hold on!” Shri grabbed, hauled to ground, legs shaking but alive.

He turned feral. “Nayantara! Gajendra!” he bellowed, lurching through wreckage, clawing debris. They were gone—swallowed by the night. Grief surged, but his oath cut through. Survivors moaned, pleas piercing. He knelt by a woman, leg mangled under a seat. “Stay with me,” he muttered, ripping his shirt to bind her, mind screaming for Nayantara.

Others rose—stunned, steady—fetching water, bracing limbs, voices threading the dark. All night, Shri worked, hands firm despite the tempest inside, eyes scouring for her. “Seen her?” he begged a dazed man, gripping his arm. “Green sari—please!” A blank shake, and Shri pressed on, throat raw, hope fraying.

Dawn crept in, stark light on the carnage, but Nayantara and Gajendra stayed lost. Shri dropped beside the wreck, hands crusted with blood and dirt, chest heaving with unshed sobs. The road lay quiet, valley yawning, the temple’s echo in the vines that saved him. Mercy or mockery—sparing him to lose her? His fists dug earth, a howl trapped, as the forest held its secrets.

Chapter 19

The hospital pulsed with its usual din—footsteps clattering on tile, antiseptic’s sharp bite slicing the air—but to Shri, it was a hollow shell, a stage for the tempest tearing him apart. A patient had rolled in earlier, a young man shredded by a motorcycle wreck, pulse flickering weak under Shri’s steady hands. He’d stitched the gashes, set the bones, dragged life back into the broken form, but as the gurney rolled off, a shadow sank over him. The man’s bloodied face, the groan of twisted steel—it ripped open a scar buried deep, hurling Shri back 28 years to that dawn when the world shattered under a forest’s cold stare.

He trudged to his cabin, each step a lead weight, a man hollowed out. The door clicked shut, locking him with ghosts he couldn’t shake. His legs buckled, and he sank into his chair, leather creaking under him. Hands, once sure, shook as they gripped the desk, knuckles white, clawing for hold against the flood. The bus crash flared in his mind, merciless—the tires’ screech, the gut-wrenching flip, the vine’s bite on his palms. And her—Nayantara, her emerald sari a fleeting flare before she was torn away, her voice drowned in chaos. Gajendra’s solid frame, swallowed by the valley’s jaws.

Cops had stormed in after, boots crunching wreckage, gruff shouts bouncing off steep walls. Diesel and damp earth choked the air, the forest mute as they hauled up the dead—bodies limp, draped in torn rags like offerings to a pitiless god. Shri stood on that cursed road, a shell carved by despair, eyes burning as he watched. His hands, crusted with blood and dirt from the night’s fight, hung dead at his sides, breaths jagged in the chill dawn. Dr. Pratap flanked him, a silent rock, coat mud-streaked, face lined with exhaustion and unvoiced grief. He’d come with the first aid wave, called by a survivor’s frantic plea, and hadn’t left Shri since.

Then the blow that broke him: Nayantara, her sari—once hope’s beacon—now smeared with blood and soil, clinging to her still form as they pulled her from the slope. Her face too quiet, warmth stolen, eyes shut in endless sleep. Beside her, Gajendra, crumpled like a fallen giant, his strength snuffed, hands slack. Shri’s knees gave, earth rushing up as a scream ripped free—raw, animal, splitting the air. He clawed the dirt, nails snapping, digging to drag her back, undo it. “No—no—no!” he choked, voice splintering, a doctor powerless, useless.

Dr. Pratap dropped beside him, hands clamping his shoulders hard. “Shri, look at me,” he rasped, steady through the haze. “You did everything—everything.” Shri thrashed, tears streaming, mud streaking his face. “I didn’t—I couldn’t—” he sobbed, words dissolving into wails. Pratap yanked him close, arms a vise, a shield against collapse. “You held on when no one could,” he growled, fierce. “You fought. This isn’t on you.”

He stayed through the bleak hours, a lifeline as cops logged the dead, shouts fading to a dull hum. When Shri staggered to Nayantara’s side, collapsing by her, Pratap knelt too, hand on his back as Shri traced her cold fingers, whispering—“I’m sorry, Nayan, so sorry.” Pratap didn’t flinch, eyes glistening, sharing the vast loss in silence. He fetched water when Shri’s voice broke, forced sips when he froze, and later, half-carried him back to the hospital, gruffly coaxing: “One step—just one, you stubborn bastard.”

Why so cruel? All they’d wanted was a quiet life—her hand in his, a future of whispered vows by the stream. Instead, the gods mocked him, vines sparing him for this endless wound. Pratap saw it—the divine taunt—and became his shadow, hauling him through grief’s fog. Nights in the cabin, pouring tea Shri ignored, or shoving him to the wards: “Lives need you—don’t quit.” His rough care kept Shri alive, though the blade of pain stayed lodged, unyielding.

Back in the present, tears burned down Shri's cheeks, splashing the desk, smudging an open journal he couldn't face. A sob broke free—raw, guttural, echoing in the tight space. He missed the knock, lost in the void, until Ramesh's voice cut through. "Saheb, I heard you. Did you call?"

Shri froze—he hadn't known the scream escaped, a cry from his soul's depths. His head stayed down, buried in pages, hiding his wrecked face. "No, Ramesh, it's fine," he managed, voice thick, a fragile lie. "I found it."

Ramesh lingered at the door, framed by faint light. "Ok, Saheb," he said soft, knowing. "Call if you need me." He'd caught the shake, the unspoken weight, and with years' wisdom, didn't push. The door clicked shut, but his steps paused outside, a quiet guard waiting. He shook his head, feeling Shri's pain like his own.

Alone, Shri's hands pressed his eyes, damming tears, but they leaked through. The journal blurred—notes of lives saved, a hollow echo to his own ruin. Twenty-eight years, and the forest still breathed her name in every leaf, her laugh in the stream. He'd survived—Vajradhar's vines—but why? To drag a half-life, chained to a past that wouldn't let go? His chest seized, sobs rising, the cabin's walls a cage of loss.

A breath shuddered out, relief and weariness mingling as Ani—Dr. Aniruddh Kashyap—stood at his cottage door. For the first time in ages, a familiar soul pierced the solitude.

Shri stepped forward, wordless, and hugged him, grief a silent weight between them. Ani held on, understanding without prodding—some bonds needed no words.

"Come in," Shri said, voice rough, stepping aside. Ani nodded, his driver trailing with luggage, then slipping into the night.

The cottage bore a haunted man's marks—journals piled chaotic, cold tea half-drunk, old books scenting the breeze from an open window. They sank

into worn chairs, and after drinks—sharp enough to dull, not erase—talk flowed, winding through past scars and present wounds.

Dr. Pratap’s funeral—a fresh void in their cracked lives.

Veerendra—a shadow at the crowd’s edge, mourning apart.

The lost bag—Veerendra’s gift to Ramesh 28 years back, vanished into time. What was in it?

The patients—endless pain, echoing old ghosts.

Shivalkot—the town that gave all, then took it.

Shri sipped, the burn grounding him, hand raking graying hair. “It never heals, does it?” he muttered.

Ani watched him, then said, “No. But we carry it.”

Shri’s laugh was hollow. “Do we?”

Silence fell, heavy but easy. Outside, wind rustled trees, whispering secrets.

Days with Ani eased Shri’s frayed edges, his presence a salve. He helped in the wards, his calm hands lifting the clinic’s gloom. Ramesh relaxed, glad Shri wasn’t alone.

Lunch at the canteen felt lighter with Ani across the table—rice and dal bland, chatter muted, but not crushing. Between bites, Ani said, “Only two for the ad.”

Shri’s brow lifted. “Two?”

“Yeah. One’s a guy, fifties, chasing village life—testing it out.”

Shri snorted. “Midlife crisis in Shivalkot. That’ll be fun.”

Ani grinned. “Other’s a woman, late twenties, Jabalpur. Believes in karma—serving till marriage and ‘real life.’”

“And the man?”

“Akola,” Ani said, sipping. “Nearby, at least. Might stick.”

Shri smirked dryly. “Good. Not sure she’ll last.” His fingers traced his glass. “Karma’s a myth to me now. What did I do to—”

“Enough,” Ani cut in, firm. “Not that road.”

Shri met his gaze, silent, then nodded as Ani softened. “Let’s walk after—clear our heads. Not much today.”

Shri exhaled, pushing his plate. “Alright.”

They roamed the forest, leaves crunching, stream murmuring, mountains looming, wildflowers swaying. Peace should’ve soothed, but Shri’s mind churned.

He stopped sharp. “Ani, get your car. I need to go back.”

Ani frowned. “Where?”

“The crash,” Shri whispered, raw.

“What? No way,” Ani snapped. “We’re not—”

“Please,” Shri begged, voice breaking. “I need it out. I stopped there once, briefly, coming here, but alone I can’t. I need this.”

Ani rubbed his temples, knowing this ran deep. “Fine,” he said, stern. “But if it’s too much, you’re out when I say. No games.”

Shri nodded. “Promise.”

The drive was mute, shadows lengthening as trees thickened, air growing heavy. Less than an hour, they arrived.

Shri’s heart thudded as he stepped out, breath snagging. The clearing lay bare, a scar unhealed—no trees since that day, the earth defiant.

Ani waved his driver to wait and followed Shri past the clearing to the temple. It stood untouched, Vajradhar's stone gaze eternal.

Shri knelt, fingers digging cold soil, lips still but heart screaming—What did I do? You saved me to break me.

Silence. No reply—just the idol's stare.

He sighed, rising, when a flower fell—a bloom not from here, one he knew from the hamlet.

His breath hitched, hands trembling as he lifted it. What's this, Lord? No more tests.

He stood slow. Ani broke the hush. "The flower?"

Shri clenched it, glancing at the valley, clearing, temple. "Let's go. I'll tell you later."

With a last prayer, he turned. The past called today—but it wasn't done.

Driving back, Shri gripped the flower. Questions lingered, but one truth held: the past wasn't through with him.

Chapter 20

It wasn't until two days later that Dr. Bhide from Akola arrived at the hospital, a jovial figure in his fifties whose round face beamed with an unshakable cheer, as if life were a grand comedy he'd bought a front-row seat to enjoy. He carried the easy swagger of a man seasoned by decades in bustling city hospitals, yet there was a restless glint in his eye—a itch for something different, an adventure, perhaps an escape from the urban grind he'd known too long.

Shri and Ani sat across from him in the hospital's small, dimly lit office, the single bulb casting a faint glow over stacks of files and the worn desk between them. Bhide leaned forward, clasping his hands with a grin. "I'd like to try this place out for a couple of days," he said, his voice warm and eager. "See what rural life feels like out here—get a taste of it."

Ani flicked a glance at Shri, one eyebrow arching in silent amusement. Shri paused, weighing the man's buoyant energy against the hospital's relentless demands, then nodded. "Sure," he replied, his tone measured but accommodating. "We'll arrange for you to stay here at the hospital itself. If you decide to stick around longer, we can figure out the details then."

Bhide clapped his hands together, a sharp sound of delight echoing in the cramped space. "Excellent! I'll make myself at home." Over the next two days, he dove in—splitting his time between assisting with patients in the wards and wandering off into the nearby woods and villages. His enthusiasm was a spark, infectious even to the weary staff, though his frequent solo treks into the wilderness drew curious stares and muttered comments from the locals, who watched him tramp off with raised brows and knowing smirks.

Then, on the second evening, the hospital's fragile calm shattered. Bhide came crashing through the entrance just as the sun dipped below the hills,

painting the sky in bruised purples and golds. His face was drained of its usual color, pale as chalk, his shirt clinging damp with sweat, his breath coming in short, ragged bursts. His hands trembled at his sides, fingers twitching as if still grasping for something he'd fled. He looked like a man who'd stumbled into a nightmare and barely clawed his way out.

Ramesh, the ever-present attendant with his sharp eyes, was the first to spot him, his own calm fracturing as he rushed forward. "Doctor! What happened?" he called, voice tight with alarm.

Bhide collapsed onto a wooden bench in the lobby, the frame creaking under his sudden weight as he struggled to catch his breath. Shri, who'd been hunched over patient charts in his cabin, emerged moments later, drawn by the commotion. His brow furrowed as he took in the sight—Bhide, disheveled and wild-eyed, a far cry from the jovial man who'd arrived days before.

"Ghost," Bhide finally rasped, his voice a hoarse scrape, his gaze darting toward the door as if expecting some shadowed figure to stalk in behind him.

Ramesh, already fetching a glass of water from the cooler near the reception, let out a short, skeptical laugh. "Ghost? Where'd you see that?"

Bhide snatched the glass with unsteady hands, downing it in one desperate gulp, water dribbling down his chin. His fingers clamped around the empty glass, knuckles whitening as he gripped it like a lifeline. "In the woods," he whispered, voice still rough, eyes wide with lingering fear. "It was following me. I could hear it—footsteps, crunching leaves, always just behind me. But when I turned around, there was no one—no one at all."

Ramesh chuckled again, shaking his head as he leaned against the wall. "Could've been a snake slithering through the bush. Or some animal scurrying about—plenty of those out there."

Bhide's head jerked up, his wild stare locking onto Ramesh. "No," he snapped, voice rising with a frantic edge. "It wasn't an animal. It was something else—I know it. The air felt... wrong. Heavy, like something was watching me, pressing in. And when I ran, it ran too—I could hear it keeping pace."

Shri stepped closer, placing a firm hand on Bhide's shoulder, his touch calm but grounding. "Dr. Bhide, you're exhausted," he said, voice steady, trying to reel the man back from the brink. "It's probably just your mind playing tricks—fatigue and shadows can do that out here."

Bhide shook his head violently, shrugging off Shri's hand. "No, no—you don't understand. I can't stay here. I'm leaving tomorrow—first thing."

Shri sighed, a flicker of resignation crossing his face. "Alright," he said, relenting. "Get some rest tonight—we'll arrange your departure in the morning. You'll be fine."

That night, as the hospital's lanterns cast their dim, flickering light down the corridors, Shri and Ani settled into Shri's cabin, glasses of amber liquid in hand, the sharp burn a quiet comfort against the day's strain. The wind howled outside, rattling the windows, a restless counterpoint to their muted talk.

"Well, there goes our candidate," Ani said, a smirk tugging at his lips as he leaned back in his chair.

Shri swirled his drink, a low chuckle rumbling out. "Probably for the best. If he's jumping at rustling leaves, Shivalkot would've eaten him alive."

Their laughter mingled, soft and fleeting, echoing through the cabin before fading into the night. But as the wind's wail sharpened, a nagging unease crept into Shri's mind—Bhide's terror had been too real, too visceral. What had he stumbled into out there? Was it truly just imagination, or something more? The thought lingered, a shadow at the edge of his mirth, unanswered.

The days that followed blurred into a punishing grind at the hospital, Shri and Ani bound to its ceaseless demands—patients flooding the wards, paperwork piling high, no respite in sight. Night became their only sanctuary, a stolen hour or two in Shri’s cabin where they’d share drinks, the liquor’s sting peeling back the day’s weight. The air would thicken with memory—Nayantara’s lilting laugh, the crash’s deafening echo, Gajendra’s steady timbre cutting through—until Ani, ever the sentinel, sensed the plunge and pivoted. “Remember that time Ramesh tripped over the mop bucket and cursed the floor for three days?” he’d toss out, forcing a grin, dragging light into the gloom. They clung to one lifeline: Dr. Sheetal Pradhan, their bridge back to the city, their chance to break free from Shivalkot’s suffocating hold. Each night, they murmured a quiet prayer into the dark—she had to come, she had to stay.

Evening draped Shivalkot like a heavy veil, the sky erupting with a fury that defied the season. It wasn’t monsoon time, yet thunder growled deep and low, and lightning tore across the horizon, bathing the hospital in jagged, electric bursts. Shri and Ani hunched over files in the cabin, the lone bulb flickering with each rumble, casting their shadows long and restless against the cracked walls. Ramesh was absent—called away to some urgent family matter—leaving the hospital eerily still, save for the storm’s escalating roar. A young orderly burst through the door, his voice breathless, eyes wide with urgency. “Sirs—I think Dr. Sheetal’s here. A city lady just got out of an autorickshaw.”

Shri’s pen froze mid-line, a shiver prickling his neck, sharp and cold. Ani glanced up, relief flashing through his fatigue. “Finally,” he muttered, pushing to his feet. Before they could step forward, the storm unleashed a thunderclap so fierce it shook the ground, lightning flaring so close it seemed to crack the earth outside. Then—a knock, sharp and deliberate, rattled the door, reverberating through the cabin like a gunshot in the silence.

“Come in,” Ani called, his voice steady but taut, a thread of anticipation tightening it.

The door creaked open, slow and heavy, and Dr. Sheetal Pradhan stepped inside, her silhouette stark against the storm’s wild glow. Rain glistened on her coat, droplets catching the light as they slid off, her hair damp and clinging to her face as she shook off the weather with a quick flick. Ani greeted her first, words tumbling out fast—“Welcome, Doctor”—then faltered, his breath catching mid-sentence, choking off into silence. Shri looked up from his papers, and the world slammed to a halt. His heart thudded hard against his ribs, breath snagging in his throat, body rooting to the chair as if the lightning had struck him dead. Sheetal’s face—those eyes, the curve of her jaw—was Nayantara, standing there, alive, impossible. The room spun, papers slipping from his grasp, fluttering to the floor like dead leaves scattered by a gust.

Sheetal’s gaze darted between them, confusion creasing her brow at Shri’s reaction—his wide, unblinking stare, his frozen stillness, like a man caught in a nightmare’s grip. Ani recovered first, though his voice quavered with the strain. “He... he has a medical issue,” he stammered, clutching at a lie, his caution a tightrope stretched thin. “Seizures, sometimes—not serious, we hope it’s temporary. Why don’t you come with me? I’ll have someone show you around.” He stepped forward, guiding her out with a hand that trembled faintly, his glance flicking back to Shri—a silent warning, a desperate plea. Sheetal hesitated, her eyes lingering on Shri’s statue-like form, flabbergasted by the intensity, but she nodded and followed, stepping into the corridor.

Ani handed her off to a nurse outside, his pulse hammering as he barked, “Show Dr. Pradhan the wards—and the hospital.” The storm roared louder, thunder vibrating the walls as he hurried back, slamming the cabin door shut behind him. Shri hadn’t moved—still locked in place, hands gripping

the desk's edge, his face a mask of shock and something deeper, something untamed, feral.

“Shri—Shri, it isn't her,” Ani said, voice low and urgent, crossing to him in two swift strides. He grabbed Shri's shoulders, shaking him gently at first, then harder, desperation creeping in. “Snap out of it!”

Shri blinked, the trance shattering, his chest heaving as he fumbled for a glass of water on the desk. His hand shook, spilling half across the scattered files before he managed to gulp it down, the cold liquid a jolt against the fire clawing his throat. Ani knelt beside him, steadying his arm, his presence a rock. “Shri, listen—I know what you're thinking. It's not her.”

Shri stared at the glass, his reflection warped in its curve, then spoke after a long, shuddering pause, his voice hoarse but clawing back control. “I know, Ani,” he rasped, each word a fight. “It can't be her... it shouldn't be her. But did you see? The semblance—it's like a mirror image.” His eyes lifted, haunted, searching Ani's face for something solid to cling to.

“I saw,” Ani admitted, his own voice tight with the weight of it, his grip firm on Shri's shoulder. “I saw, and it hit me too. But she's not Nayantara—she's Dr. Sheetal Pradhan. She's our way out of this damn place, our only hope.”

Shri's breath came heavy, ragged, his chest rising and falling like a man breaking the surface after too long underwater. “Why is this happening, Ani?” he whispered, the question a plea, a curse edged with despair, his fists clenching against the desk's worn wood. “To me—why me?”

Ani's hand tightened, a lifeline cutting through the storm—both the one raging outside and the one tearing Shri apart within. “We'll see,” he said, his tone fierce, resolute, a vow forged from years of standing by Shri's side. “We'll figure it out—together. But you hold on, you hear me? You don't break now.”

Lightning flared again, flooding the cabin in stark whites and blacks, casting Shri's face in a ghostly glow—grief, disbelief, and a flicker of steel warring within his hollowed eyes. The thunder rolled, a primal roar, as if the gods themselves were answering—taunting, warning, or perhaps beckoning. Sheetal's arrival wasn't mere chance; it was a reckoning, a thread of fate pulling tight, thrilling and terrifying, dragging Shri toward an edge he couldn't yet fathom.

Meanwhile, Sheetal lingered in the corridor, her mind buzzing as the nurse led her toward the wards. The storm outside rumbled on, its thunder a low growl that shuddered through the hospital's weathered walls, but it was the storm inside that cabin that gnawed at her, sharp and insistent. She hadn't even been properly introduced—no names exchanged, no handshakes offered—just a whirlwind of shock and evasion that left her reeling. Dr. Kashyap's hasty exit, Dr. Varma's frozen stare—it was equal parts absurd and unnerving, like she'd stumbled into a play mid-act, clueless of her role or the script. What had she walked into? Curiosity prickled her skin as she turned to the nurse, a young woman named Lata with a knowing smile and a clipboard tucked under her arm, her stride brisk against the tile.

“Who were those two doctors?” Sheetal asked, keeping her tone casual but threading it with intent, her eyes sharp on Lata's reaction.

Lata's smile widened, a flicker of pride lighting her dark eyes. “The one who escorted you out? That's Dr. Aniruddh Kashyap. And the other one—Dr. Shridhar Varma.”

Sheetal stopped dead in her tracks, her breath catching hard in her chest. Lata turned, eyebrows lifting at the sudden pause. “You mean the Dr. Shridhar Varma?” Sheetal pressed, her voice sharpening with disbelief, urgency creeping in. “From Vindhyavasini Hospital?”

“Yes,” Lata replied, nodding as if it were the most ordinary fact, her tone easy and unbothered.

A thrill surged through Sheetal, electric as the lightning splitting the sky beyond the corridor's narrow windows. She'd heard of them—everyone in her field had. Ani and Shri weren't just doctors; they were legends, giants of modern medicine whose names reverberated through lecture halls, textbooks, and whispered awe in hospital break rooms. She'd pored over their case studies at university—Dr. Kashyap's meticulous diagnostics that unraveled the trickiest cases, Dr. Varma's near-mystical gift for healing the hopeless, earning him the murmured title of “the magical healer” among her professors. Her fingers twitched at the memory, recalling the dog-eared pages of journals she'd devoured, each breakthrough a spark that fueled her own ambitions. She'd come to Shivalkot chasing another legend—Dr. Pratap, the grizzled trailblazer whose vacancy she was desperate to claim. Taking his place was a career-defining leap, worth every grueling year she'd spend in this rural nowhere. But this? Meeting Dr. Ani and Dr. Shri in person—working under their shadow—it was a dream she hadn't dared to voice, a twist of fate as wild and untamed as the storm raging outside.

Yet their first encounter gnawed at her, a splinter of unease lodging deep. Dr. Kashyap's forced calm, his quick lie about “seizures,” was strange enough—but Dr. Shridhar's reaction? That frozen, wide-eyed stare, as if she'd crawled out of a grave—it haunted her, a riddle wrapped in the thunder's echo. She glanced at Lata, who'd resumed her stride toward the ward, and ventured cautiously, “Is Dr. Shridhar... going through something?”

Lata slowed, her smile fading to a gentle, guarded curve as they stepped into the ward's dim light. Patients stirred in their beds, shadows shifting under the flickering bulbs, the air thick with the scent of antiseptic and quiet suffering. “Ever since he came here for Dr. Pratap's funeral,” she said, her voice softening, tinged with care, “he's been... different. Upset, not himself. They were close—very close, those two.”

Sheetal's chest tightened, a piece of the puzzle snapping into place. So that was it—grief, raw and unhealed, the kind that could lock a man in place, strip him bare. She'd seen it before: loss carving hollows in even the strongest souls. Dr. Pratap's death must've hit Dr. Shridhar like a sledgehammer, shattering the "magical healer" into something fragile, human. It made sense—his reaction wasn't about her, not truly. She exhaled, a knot of tension unwinding as Lata's words offered a tether to reason. "I see," she murmured, more to herself than the nurse, her mind settling into the explanation. The pain of losing someone dear—she knew that sting, if not its full depth. It accounted for the shock, the silence, the way he'd stared at her like a ghost made flesh.

Still, a whisper of doubt lingered, sharp and unplaceable, as she followed Lata deeper into the ward. The storm's growl softened to a distant rumble, but the air felt heavier now, charged with something unspoken, something she couldn't quite grasp. She squared her shoulders, brushing it aside. She was here for a purpose—to claim Dr. Pratap's legacy, to learn from the legends who'd somehow crossed her path. Whatever haunted Dr. Shridhar, whatever shadow had flickered across his face at her entrance, it was his burden—not hers. Not yet. She stepped forward, the clack of her heels against the tile a quiet resolve, ready to face the rural chaos and the giants who'd shape her destiny.

Back in the cabin, Shri sat alone, the storm's murmur fading beyond the walls. The glass of water trembled in his hand, the last drops spilling as he set it down with a soft clink, his breath steadying at last. Sanity crept back, a fragile thread pulling him from the abyss. No, it can't be her, he told himself, the words a mantra against the chaos swirling in his mind. Nayantara was gone—28 years gone—her face etched in memory, not flesh. Yet Dr. Sheetal's uncanny likeness had unraveled him, a specter stepping from his past into this storm-lit present. He rubbed his temples, a bitter laugh scraping out. What must she think of him now? Him—a legend,

a “magical healer”—reduced to a gaping, wild-eyed fool at their first meeting, a madman in a doctor’s coat.

Worry gnawed at him, sharp and cold as a blade. If he kept this up—staring at her like she’d risen from the dead—she wouldn’t last a week here. She’d bolt, their hope of escaping to the city vanishing with her, leaving him trapped in Shivalkot’s relentless grip. He couldn’t let that happen—not for Ani, not for himself. He clenched his fists, nails biting into his palms, a silent vow hardening within him. Get it together, he urged himself. Bury these ghosts before you ruin everything. The past had claimed too much already—Nayantara, Gajendra, Pratap—it wouldn’t claim his future too.

The door creaked faintly, a reminder that Ani had slipped out earlier, his footsteps long faded down the corridor toward the clinic where patients waited. Duty tugged at Shri—he couldn’t leave Ani to bear it alone, not after all they’d weathered together. He rose, smoothing his coat with hands that still carried a faint tremor, the familiar weight of responsibility steadying his pulse. With a final glance at the scattered papers—silent witnesses to his lapse—he stepped into the hall, the hospital’s steady hum swallowing the last tendrils of his dread.

Hours bled away in the clinic, a relentless blur of fevers and fractures, Shri and Ani moving in tandem as they always had—two halves of a well-oiled machine, their rhythm honed by years of trust. The storm had exhausted itself, its fury spent, leaving a damp stillness in its wake that settled over the hospital like a sigh. Patients dwindled, their voices fading into the night, until the ward grew quiet, the last footsteps echoing out into silence. Shri leaned against a counter in the clinic, wiping sweat from his brow with the back of his sleeve, when the door swung open. Sheetal stepped in, her coat crisp despite the day’s chaos, her presence a sudden jolt against the mundane calm.

He straightened, his heart lurching—not with the shock of before, but with a wary resolve he'd fought to reclaim. She met his gaze, her eyes sharp and assessing, no trace of the confusion she'd worn earlier in the cabin. Ani glanced between them, a flicker of relief softening his tired smile, but Shri felt the weight of her scrutiny—his earlier unraveling still raw in her memory, a first impression he couldn't erase. "Sheetal," he said, his voice steady now, offering a nod he hoped masked the faint tremor beneath it. "Welcome to Shivalkot."

She returned the nod, a faint curve touching her lips—curious, not unkind, but carrying a hint of something deeper, something unspoken. "Dr. Varma...Dr. Kashyap" she replied, her tone measured, deliberate, laced with a quiet weight that hinted at questions she hadn't yet voiced. "It's an honor."

The words hung in the air, simple yet loaded, a fragile bridge stretching from his haunted past to this uncertain new beginning. Ani clapped a hand on Shri's shoulder, a silent 'You've got this' cutting through the tension, and the cabin's ghosts retreated—if only for the moment. Shri exhaled, the burden lighter—not gone, but shared. Sheetal was here, their lifeline, and he'd fight to keep her, to keep pushing forward. The night stretched ahead, quiet but alive, a chapter closing with a whisper of hope amid the shadows.

Chapter 21

Sheetal stepped into Dr. Pratap's old cottage, the wooden beams and mud-plastered walls exhaling a faint musk of earth and incense that hung heavy in the air. The space had been spiritually cleansed after his passing—a ritual of swirling smoke and rhythmic chants to sweep away the lingering echoes of death—yet it carried a quiet weight, as if the walls still cradled his shadow. A village woman, broad-shouldered and brisk in her movements, had been hired to tend it; she'd swept the floors to a dull shine and left a simple meal simmering on a small stove—rice and dal, its steam curling upward in the dim light, a humble offering to the new occupant. Weary from the journey and the jarring welcome at the hospital—Dr. Shridhar's frozen, unblinking stare, Dr. Ani's hurried deflection—Sheetal forced down the food, each bite a mechanical chore against the knot in her stomach. Her limbs ached as she collapsed onto the narrow bed, the mattress creaking under her weight, but sleep danced just beyond her grasp, elusive and mocking.

Shri's expression haunted her, flickering behind her closed lids like a memory caught in storm-light. Those wide, unblinking eyes, the way he'd gone rigid as stone—it wasn't just stress, not the neat explanation she'd tried to stitch together. She rolled onto her side, the coarse blanket scratching against her skin, and wrestled with reason. He's grieving Dr. Pratap, she told herself, the nurse's words looping in her mind: They were close—very close. A rational anchor—a doctor buckling under the weight of loss, his composure frayed by sorrow. Yet doubt gnawed at her, a splinter she couldn't pluck free, sharp and insistent. What had he seen in her face to unravel him so completely? The question coiled tighter, her mind a restless tangle of half-formed theories, until exhaustion finally dragged her under. She didn't notice when she slipped into a fitful doze, the night blurring into a haze of fragmented dreams.

A sharp knock jolted her awake, sunlight spilling through the cottage's lone window in dusty beams that cut across the room. Chandra, the maid, stood at the threshold—her sari faded but crisp, her voice a soft summons breaking the morning stillness. “Breakfast, memsaab,” she called, already bustling in with a broom in one hand and a pot in the other, her movements swift and practiced. Sheetal blinked, the fog of sleep clinging thick as she dragged herself from the door back into the room. She stumbled to the cramped washroom, freshening up to shake the haze, then sat to a plate of parathas and a steaming cup of chai, the warmth seeping into her hands, steadying her nerves. With a quiet nod of thanks to Chandra, she stepped outside, the morning air crisp against her skin, and set off for the hospital, her strides purposeful despite the weight still pressing on her chest.

The road unfurled before her, a stark contrast to the Shivalkot of 28 years past, pieced together from whispered tales she'd caught in passing. Where once only silence and dense forest reigned, now bikes sputtered along dirt paths, auto-rickshaws trundled with rattling frames, and buses roared at steady intervals, their horns slicing through the quiet like jagged blades. Dust swirled under her feet, kicked up by the village waking to a rhythm she'd yet to learn, and the hospital loomed ahead—its weathered facade a sentinel of time and toil, standing firm against the encroaching clamor.

Shri was already there when she arrived, his coat crisp despite the faint shadows bruising the skin beneath his eyes. He stood in the corridor, a chart gripped in his hand, his presence a quiet force amid the morning's hum of nurses and patients stirring awake. “Good morning, Sheetal,” he said, his voice steady, a practiced calm that masked the storm she'd glimpsed the night before, though it didn't quite reach his eyes. She returned the greeting—“Good morning, Dr. Varma”—her tone polite but threaded with curiosity, her gaze lingering a heartbeat too long before she turned to her rounds, her steps deliberate, her mind still circling that haunted look he'd worn.

The morning stretched thin with patients—a child with a fever burning hot under her touch, an elder with a cough that rattled deep in his chest—each case a thread weaving her into Shivalkot’s pulse. Shri moved through his own duties, their paths crossing briefly in the ward—a nod here, a glance there—each exchange measured, restrained, a careful dance around the tension neither acknowledged. When the last patient shuffled out, his shoulders hunched with age, Shri retreated to his cabin, the door clicking shut behind him with a soft finality. He sank into his chair, the familiar creak of the leather a small comfort against the storm brewing within, and reached for the journals—yellowed pages of cases long closed, a lifeline to divert his restless mind. His fingers traced the faded ink, but his thoughts snagged on Sheetal’s face—Nayantara’s echo, sharp and undeniable—and the fragile resolve he’d forged in the night wavered. The words blurred before him, a silent battle raging beneath his calm: to bury the past deep where it couldn’t claw free, or to let it rise and swallow him whole.

Ramesh arrived late that morning, his usual brisk stride slowed by the weight of unseen burdens, his absence a quiet void in the hospital’s rhythm until he shuffled through the door. His face was drawn, his shirt rumpled as if he’d slept in it, the lines of exhaustion etched deeper than usual. “Morning, Saheb,” he murmured to Shri, his voice rough but warm, a faint nod passing between them like a ritual of reassurance before he slipped into his duties—charts to fetch, trays to prep, the steady hum of his presence stitching the day back together. Shri barely looked up from his journals, the ink a fragile shield against the thoughts still circling Sheetal’s face, but he felt the comfort of Ramesh’s return, a tether to normalcy grounding him amid the chaos of his own mind.

Half an hour later, a clamor erupted outside—a cacophony of shouts, clattering metal, and hurried footsteps that shattered the cabin’s stillness like glass. Shri’s head snapped up, pulse spiking as he shoved the journals aside and bolted for the door, the pages fluttering in his wake. The ward

was chaos: nurses darted like startled birds, their voices overlapping in sharp, urgent bursts—“Get the IV!” “Oxygen, now!”—as they swarmed an empty bed dragged into the center. There, Ramesh lay sprawled, his broad frame sinking into the mattress, his chest heaving in shallow, desperate gasps that tore through the air. Sweat beaded his brow, glistening under the harsh lights, his eyes wide and wild, locked on Sheetal with a terror that chilled the room to its bones. A nurse wrestled an oxygen mask over his face, the hiss of it cutting through the din like a lifeline, while Sheetal pressed her hands to his chest, her movements swift and precise, fighting to steady a heart that bucked and faltered beneath her palms.

“What happened?” Shri demanded, his voice slicing through the fray as he shoved forward, his coat flapping open, his own heart hammering against his ribs like a caged beast.

Sheetal didn’t flinch, her focus razor-sharp even as she answered, her breath coming fast. “Looks like a cardiac arrest. He was attending to a patient when I came in—just turned around and collapsed right there.” Her eyes flicked to Shri, a flash of concern breaking through her calm for an instant, then snapped back to Ramesh, whose gasps rasped against the mask, his gaze still pinned to her, unblinking, as if she were a phantom risen from the shadows to claim him.

Shri froze for a split second, a jolt of recognition searing through him like lightning. Not again. Ramesh’s stare—so like his own the night before, that same stunned, haunted look—mirrored the shock that had gripped him at Sheetal’s arrival. Did he see it too? Nayantara’s echo in her face, a ghost stepping into the living world to unravel them both? His mind raced, grasping for reason, for anything to anchor this spiraling madness. He swallowed hard, forcing his voice steady, his doctor’s mask slipping into place over the panic clawing beneath. “Maybe it’s stress—something from home,” he said, the words a flimsy shield, loud enough for the nurses to

hear, to cling to as explanation. “We’ll sort it later. You handle the clinic patients—I’ve got this.”

Sheetal hesitated, her hands stilling on Ramesh’s chest as the IV line pierced his arm, the drip a lifeline threading into his veins, its steady rhythm a counterpoint to the chaos. She met Shri’s gaze, searching his eyes for a beat, a flicker of doubt shadowing her own—did she sense the lie beneath his calm, the tremor he buried? But she nodded, stepping back, her coat stained with the sweat of the fight, her breath steadying. “Alright,” she said, her voice clipped, decisive, then turned to the nurse beside her. “Keep me posted—every change.” She strode toward the clinic, her heels clicking a determined retreat against the tile, leaving Shri in the eye of the storm she’d helped quell.

He knelt beside Ramesh, the man’s gasps slowing under the oxygen’s mercy, his eyes fluttering as the terror ebbed, leaving exhaustion in its wake. Shri’s hand found his wrist, the pulse thready but there, a fragile beat he clung to like a lifeline of his own. “Hold on, Ramesh,” he murmured, low and fierce, a vow to the man who’d stood by him through decades of pain, a constant in a world that kept breaking. The nurses buzzed around him—IV secured, monitors beeping a steady rhythm—but Shri’s mind churned, a tempest of doubt and dread. Stress? Family errands? He knew better—knew it in his bones. Ramesh had seen her—or what he thought was her—and it had broken him, just as it had broken Shri the night before. The hospital’s walls seemed to close in, the air thick with questions he couldn’t voice, not yet—not to the nurses, not to Sheetal, not even to himself. Whatever Sheetal carried in her face, it was no mere coincidence—it was a reckoning, a force tearing at the seams of their fragile world.

After a long stretch of battling Ramesh’s crisis—hours that bled into a haze of monitors, murmured reassurances, and the steady beep of machines stabilizing—Shri slipped away, his legs heavy as lead, his mind a storm of

jagged edges threatening to cut him apart. The hospital's corridors buzzed faintly, a distant pulse of life carrying on as he made for the canteen, drawn by the primal need for air, for a moment to breathe outside the chaos. He rounded the corner, the scent of chai and stale biscuits wafting through the open door, a mundane comfort—and there she was. Sheetal, seated alone at a chipped table near the window, a steaming cup of chai curling tendrils of vapor before her. Her hands cradled it as if it could steady the nerves still frayed from the morning's whirlwind, her gaze lost somewhere beyond the glass, the late morning light catching the faint sheen of sweat still clinging to her brow.

Shri slowed, his intent clear—to approach, to check on her after the madness of Ramesh's collapse, to bridge the gap their first meeting had carved. But then he saw it. Her fingers, restless, drifted from the cup to a necklace at her throat—a simple chain with a small pendant, unremarkable yet devastating. She toyed with it absently, twisting it between her thumb and forefinger, a gesture so familiar it slammed into him like a physical blow, knocking the air from his lungs. He stopped dead in his tracks, breath snagging in his chest, the world tilting beneath his feet. Nayantara—his Nayan—had done that very thing, countless times by the stream, by the hearth, her beads clicking softly as she'd laughed or fallen quiet, a habit etched so deep into his soul it was as much a part of her as her voice. The memory surged, vivid and cruel—her dark eyes glinting with mischief, her fingers dancing over the strand—and now here it was again, alive in Sheetal, as if time had folded in on itself to taunt him.

He stood frozen, rooted to the canteen's threshold, the clatter of cups and distant chatter fading to a dull roar in his ears. Sheetal sat there, oblivious, the necklace glinting as she twisted it, each motion a perfect mirror to Nayantara's—a ghost made flesh, sipping chai in this battered, mundane room. His mind reeled, picturing her—his Nayan—risen from the valley's depths, her emerald sari traded for a doctor's coat, her warmth no longer

stolen but pulsing right before him, alive and impossible. Was it her? Could it be? The rational part of him screamed no—28 years, the crash, the bodies hauled up cold and still—but his heart, treacherous and raw, thundered otherwise, a traitor to reason. His hands trembled at his sides, a cold sweat breaking across his neck, his body stunned as if she'd turned and called his name across the decades.

Sheetal shifted then, her head tilting slightly, and the spell quivered, teetering on the edge of breaking. She hadn't seen him yet, still lost in her own thoughts, the necklace slipping back against her skin as she lifted the chai to her lips, the steam curling upward like a fragile thread. Shri's chest heaved, a ragged breath escaping him, and he forced his feet to stay planted, battling the urge to stumble forward, to demand answers from a woman who couldn't possibly hold them. Nayantara was gone—he'd buried her, mourned her, carried her loss like a stone in his chest—but this echo, this cruel mimicry, clawed at the scars he'd fought so hard to seal. The canteen's walls seemed to close in, the air thick with the weight of what he'd lost and what stood before him—a living riddle, a whisper from the past he couldn't yet unravel.

A hand clapped his shoulder, jarring Shri from the reverie that had pinned him to the canteen's threshold. He flinched, the ghost of Nayantara's necklace still twisting in his mind's eye, but Ani's voice—steady, grounding—cut through the haze like a lifeline. "Ramesh seems fine now," Ani said, his tone warm but edged with weariness from the day's toll. "Just checked on him. Sorry I was late—got stuck on a long call with the office folks before I could get here."

Shri exhaled, forcing the tremor from his breath, grasping at the normalcy Ani offered. "No worries, Ani," he replied, managing a faint smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "Come, let's have some chai." He gestured

toward a table, his legs moving on instinct, though his heart still thudded an unsteady rhythm against his ribs.

Sheetal glanced up as they approached, her chai cooling in her hands, the necklace now still against her collarbone, its quiet gleam a silent taunt. She rose, closing the distance with a brisk stride, her expression a mix of relief and lingering unease from the morning's chaos. "Thankfully, Ramesh is fine," she said, her voice carrying a faint tremor, betraying the calm she tried to project. "I just can't wrap my head around what happened—sudden, out of nowhere, like a bolt from the blue."

"Sit, Sheetal," Ani said, pointing to an empty chair with a nod, his calm a practiced shield as he settled across from her, his chair scraping softly against the floor. Shri slid into his seat beside Ani, his face a mask of composure—stunned beneath the surface, but cloaked as always, the years of burying pain honing his facade to a fine edge.

"Don't know," Ani offered, leaning back, his fingers drumming lightly on the table's chipped surface, a casual rhythm to offset the tension. "The ECG doesn't point to any previous condition—no signs of trouble lurking there."

"Exactly my point," Sheetal pressed, her brow furrowing, her chai forgotten as she leaned in, her voice sharpening with urgency. "It's too sudden—too strange, too out of place."

"He should be alright in a day or two," Ani said, his voice even, deflecting her probe with a shrug, steering the conversation back to safer ground.

"We'll find out what's behind it."

Shri cast a sidelong glance at Ani, a knowing flicker passing between them—a shared understanding they wouldn't voice—then spoke, his tone measured, careful. "Could be overstressed—something from home weighing on him." The lie rolled off his tongue, a threadbare excuse he'd

clung to earlier in the ward, though his pulse betrayed the truth he refused to speak aloud, hammering against his chest.

“Probably,” Ani agreed, his nod too quick, his eyes darting to Shri—a silent plea to hold the line, to keep the facade intact.

Sheetal’s gaze sharpened, flitting between them like a hawk, her fingers brushing the edge of her cup in a restless dance. “Somehow, I feel something’s not right,” she said, her words slow, deliberate, each one landing like a stone in still water. “Too many things happening without reason—too many pieces that don’t fit.”

Ani forced a nervous laugh, the sound brittle in the canteen’s stale air, cracking under the weight of her scrutiny. “You’re reading too much into nothing,” he said, waving a hand dismissively, though his smile didn’t reach his eyes, faltering at the edges.

Sheetal tilted her head, a faint smirk tugging at her lips, a glimmer of scepticism in her dark eyes. “Probably,” she conceded, her tone lightening but laced with doubt, a thread of suspicion she didn’t fully release. “A new place is getting to me—making me see shadows where there aren’t any. Should be alright once I settle in.” She rose, brushing her coat smooth with a quick, decisive motion. “Ok then, catch you both later.”

“Take care,” Ani said, his voice overlapping with Shri’s quiet “See you,” their farewells a rote harmony as she nodded and slipped out, her footsteps fading into the corridor’s steady hum, leaving a wake of unspoken questions rippling behind her.

Ani turned to Shri, his gaze piercing, cutting straight through the silence that settled over them. “I saw what happened there,” he said, his voice low, direct, slicing to the bone of what they’d both witnessed.

Shri stiffened, his chai untouched, steam curling upward into the stillness like a fading ghost. “What?” he asked, though he knew, the word a reflex against the truth pressing in.

“Don’t read too much into it,” Ani pressed, leaning closer, his tone firm but threaded with concern. “Lots of girls play with their necklaces—it’s a habit, nothing more, nothing significant.”

Shri’s eyes met his, steady but shadowed, a crack splintering through his armor. “So, you noticed it too,” he murmured, the admission soft, heavy with the weight of recognition they couldn’t escape.

“I did,” Ani admitted, his tone softening, a reluctant concession, “but I wouldn’t read too much into it—not yet. It’s not her, Shri.”

“No it’s not, Ani,” Shri said, his voice firm, though it wavered at the edges, trembling with the effort to believe his own words. “...cannot be her. She’s gone.” The statement was a mantra, a shield against the ache that clawed at him, but it shook with the burden of 28 years—years of loss, of certainty, now fraying at the seams.

Ani reached over, tapping Shri’s shoulder with a hand that carried the weight of their shared history, his touch a lifeline in the storm. “Listen, my friend,” he said, his voice thick with regret, rough with the guilt of what he couldn’t fix. “I’m sorry how things have turned out—sorry you’re caught in this mess again. There’s nothing much either of us can do but bear it. Stick it out for a few days—you can come back to the city when things settle here.” He paused, then added, a reluctant shift in his tone, “By the way, I’ll have to leave tomorrow. Neha and the kids have given me the ultimatum—family’s pulling me back. Also, the board’s convening the day after—can’t miss it.”

Shri blinked, the dates jolting him from the fog that had clouded his mind, snapping him back to the present. “Oh, yes,” he said, rubbing his brow with

a tired hand, the lines of exhaustion deepening. “I totally forgot—the days are all messed up in my head, running together.”

Ani managed a nervous smile, faint and fleeting, barely masking the strain beneath it. “It’s ok, Shri. I’ll call when your input’s needed—keep you in the loop.”

Shri nodded, a simple dip of his head, his throat tightening with words he couldn’t say. “Sure,” he managed, the single syllable carrying more weight than it should.

“I didn’t want to leave you,” Ani said, his voice dropping low, raw with guilt that gnawed at him. “Not now—not in this situation, with everything piling up like this.”

“Hey, Ani,” Shri cut in, forcing a grin that felt foreign on his lips, his tone lighter than the heaviness dragging at his chest. “Don’t worry about it. I’m a grown man—I’ll handle everything here, I promise you that.”

The words hung bold between them, a vow he willed into truth, though his heart whispered otherwise, a quiet tremor beneath the bravado. He needed Ani—his rock, his tether—more than ever, with Sheetal’s face stirring ghosts he couldn’t silence and Ramesh’s collapse cracking the fragile shell he’d built around his pain. But he’d gotten better at cloaking it, the mask of calm a skill honed over decades of loss, polished to a fine art. Ani’s eyes searched his, a flicker of doubt lingering in their depths, but he nodded, accepting the lie for now, trusting Shri’s resolve even as it teetered. The chai grew cold before them, the canteen’s hum a quiet witness to a friendship stretched thin—and a man balancing on the edge of his own breaking point, holding fast to a promise he wasn’t sure he could keep.

Chapter 22

Shri stood in the ward, flipping through Ramesh's reports, the pages crinkling under his fingers like they were trying to tell him something soft and shaky. Around him, the hospital buzzed—monitors beeping, footsteps bouncing off the tiles—a steady hum that drowned out the mess of the last few days. He looked up at Sheetal, her white coat a little crooked from running around all morning, shadows tugging at her eyes, and cracked a small, tired smile, the kind he didn't let out often. "Thank God, nothing too bad," he said, his voice even but lighter than usual, like he'd dodged a punch. "Ramesh's reports are mostly okay—he's pulling through, and fast. Just a couple days."

Sheetal gave a quick nod, her shoulders dropping a bit, tension leaking out. But her dark eyes flickered with something else—relief, sure, but mixed with a quiet tangle of questions she couldn't pin down, ever since Ramesh hit the floor. Shri saw it, that little wrinkle on her forehead, the way she stared a second too long, and his voice softened, rough around the edges with worry. "You look beat," he said, gentle like he was testing the waters, years of patching people up telling him she was close to cracking. "Take a breather, huh? No fires to put out yet—I've got this."

She pushed a stray hair off her face, slow and worn out, but forced a small grin, stubbornness peeking through the exhaustion. "I'm fine, sir," she said, her voice steady even though it wobbled underneath, holding herself up against the weight of it all. "A hot chai'll fix me right up."

Shri's grin stretched a little wider, a flicker of warmth sneaking past his usual wall, a rare peek at the guy buried under the title. "Alright, off you go then," he said, tipping his head toward the canteen, his eyes hanging on her a moment—grateful, solid—before he dropped back to the reports. Those neat rows of numbers felt like a shield, keeping the ghosts at bay, the ones that muttered in the corners of his head, nipping at his calm.

In the canteen, Sheetal plopped down at a corner table, the chipped wood cold under her hands, steadying her as she sank into the chair. The air smelled faintly of old tea and greasy snacks, a low buzz of chatter floating from some orderlies by the counter, their voices mixing with the clatter of cups. She wrapped her hands around her chai—already gone lukewarm—and let her thoughts drift, picking through the craziness of Shivalkot. That stormy night she rolled in, Shri’s wide-eyed stare that cut too deep, Ramesh dropping like a stone—it all swirled together, jagged pieces she couldn’t fit. Her fingers wandered to the pendant around her neck, twisting it absentmindedly, a lifeline she clung to as she tried to make sense of this place, every bit of it sharp and strange.

The canteen lady shuffled over—short and sturdy, her face creased with years, sari hitched up tight—and plunked a fresh, steaming chai in front of her, the cup clinking loud enough to jolt Sheetal out of her daze. “You’ve only been here a handful of days,” the lady said, her voice scratchy but soft, slicing through the hum with a rough kind of care, “and it’s already been a whirlwind, hasn’t it?”

Sheetal’s mouth quirked into a half-smile, her fingers stalling on the pendant as she met the woman’s eyes. “Guess that’s just a doctor’s life,” she said, tossing in a little laugh to cover how bone-tired she felt, a flimsy wall against the truth.

The lady cocked her head, her eyes narrowing, sharp like she’d seen this before. “Sure, but you’ve got to rest sometime, or it’ll grind you down,” she said, firm and no-nonsense, the kind of warning that came from watching too many folks collapse.

Sheetal let out a laugh—quiet, real, spilling out before she could stop it, a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. “Okay, but what do I even do with a break?” she shot back, her voice perking up, curious now. “There’s nothing around here—at least, nothing I’ve stumbled on.”

The lady's eyes popped wide, a flash of shock crossing her wrinkled face as she planted her hands on her hips, play-acting offended. "What're you talking about?" she huffed, her voice climbing with a spark of pride.

"There's plenty! The markets—go poke around, grab some trinkets, stuff you'd never see in those big cities, real bits of this place's heart."

Sheetal's smile slipped, doubt creeping in, dimming her flicker of interest.

"I don't even know where those markets are," she admitted, her voice dropping, unsure like she was still finding her footing. "And I'm not ready to go alone—not with everything feeling so... new."

The lady's face softened, her eyes warming up as she nodded, getting it.

"Fair enough—it's all strange for you," she said, her tone easing up. "Sister Lata can take you. Her village has the best markets—full of old traditional stuff, things you'd love. Nothing like those city bazaars you're used to."

Sheetal paused, glancing at her chai like it might spill some wisdom, steam curling up in little wisps. "I don't want to bug her," she said, quiet, hesitant. "She's got enough on her plate with nursing."

"I'll handle it," the lady said, waving off the worry with a quick flick of her hand, stubborn as a mule. "Maybe late afternoon, when the sun's not so mean—she'll show you. You'll get it then."

Sheetal's smile crept back, small but real, a glint of excitement breaking through her weariness. "Alright, you win," she said, lifting the chai to her lips, the heat sinking into her like a tiny promise. The thought stuck with her—a chance to step out, peek past the hospital's chokehold—and maybe find something fresh in this odd, shadowy place, something she couldn't quite grab yet.

Back in his cabin, Shri dropped into his chair, the leather creaking under him like an old friend who didn't have much to say. He gripped the desk's edge, fingers digging in, like the scratched-up wood could hold him steady

against the mess kicking up inside. The air felt heavy, thick with memories he couldn't shake—Sheetal's every move flashing Nayantara's face, that necklace of hers a cruel little echo of the beads he'd fumbled with by the stream years ago, hands shaking. He shut his eyes tight, begging his head to quit, to shove down the crazy idea that Nayan was back, crawling up from the valley after 28 years of nothing but silence. His heart wouldn't let go, thumping hard with a dumb, shaky hope he didn't want to feel—a chance she'd come back to him. But his brain fought back, hard and cold, a wall he'd built up after losing her, standing tall against that ache.

She's gone, he muttered in his head, over and over, like a scratched record, digging it deep until it stuck. *Gone, gone, gone*. Still, it nagged at him, a thorn he couldn't pull out, and with Ani gone that morning—his voice just a fuzzy memory on the phone, saying he'd check in—Shri was left solo, staring down his own mess. Ani'd been his rock, the one who'd watched Sheetal twist that necklace and told him, *Don't make it more than it is*, keeping him sane. Now, alone, the cabin felt smaller, the journals on his desk just sitting there, watching him wrestle with something he couldn't say out loud. Every day, he piled up the denial higher—Nayan wasn't back, couldn't be, no matter how she echoed in Sheetal. He wasn't ready to let that thought in, not even a whisper, not when believing it might break him for good.

He leaned back, letting out a rough breath, the hospital's hum sneaking through the door—a thread to hang onto, something to pull him from the edge. His fingers grazed Ramesh's reports, a little win scribbled in ink, but it didn't hush the fight inside. Denial was his bunker now, keeping out the hope he couldn't risk. Sheetal—her voice drifting from the canteen, that pendant glinting in his mind—kept banging on the cracks, threatening to let the past rush in, but he clenched his jaw, staring at the ceiling's chipped plaster, begging those ghosts to stay down.

The canteen lady wouldn't let up, her voice steady and pushy until Sister Lata gave in with a shrug and a lopsided grin, agreeing to drag Sheetal to the village markets that afternoon. Shri heard about it later, a tiny knot in his chest loosening—Sheetal gone for a bit might hush the noise in his head, let him breathe without her stirring up old shadows. He gave them a quick nod from the ward, ducking back to his cabin as they hopped into an autorickshaw, its engine coughing awake with a puff of smoke. The ride bumped along dusty roads, the hospital's plain walls blurring into green fields and golden light, until the market opened up in front of them—a loud, colorful mess, stitched together from Shivalkot's rough edges, alive and kicking.

Sheetal stepped out, sucking in a quick breath, steadying herself against the sight. Stalls crowded the tight lanes, bamboo frames sagging under piles of stuff—shawls in deep reds and browns hanging like flags, brass bangles gleaming like loot, clay pots with tribal scratches standing watch, trinkets swinging on ropes, catching the sun in bursts of silver and blue. The air buzzed—hawkers hollering prices like a song, roasted corn tang mixing with sticky-sweet jaggery, kids zipping through, their giggles slicing through the racket. Sheetal's eyes went big, a rush bubbling up—raw, real, nothing like the city's cold shine, pulling her in hard. She wandered stall to stall, fingers brushing a wooden box worn smooth, then amber beads glowing warm, her pulse jumping with every find. “This place is wild,” she mumbled, caught up in it, hardly noticing Lata peel off toward some bright dresses fluttering in the breeze.

She was crouched by a trinket stall, a little elephant pendant cool in her hand, when a voice—sharp, warm, way too close—cut through like a slap. “Hey, when'd you get back?”

She shot up, spinning around to a woman—maybe late forties or early fifties, sari faded but tidy, gray streaks in her bun, her face rough but lit up

like she knew her. A basket of greens dangled from her arm, swinging as she stepped in, eyes shining with dead-certain recognition. Sheetal blinked, brow scrunching, gripping the pendant tighter. “Back from where?” she stumbled out, voice tight, a nervous edge creeping in. “Do I know you?”

The woman laughed, loud and sure, eyes crinkling as she brushed it off. “Oh, come on! The hospital—years back, my first kid. You kept me sane, spinning those tribal stories—don’t tell me you forgot!”

Sheetal’s gut twisted, a cold shiver running up her neck even with the sun beating down, her heart picking up speed. “No, I’m sorry,” she said, her voice climbing, sharp enough to cut through the market’s noise. “I just got here a few days ago. You’ve got me mixed up with somebody else—somebody from before.”

“No, no, no!” the woman pushed back, grin locked in place, eyes boring into Sheetal’s with a freaky intensity that glued her feet down. “It’s you—I know it! Dr. Varma’s fiancée! You two took off for Bombay way back. My husband got a job there too—we just rolled in two days ago to visit family.” She stopped, tilting her head, her smile turning soft, almost amazed as she looked Sheetal over. “God, you’ve changed, but it’s you!”

Sheetal went stiff, the pendant slipping out to clack against the stall, lost in the market’s hum, her calm cracking wide open. Her mouth dried up, words jamming in her throat as the woman kept talking, not seeing the shock pinning Sheetal there. *Dr. Varma’s fiancée?* It hit her like a slap—Shri’s stunned look that first night, Ramesh dropping under her hands, the way he’d stared at her necklace—all smashing together, spinning her head until she couldn’t breathe. Before she could spit anything out, a man pushed through the crowd—tall, thin, face carved with lines, going hard as he spotted her. His eyes bugged out, then slit narrow, his skin turning chalky like he’d seen a ghost step out of the grave. He grabbed his wife’s arm, yanking her back mid-word, quick and rough.

“Wait—what—” the woman yelled, tripping as he pulled her off, her basket swinging wild while he leaned in, hissing something hot in her ear. Sheetal caught the end, faint but like a knife through the noise: “No, that’s not *Nayantara*...”

His whispers sped up, panicked, his grip iron as he hauled her through the crowd, dodging stalls and people. The woman twisted back, throwing a wild look at Sheetal—shock, doubt, fear all fighting in her eyes, her mouth open like she might shout. Then they were gone, sucked into the swarm, leaving Sheetal stranded, gasping, the market’s buzz fading into a weird blur. Her heart pounded loud, *Nayantara* sinking into her brain like a splinter, slicing through the thrill she’d felt, leaving a cold, empty pit.

Lata’s voice piped up, cheery and clueless, snapping her out of it. “Got a dress for my niece—hey, you okay?” Sheetal turned, plastering on a calm face, but her hands shook, the pendant digging into her palm. “Yeah, I’m good,” she lied, her voice thin, ready to snap, *Nayantara* banging louder in her chest. The market’s charm dulled, just a stage for the mystery clawing at her—*Who was I to them? Why’s that name unlocking Shivalkot’s shadows, doors I don’t know if I can face?*

The autorickshaw rattled back to the hospital, engine grumbling under the market’s dying hum, dust kicking up around them like a gritty curtain. Sheetal sat next to Lata, hands locked tight in her lap, the elephant pendant jabbing her skin—a little stab tying her to that woman’s words, a buzz she couldn’t shake. Fields and sunlight blurred by, but her head roared louder than the rickshaw, swirling with questions and half-baked fears. She wanted to spin around, grab Lata, and yell, *Who’s Nayantara?*—rip the truth loose right there. *Who was she? Why’d that lady know me, why’d her husband look like he’d seen a corpse?* But she bit down hard, swallowing it, staring at the trees whipping past, their branches waving like they knew something. Things were shaky enough—Shri’s stare, Ramesh’s fall—she couldn’t kick

the hornet's nest, not yet, not without knowing what'd sting. Silence was all she had, thin but holding, as the hospital's shape grew closer, its beat-up walls promising answers she wasn't ready to chase.

That night in Dr. Pratap's cottage, the quiet turned mean, making every thought scream louder. Sheetal lay under a scratchy blanket, the ceiling's cracks glaring down like eyes that wouldn't blink, judging her. *Nayantara* wrapped around her mind, tight and hissing, a snake she couldn't shake off. Sleep wouldn't come—the market's buzz was gone, swapped for a parade of questions stomping through her head. The woman's voice rang—"Dr. Varma's fiancée!"—clear and cutting, deeper every time, her husband's white face yelling silently from the dark corners. She flipped over, the mattress groaning, pressing her hands to her eyes, begging the pictures to stop, just for a second. She wanted to march to Shri, dump it all out—*Who's Nayantara? Why're they seeing her in me?*—but it caught on something rough, a line she couldn't step over. He was her boss, a big name she barely knew, a guy she'd met days ago in a blur of emergencies and weird looks. Digging into his past, picking at his scars, felt wrong—rude, pushy, too far past a boundary she couldn't even see, muddied by his quiet pain and the way she seemed to rattle him.

She let out a shaky breath, lost in the cottage's stillness, yanking the blanket tighter, its rough edges no match for the cold creeping in. Things had settled a little after the chaos—Ramesh getting better, Ani leaving, the hospital's hum holding them together—and she gripped that, scared to break it with dumb questions. Shri's smile that morning, small and warm, popped into her head—a rope she didn't want to cut. But the nights turned on her, *Nayantara* whispering nonstop, chewing up her calm. She couldn't ask—not now, not with everything wobbling under her.

The truth was there, simmering, something she felt deep but couldn't grab, and Sheetal lay stuck, torn between wanting to know and playing it safe, the weight of it all pressing down like a rock as the night dragged on, dawn's first light sneaking in—a promise she wasn't ready to take.

Chapter 23

Nearly a week had passed since Ramesh's collapse, his recovery a slow, stubborn crawl back from the edge, each day a quiet fight against the fragility that lingered. The hospital discharged him with stern orders—maximum rest, minimal strain—etched into his chart like a lifeline he was meant to clutch. But the very next week, there he was, back in the corridors that had cradled him for decades, his broad frame shuffling through the familiar chaos of Shivalkot Hospital. It was his lifeline, those walls a tapestry of upheavals and quiet triumphs woven through his 35 years—floods that drowned the roads, feuds that split families, the steady march of change that reshaped the village around him. Yet now, a new shadow loomed: Sheetal. He dodged her like a ghost in the halls, his steps quickening when she neared, his gaze fixed on the scuffed tiles, never daring to meet her eyes. If duty forced their paths to cross, he'd nod curtly at her commands, his voice a murmur barely audible, then flee the moment he could—slipping away like smoke through her fingers, a wisp she couldn't grasp.

Sheetal noticed it all, the avoidance a silent scream that rang louder with each encounter, impossible to ignore. She mirrored his dance, steering clear when she could, her own steps measured, her presence softened to spare him—but it gnawed at her, a relentless ache beneath her ribs. Curiosity burned hotter with each averted glance, swelling into a pain sharp and unyielding, a bruise she couldn't soothe. Who was Nayantara? Why did her name—whispered in a market's clamor, etched in Ramesh's wide-eyed shock as his heart faltered—carry such weight, such power to unravel? Answers eluded her, a locked door no one would open, taunting her with its silence. And yet Ramesh... he was the key. Decades here, a witness to the hospital's buried secrets—he'd seen her, recognized something in her face in that shattering moment before he fell. She needed to know, the need

festering like an open wound, raw and insistent, driving her toward a brink she couldn't name.

One crisp morning, with the sun slanting through the ward's windows in golden shards and Shri buried in a surgery down the hall, Sheetal seized her chance. She summoned Ramesh to her cabin, her voice firm over the crackling intercom, her pulse a steady thud of resolve hammering in her chest. The door creaked open, a reluctant groan, and there he stood—meek, hesitant, framed in the doorway like a man teetering on a precipice, his hand gripping the knob as if it could anchor him against the storm he sensed brewing. “You summoned me, Madam?” he asked, his voice low, rough around the edges, eyes darting to the floor, the open door a lifeline he clung to with quiet desperation.

“Yes,” Sheetal said, her tone even but edged with steel, a doctor's authority honed by years of command. “Come in and close the door.”

Ramesh shifted, his shoulders hunching inward, a flicker of resistance tightening his grip. “It's alright, Madam,” he mumbled, clinging to the threshold like a child stalling punishment. “You can tell me what you need from here.”

Sheetal's patience snapped, irritation flaring hot in her chest as she leaned forward, her voice rising with a sharp, unyielding edge. “Just come in and close the door behind you—now.”

He flinched, a deer caught in a hunter's sight, his resolve crumbling under her command. He had no choice but to obey, stepping inside with a shuffle, the door clicking shut with a hollow thud that sealed them in. He stood there, head bowed, hands clasped tight before him, fingers twisting together, waiting for her next blow. The cabin's air thickened, the faint hum of the hospital muffled beyond the walls, a ticking clock on her desk the only sound cutting the silence—a relentless heartbeat between them.

“How long have you been working here, Ramesh?” Sheetal asked, her tone deceptively calm, a lure to draw him in, though her fingers tightened around a pen on her desk, knuckles whitening with the force.

Ramesh blinked, confusion flickering across his weathered face, caught off guard by the question’s simplicity. He paused, then rasped, “Maybe 35 years, Madam,” his voice a reluctant thread pulled from the depths of memory, frayed but honest.

“Oh,” Sheetal said, leaning back in her chair, her eyes narrowing as she struck, the trap springing shut. “So, then you must know all about Nayantara.”

The name dropped like a stone through glass—Ramesh’s head snapped up, his eyes wide with shock, pupils dilating as if she’d plunged a blade into his chest and twisted. The air stilled, his breath hitching audibly in his throat, a tremor rippling through his frame, shaking the hands he’d clasped so tight. His face drained of color, a ghost staring back at her, caught in the glare of a truth he couldn’t outrun.

“Answer me,” Sheetal pressed, her voice a whipcrack, unrelenting, slicing through the stunned silence.

Ramesh’s mouth opened, then closed, his gaze darting to the door as if it could swallow him whole, carry him away from this moment. “How—how do you know about Nayantara?” he stammered, his words a plea, a flimsy shield against the onslaught, his voice cracking with the weight of it.

“Just answer my question,” she shot back, her stare piercing, unyielding, pinning him where he stood.

He swallowed hard, the fight draining from him like blood from a wound, his shoulders slumping in defeat. “I... I do know a bit about her,” he admitted, voice barely above a whisper, eyes dropping to the floor again, the confession pulled from him like a splinter from flesh.

“Did she look like me?” Sheetal demanded, leaning forward now, her heart pounding against her ribs, a drumbeat she couldn’t silence.

Ramesh hesitated, his breath shallow, then gave a single, jerky nod—small, almost imperceptible, but it landed like a thunderclap in the silence, shaking the room. Sheetal’s breath caught, the confirmation a jolt that sparked a dozen more questions, a wildfire blazing through her mind, but she pressed on, relentless. “What about her and Dr. Shridhar?”

His head jerked up again, protective fire flaring in his eyes, a wall slamming down with a force that surprised her. He knew—knew how this could shatter Shri, reopen scars that had barely begun to mend, wounds he’d watched bleed for decades. His voice broke, thick with emotion, as he stepped forward, hands clasped like a supplicant before a judge. “I’m a small person, Madam,” he said, trembling, tears glinting at the edges of his vision, threatening to spill. “But please—please—don’t delve into this. I beg you. Dr. Shridhar’s wounds were healing, but you—you’ve come and ripped them open wide. Spare me, spare him, I’m begging you!”

Sheetal froze, the raw pain in his face a mirror to the ache she’d carried since the market, a reflection that stopped her cold. His words hit her like a wave—grief, loyalty, fear crashing over her resolve, drowning the fire that had driven her. She wanted to push, to demand more—Who was she to him? Why me?—but the sight of him, fragile despite his recovery, stayed her hand, a tether pulling her back. A minor heart attack, yes, but still a threadbare life she couldn’t risk snapping, not when his tears trembled so close to falling. Her jaw tightened, curiosity warring with compassion, a brutal tug-of-war in her chest, and she sighed, relenting, the sound heavy with regret. “Go,” she said, her voice softer now, a concession laced with the weight of what she’d lost in this moment. “You can leave.”

Ramesh nodded, a quick, grateful dip of his head, his relief palpable as he shuffled out, the door creaking shut behind him with a finality that echoed

in her chest, a hollow thud that lingered. She slumped back in her chair, the pen rolling from her fingers to clatter against the desk, her cabin a cage of unanswered questions closing in. His plea had stanching her probing, a dam against the flood of her need, but the curiosity—the pain—only deepened, a chasm widening within her, dark and uncharted. Ramesh knew, Shri knew, and she was left grasping at shadows, the name Nayantara a specter that refused to fade, hovering just beyond her reach.

Back in Dr. Pratap's cottage, the night pressed in like a living thing, its silence a weight Sheetal couldn't shake, thick and oppressive. She sat at the small table, the plate of dal and chapati before her a cold, unyielding challenge, staring back like an accusation. She forced a bite down, the food ash in her throat, tasteless and heavy, her hands trembling as she set the spoon aside with a faint clink. Sleep was a distant stranger—each time she closed her eyes, Ramesh's tear-streaked plea flickered behind her lids, Nayantara's name a relentless drumbeat in her skull, Shri's guarded gaze a shadow that wouldn't fade, steady and sad. The cottage's walls loomed, the air thick with the incense of its cleansing, a faint musk that clung to every breath, yet it felt uncleaned of secrets, a trap tightening around her with each passing hour. She was strong—years of stitching wounds, facing death in sterile rooms, had forged that steel in her spine—but this? This suspense, this darkness creeping through Shivalkot's seams, was a burden her resilience couldn't bear, a weight that bent her until she feared she'd break. By morning, as dawn bled pale through the window, casting faint light across the cracks above, her resolve hardened, a jagged edge cutting through the haze. Enough was enough. She needed to claw back her life, her old self—Shivalkot would devour her whole if she lingered another day, its shadows too hungry, too deep.

The next morning, she strode to Shri's cabin, her steps firm despite the exhaustion carving hollows beneath her eyes, dark rings that betrayed the sleepless night. The door creaked open, revealing him hunched over his

journals, the familiar sight of ink and paper a fortress against the world, a shield she'd seen him wield before. He looked up, surprise flickering across his face, a brief widening of his eyes, then softening into a weary warmth that caught her off guard. "Come, Sheetal," he said, setting his pen down with a soft tap, his voice steady but laced with an undercurrent she couldn't place—grief, perhaps, or resignation. "What can I do for you?" She studied his eyes—sadness lingered there, yes, a deep well of it, pooling in the lines etched around them, but he masked it with the ease of a man who'd worn grief like a second skin for decades, a habit as old as the journals he clung to.

She sank into the chair opposite him, the leather creaking under her weight, her hands clasped tight in her lap to still their tremor, fingers digging into her palms. "Sir," she began, her voice low but resolute, a steel thread running through it, "I don't think I can continue here."

The words landed like a thunderbolt—Shri's face froze, a flicker of shock rippling through his calm, cracking the mask for a heartbeat. He couldn't tell if it was the loss of a doctor or her that struck deeper, a wound he buried fast beneath layers of control. His breath caught, a shadow of Nayantara's departure 28 years ago ghosting through him—different, yet the same sting, sharp and familiar—but he shoved it down, locking it away. "What happened?" he asked, his tone even, probing, though his fingers tightened on the journal's edge, knuckles whitening against the worn cover.

"Oh, no, nothing," Sheetal lied, the words slipping out too quick, a flimsy veil over the truth clawing at her insides, desperate to break free. "I just want to go back home. Not sure if this is the place I want to be anymore." Her eyes darted to the floor, unable to meet his, the weight of Ramesh's plea and the market's echo pressing down, a burden she couldn't voice.

Shri leaned back, a long pause stretching between them, the ticking clock a relentless heartbeat in the silence, counting out the seconds of his

deliberation. “Ok,” he said at last, his voice measured, resigned, a quiet surrender to her choice. “If you’ve made up your mind, there’s nothing we can do. When are you planning to leave?”

“Tomorrow, if it’s ok with you,” she replied, her tone steady now, though her chest tightened with each word, a vise squeezing her lungs.

“Oh, you’re that fed up with this place,” Shri said, a faint smile tugging at his lips, a spark of humor breaking through the ache beneath, a fleeting attempt to lighten the weight settling over them.

“No, no, it’s not that,” Sheetal countered, her voice softening, a flicker of guilt flashing in her eyes as she glanced up at him. “The place is nice—very nice. But it doesn’t suit me, I guess.” She shrugged, the lie brittle on her tongue, her fingers brushing the pendant at her throat—a habit that nearly undid him again, a jolt he buried beneath his calm.

“Alright,” Shri said, nodding slowly, his smile fading into something sadder, more final, a quiet acceptance that carved lines deeper into his face. “Do say goodbye before you leave. One of the nurses will help you with bus timings and booking—let them know what you need.”

“Ok, Sir,” she said, rising, her chair scraping against the floor with a rough groan that echoed in the small space. “Thank you for everything. I’d hoped I could work with someone as esteemed as you, but it looks like that’s not to be.” Her voice wavered, a crack splintering through her resolve, but she held his gaze this time, a farewell laced with regret, heavy with what might have been.

Shri’s smile returned, small and strained, a flicker of warmth in his colorless world, a spark against the gray that had settled over him. “Call me if you need anything—anytime,” he said, his tone gentle, an offer that hung heavy with unspoken years, a lifeline he extended despite the distance growing between them.

Sheetal nodded, a tight smile curving her lips, a mirror to his own strain. “I will,” she murmured, then turned for the door, her steps deliberate, measured. “Goodbye,” she added softly, almost to herself, before stepping out, the door clicking shut behind her with a soft, final thud that reverberated in the silence. The sound echoed in Shri’s chest, another chapter closing in a life already bled dry of hue, a quiet wound reopening beneath his ribs. He stared at the journals, the ink blurring before him, Sheetal’s departure a mirror to Nayantara’s—different in shape, yet the same sting, sharp and deep. Was it her face he’d lose again, or just the hope she’d brought, the fragile light she’d carried into his shadowed world? He couldn’t tell, didn’t want to peel back the layers to find out. The cabin grew still, the hospital’s hum a distant pulse beyond the walls, and Shri sat there, alone once more, the weight of the unspoken settling like dust over his wounds, a quiet burial for a pain he’d never fully escape.

Chapter 24

That night, Sheetal crashed hard, the cottage's rough blanket wrapping her up like a shield against everything outside. All the chaos of the past few days—Ramesh crumpling to the ground, Nayantara's name hanging in the air like a ghost, the market's noise bouncing around her skull—finally faded into nothing. For once, she didn't dream, just sank into a deep, quiet sleep, the edges of her worries smoothed out by the thought of getting away. Tomorrow, she'd hop on a bus, its engine rumbling her out of Shivalkot's grip, and by the next morning, she'd be back in the city—her own bed, her friends' voices cutting through the noise, streets that didn't hum with secrets. It felt good, calming her down, her breaths slowing as she slept better than she had in weeks. But even in that peace, something nagged at her—a small, steady ache she couldn't shake. She was walking away from something huge, a shot at working with Dr. Shridhar, a legend who'd patched up miracles from broken lives. It stung, that chance slipping through her fingers, cutting through the relief she wanted to feel.

And then there was him—his pain. She hadn't asked for it, but it hit her anyway, sneaking through the cracks in his calm voice, his tight smiles. Shri buried it deep, like he'd spent years perfecting how to hide it, but she'd caught it anyway—that quick flash in his eyes, the weight dragging on him like wet dirt. She didn't get why it got to her so much, why his quiet struggle pulled at her chest, but lying there, she wished she'd said something. *What's eating at you?* she'd wanted to ask, to reach out and lighten it somehow, to keep a legend like him from carrying it all alone. The urge stuck with her, a loose thread she couldn't tug on, catching on the edge of sleep as the night wore on.

Morning came sharp and bright, sunlight spilling over Shivalkot's hills as Sheetal threw her stuff into her bags, moving fast, almost on autopilot.

By afternoon, she was all set to leave. She said her goodbyes—quick nods to the nurses, a soft “thanks” to Chandra, the maid—her voice holding steady even as her chest tightened. When she got to Shri’s cabin, the door was half-open, his shape hunched over stacks of journals, surrounded by paper and ink like it was his fortress. “Goodbye, Dr. Varma,” she called out, her voice wobbling with something she couldn’t pin down. His pain slammed into her again, raw and heavy, like she could feel it in her own bones, even though his face didn’t give anything away—just that same steady mask. He raised a hand, a small wave, but stayed put, didn’t come closer. “Safe travels, Sheetal,” he said, his tone low and solid, like a wall holding back whatever was breaking underneath.

She turned fast, the auto’s engine growling outside, the driver tapping the horn impatiently. Her steps hitched for a second—she half-thought he might come after her, call her back—but the cabin door didn’t budge, Shri locking himself inside. She climbed in, the auto jerking forward, dust kicking up behind her as the hospital faded away. Back in his cabin, Shri sat still, the journals blurring in front of him, his fingers gripping a pen that wouldn’t move. Sheetal was gone, another piece of his life torn loose, and the quiet hit harder than ever—a silence he’d built walls against but couldn’t escape.

Sheetal settled into her bus seat, her bag shoved next to her, the window cold against her cheek. As the village slipped by—mud huts glowing warm in the afternoon light, fields swaying like they were alive—she felt a weird pang, soft and unexpected. It was pretty now, almost mesmerizing, this place she’d been dying to ditch. She frowned, pressing her water bottle to her lips, the cold snapping her back. *What’s wrong with me?* she thought, the question sitting heavy. Deep down, she hadn’t really wanted to leave—not completely. Something about Shivalkot still tugged at her, a pull she could feel in her ribs, but Ramesh’s crying and Shri’s hidden hurt had pushed her out. She couldn’t stay and make it worse, couldn’t handle seeing

his scars crack open because of her. She leaned her head back, eyes drifting shut, trying to let it all go—Shivalkot, Nayantara, everything—lost in the bus’s steady hum.

The bus rattled along, maybe an hour passing as it curved into the forest, the trees closing in dark and quiet, their branches knitting together overhead. Sheetal shifted, glancing out the window at the mountains cutting into the dusk, and a strange peace settled over her—something old and wordless tugging at her gut. She pressed her hand to the glass, the coolness calming her, when the bus jolted—a rough cough, a metal groan—and screeched to a stop. The driver swore loud enough to wake the dead, hopping out to kick the tires and wrench the hood open with a bang. People grumbled, shifting in their seats, while Sheetal watched, her calm starting to unravel.

Half an hour crawled by, the forest pressing in close, until the driver hauled himself back in, sweat dripping down his face. “Problem with the engine I think,” he snapped, irritation thick in his voice. “Mechanic’s on the way—couple hours.” Groans broke out—some yelled, “What kind of crap service is this?” while others just sighed, climbing out to sit on rocks by the road, fanning themselves in the evening air. Sheetal hung back, then stepped down, her legs stiff, gravel crunching under her boots. She paced around the bus, antsy, her eyes wandering—until something caught her: a clearing, bright and sharp against the dark woods, like a spotlight in the shadows. It pulled at her, a tight feeling in her chest she couldn’t shake, and before she knew it, she was walking toward it, the road’s noise fading behind her.

The clearing stretched out in front of her, a little hollow where a few people wandered—some snapping pics of the mountains, others following the stream glinting in the last light. Sheetal kept going, her breath short, drawn in by something she couldn’t name. Then she spotted it—a temple, small and old, its stone worn but stubborn, tucked against a hill. Vines twisted

around it, and inside, a faded idol stared out, its carved eyes deep and steady. She edged closer, her boots soft on the moss, leaning in to get a better look at its face. And then—it hit her. The eyes lit up, a sudden, blazing glow that hadn't been there a second ago. Her head spun, a scream ripping through her—not hers, but a bunch of them, high and desperate, bouncing around from everywhere at once. The ground tipped, something pulling at her—or shoving her?—her vision twisting into a wild mess of green and rock. She gasped, arms flailing, her hand catching a branch just as her legs gave out, the bark digging into her skin.

“Hey—you okay?” Two women ran over, their voices sharp with worry, grabbing her arms as she swayed. Sheetal's knees hit the dirt, her chest heaving, those screams still echoing in her head as they pulled her up. “She's fainting—get her to the road!” one yelled, her sari whipping around as they dragged her back. They propped her against a rock, shoving her water bottle into her shaky hands. “Drink—easy,” the other said, her eyes big with concern. Sheetal chugged it, the cold snapping her back a little, but her voice came out rough, barely there. “Hospital... hospital...”

The women shared a look, then flagged down a van rolling by, its engine grumbling as it slowed. “Shivalkot Hospital—take her there!” one shouted at the driver, a gruff guy who gave a quick nod. Hands guided Sheetal in, her bag tossed next to her, the door banging shut. “You'll be okay—just hold on,” a woman called, her face blurring as the van took off, gravel spitting under the tires. Sheetal slumped back, her head throbbing, the forest's quiet swapped for a mess she couldn't sort out. Those glowing eyes stuck with her, Nayantara's name pulsing faint under the screams—was it real? Was she cracking up? The van raced back to Shivalkot, dragging her right back into the shadows she'd run from, her escape falling apart in a way she couldn't dodge.

The van skidded to a stop outside Shivalkot Hospital, tires kicking up rocks as the driver jumped out, yelling, “Help! Quick—someone’s hurt!” Lata rushed out, her sari flapping, a nurse and Ramesh right behind her, his steps shaky when he saw the van. Their faces went pale as the door swung open—Sheetal slouched inside, skin white, eyes half-open, looking like a shadow of the woman who’d left hours ago. “Madam?” Lata’s voice shook, stunned, while Ramesh stopped dead, his breath catching—Nayantara’s face hitting him all over again. “Move—get her in!” the nurse snapped, jolting them into gear. They eased her out, Lata and another nurse holding her up, Ramesh fumbling for her bag with trembling hands. The ward swallowed them up, its clean buzz cutting through the chaos of her coming back.

Shri had called it a day early, Sheetal’s leaving weighing him down enough to drag him to his cottage before dark. He sat there in the dim, a cup of tea going cold in his hands, when the door flew open. Ramesh stumbled in, panting, eyes wild. “Doctor Saab—Madam’s back!” he blurted, voice breaking. “She passed out on her way home—something’s off!”

Shri’s cup hit the table hard, tea sloshing as he shot up, his heart slamming. “Back?” he croaked, dread and shock tangling up, and he bolted past Ramesh, coat forgotten. He half-ran to the ward, the hallways a smear, his pulse pounding with fear and old ghosts. There she was, sprawled on a bed, worn out but hanging on—her chest barely moving, her face wiped out. The junior doctor fussed with an IV, nurses already done with the basics—vitals good, fluids running. Shri dropped into the chair next to her, breathing hard, watching her eyes flicker, life creeping back slow like light over the hills. She was here, awake, but fragile, and he couldn’t peel his eyes off her—Nayantara’s shadow burning through him, a cut he couldn’t name.

Sheetal’s eyes locked on him, blurry but clearing, her voice weak and choppy. “The bus... stopped in the forest,” she mumbled, exhaustion

dragging her words. “I was walking... saw a temple. Don’t know what happened next.”

Shri went rigid, a jolt hitting him like a spark. The temple. Vajradhar—that old stone god, its eyes watching his world fall apart 28 years back. A sick game, a twist that had torn him open once, spilling Nayantara’s blood across that valley. What was it doing now, pulling Sheetal into its mess? His head spun, old screams and wreckage crashing into now, and he clamped his jaw tight, forcing his voice steady. “Rest,” he said, low and firm, even as his hands shook. “Sleep. You’ll be okay by morning.”

Sheetal gave a faint smile, a spark of trust in her tired eyes, and let them close. Soon, her breathing evened out, the sedative kicking in, her face softening into a calm that hid the storm she’d kicked up. Shri stayed put, glued to the chair, staring—every breath she took a thread holding him there, every twitch of her face a puzzle he couldn’t crack.

Hours later, whispers cut through the ward’s quiet, pulling Sheetal out of the drug’s fog. She didn’t move, her body sunk heavy, but she heard Ramesh, his voice low and pushing. “Doctor Saheb, you’ve been here all night,” he said, almost begging. “She’s fine—go home, sleep. It’s nearly morning.”

Through cracked eyes, Sheetal saw Shri in the dark—a tired shape slouched in the chair, dragging himself up slow and stiff. Ramesh steadied him, sticking close, guiding him out with a quiet, “Come, Saheb.” The door creaked shut, their steps fading, and Sheetal lay there, her mind buzzing despite the haze. Why’d he stay all night? Why’d he care so much—sitting there like a guard, his presence solid and steady? And if he cared that much, why’d he let her go, waving her off with that forced smile? Questions spun, quick and jagged—Nayantara, the temple, his hurt—but the sedative softened them, pulling her back under. She slipped away, the answers out of reach, tied to the man who’d watched over her in the dark.

Chapter 25

By noon the next day, Sheetal hauled herself out of the ward's creaky bed, her legs steady enough but her head still wobbly, like a fog she couldn't quite shake. The IV's pinch lingered in her arm, a little reminder of last night's mess, but she felt okay—good enough to shuffle out into the hospital's buzz, slow and careful. She found Shri in the clinic, bent over some poor guy, his coat all wrinkled, eyes dark from staying up all night watching her. He looked up when she walked in, surprise flashing over his face, and he stood fast, his chair scraping loud against the floor. "What're you doing out of bed?" he asked, his voice rough, a mix of worry and a tiny bit of scolding.

Sheetal gave him a small smile, propping herself against the doorframe. "I'm doing better, sir," she said, keeping it soft but solid. "Thought I'd head to the cottage, clean up a bit."

Shri's forehead creased, his eyes running over her—pale, sure, but stubborn as hell. "You sure you're okay?" he pushed, stepping closer. "Take Ramesh with you, just to be safe."

"Nah, I'm good," she shot back, standing a little taller, a spark of her old self in her eyes. "I can handle it."

He paused, then let out a breath, giving in. "Alright," he said, his tone easing up. "I'll send lunch over. Rest up—we'll talk tonight."

Her smile grew, a warm little thanks in her voice. "Sounds good, sir... and thanks," she said, turning quick before he could say more, her steps echoing down the hall as Shri watched her go, a knot of worry settling in his gut.

Evening rolled in, splashing the hospital with gold as Sheetal came back, hair still wet from a bath, walking stronger but her eyes heavy with questions. She made a beeline for Shri's cabin, the door half-open, his pen

scratching away as she stepped inside. He glanced up from his journals, relief softening his tired face. “There you are,” he said, dropping the pen, his voice warm but careful. “How’re you holding up?”

“A lot better,” Sheetal answered, sinking into the chair across from him, her hands locked tight in her lap. “Still don’t know what hit me, though.”

“It’s fine,” Shri said, leaning back, his voice steady like an anchor. “Stuff like that happens.”

“No, sir,” she cut in, sharp and quick, her eyes snapping to his. “Not to me it doesn’t. It was like I *belonged* there—the temple, the forest. I knew those mountains, that valley... like they were part of me.” Her voice shook, caught between wonder and fear, as it all rushed back—those glowing eyes, the screams, something old and huge pulling at her.

Shri went still, his breath hitching, too shocked to say a word. Her words slammed into him—Vajradhar’s shadow, Nayantara’s crash, that valley that ripped his life apart 28 years ago. He saw it in her eyes, that same pull that haunted him, and his head spun, scrambling for solid ground. She stared at him, waiting, then asked, “What’s it mean?”

He let out a slow breath, keeping his voice low, steady, hiding the chaos underneath. “I don’t know, Sheetal,” he said, meeting her eyes. “I’m just a doctor. But I know there’s stuff out there bigger than us—bigger than scalpels and medicine.”

Sheetal’s brow scrunched, her curiosity kicking up. “What’re you getting at?”

“Some things don’t make sense,” he said, his tone heavy, shutting it down soft but firm. “They’re out of our reach—let’s leave it there.” He stopped, then shifted gears, his voice lighter. “So, what’s your next move?”

Sheetal watched him close, trying to catch the flicker in his worn-out eyes—pain, yeah, but maybe a little hope too. “Think I’ll stick around a while,” she said slow, feeling it out, “then figure it out.”

Shri tilted his head, a crooked smile tugging at his mouth. “You know I’m stuck here ‘til I find someone permanent to run this place,” he teased, though his eyes gave away a hint of relief.

“Oh!” Sheetal grinned, picking up his vibe, her voice perking up. “Guess I shouldn’t rush to decide then.”

They busted out laughing—hers loud and bright, his a low, rare rumble—filling the cabin and spilling out into the halls, a sound that hadn’t bounced around the hospital in forever. It rang off the walls, a quick fix for the dark corners, even if the big stuff—Vajradhar’s tricks, Nayantara’s ghost, whatever was tying them together—stayed quiet underneath.

That night, Sheetal tore into her dinner—lentils and bread, a simple win after the craziness chewing up her days. She flopped onto the cottage’s beat-up couch, its springs squeaking loud under her, matching the jangle in her head. The TV buzzed on—news mumbling flat, some sitcom’s laugh track shrieking like a lunatic—but it was just noise, miles away from the mess spinning inside her. She stabbed the remote, shutting it off with a growl, and the silence hit hard, thick and sticky, loaded with a fear she couldn’t pin down. Then it slammed into her—cold and sharp, cutting through the haze: the medicine. She’d left the pouch on the table after lunch, its worn fabric burned into her memory. Her hand shot out—nothing, just the scratched-up wood under her fingers. Her stomach flipped, a chill crawling up her neck as she scanned the room, the lamplight carving spooky shapes on the walls—every shadow looking like something out to get her. It was gone.

She jumped up, her breath picking up, and stormed into the bedroom—yanking the quilt off, digging behind the lamp—her hands grabbing at

nothing. The pouch was nowhere, and a jittery panic clawed into her chest, her heartbeat pounding like a drum. Her eyes caught on the storeroom door—dark and rough, scratched up like it'd seen a war, a spot she'd avoided since day one. *Maybe Chandra stashed it there*, she told herself, the idea shaky but enough to pull her toward it, her feet dragging quiet on the cold floor. She flicked the latch—it slid open too easy, like it was waiting for her—and the door groaned low, letting out a dusty, stale puff that stung her eyes.

She stepped in, the dark swallowing her up, her hand swinging through the black, brushing sticky webs that grabbed at her 'til she hit the switch. A sharp *click*, and a weak bulb buzzed on, its dim yellow light pushing back the shadows to show a room bigger than she'd ever guessed. Old junk was everywhere: a banged-up brass urn catching the light, a pile of journals rotting into mold, a rickety bed—Shri's first crash pad in Shivalkot—sagging under years of neglect. Her eyes darted around, restless, until they landed on it—Vajradhar. A statue, just like the one in the temple, stood stiff in the corner, its stone face hard and cold, those empty eyes drilling into her like they had in the woods. Her heart jumped, a gasp tearing out as she stumbled back, her hip slamming into a wooden cabinet. It shook, a loud crack splitting the air as stuff poured off the top—papers, packets, a mess crashing down like a landslide.

She stopped cold, her breath short, her pulse roaring as she glanced at Vajradhar—its stare still locked on her, alive somehow, heavy. Her legs wobbled, her shaky hands dropping to the pile as she started picking it up, her fingers brushing rough edges, every touch rattling her more. She kept sneaking looks at the statue, its vibe pressing down on her, until her hand hit an envelope—ripped open, photos poking out like sharp edges daring her to grab them. Curiosity surged, shoving the fear aside, and she snatched it, dropping onto the bed with a loud creak. Her hands trembled as she

pulled the photos out, and then it hit—a gut-punch shock that burned through her, stealing her air, her head spinning as everything broke apart.

These were Nayantara's—snapped by Neha, meant for Shri before he went back to Bombay—and the first one hit like a thunderclap: not just a lookalike, not some fluke, but *her*. Nayantara's bold smile shone, her slim body posed, her eyes—Sheetal's eyes—staring back, every line and shadow dead-on, just wrapped in a sari instead of her ratty coat. It wasn't close—it was *her*, a copy stamped across years, a twin from a grave she didn't even know. Her chest locked up, the air thinning as something wild shook through her—not a memory, not a picture, but a deep, tearing pull she couldn't name, clawing right at her core. Her hands shook as she spread the rest out, each photo sinking its hooks in deeper, dragging her into a haze of bits and pieces she couldn't grab hold of.

The first: Nayantara under a fat moon, the hamlet glowing with hidden fire, her red skirt cutting through the dark like a wound, tribal women fuzzy at her sides, little bells flashing on her wrists. Shri wasn't there—stuck at the hospital—and a weird buzz hit Sheetal's head: a far-off beat of drums, flames flickering at the corners of her eyes, a chant—"Vajradhar, hear us!"—whispering through the fog. It faded fast, just a smear of feeling, gone before she could catch it.

The second: Mrigendra, his rough face lit up under a moonlit party, eyes sharp and in charge, standing tall and proud—a leader, a rock—surrounded by shadowy folks who looked up to him, even frozen in the shot. Sheetal's breath caught, something deep twitching as she traced his face; it felt familiar—a heavy kind of power, a tie to a life she'd lived—her fingers hanging on the worn edge, her heart thumping with something she couldn't say. A low hum ran through her, hints of fireside talks and big promises, but it slipped off, leaving an empty pull she couldn't shake.

The third: Shri tied to the Tree of Truth, a huge oak stretching into a stormy sky, ropes digging into his wrists, his bare chest slick with sweat, his eyes blazing with fight. Sheetal's grip tightened, her breath snagging as a storm kicked up inside—not a clear picture, but a shout. The Tree stood out in the photo, its twisted branches like veins, and for a split second, it glowed—a weak, eerie pulse jumping off the page, alive, calling her. Her gut twisted, a hard yank pulling her toward it, the room tipping as the statue's stare clamped down, its hollow eyes flashing along with it. Something howled soft—a gust, a voice?—but it melted away, leaving her heart slamming, her head spinning.

The fourth: Nayantara with red smeared across her forehead, a bloody mark against her white sari, the temple's shadow eating her up. A chill ran through Sheetal—incense hit her nose, a song hummed faint—but it broke apart, a ghost she couldn't hold onto, soft and slipping away.

The fifth: Nayantara limp in Shri's arms, his coat thrown over her in a clearing, the forest dark and pressing in. Stars winked weak, a whisper—“You were always the one”—brushing her ears, but it cracked apart, a quick ache sliding through her hands.

Sheetal's fingers spasmed, the photos dropping to her lap like dead leaves, her chest heaving as that blurry pull backed off, leaving her wrecked, lost, her breath rough in the quiet. Nayantara wasn't just a match—she was *her*, a reflection burned across time. The Tree of Truth flashed in her head, its quick glow a signal, a call carved into her bones, dragging her toward the hamlet with a strength she couldn't fight. Her heart pounded, fear and want crashing together—this wasn't random; it was a demand, old and brutal, clawing at her with a need she couldn't name.

She gripped the envelope, her eyes caught by Vajradhar's empty stare, its silence screaming loud, a call cutting through the dark. The truth was waiting—out there, in the hamlet's hidden heart—and a fierce, shaky urge to chase it roared through her, pulling her toward something she couldn't even guess at yet.

Chapter 26

The days after that hit Sheetal hard, like a storm rolling in slow but heavy, piling up strength she couldn't dodge. Something restless chewed at her—a need to get to the hamlet, some nowhere spot she couldn't find on a map, its pull digging into her bones like a voice she couldn't shake. She didn't know where it was or how to get there, but it yanked at her anyway, steady and stubborn, like a compass spinning wild. Every time her eyes caught Shri's—across the ward's buzz, in the clinic's shuffle, or over a quick nod—it stirred something. A tie she couldn't pin down before was getting clearer, sharper with every look. His worn-out eyes, his quiet grit, they dragged her in, this weird ache growing to stick close, to hover near him. It wasn't just respect anymore—it ran deeper, older, like a string tying her to him across some gap she couldn't see.

But she had to figure it out. What was holding her here—Shivalkot, the hospital, the valley's big, quiet weight? What was this thing calling her, this throb under her ribs that got louder every day? Those photos had busted her world, wide open, Nayantara's face—*her* face—staring back, that Vajradhar statue's empty eyes daring her to chase it. The flashes she got—drums, red streaks, Shri tied up—were still fuzzy, slipping away like smoke before she could grab them. The truth was right there, just out of reach, and all the stuff bottled up inside—scared, aching, dying to know—kept swelling with nowhere to go. Ramesh wasn't any help; his shaky stares and begging kept her away. Shri was nearer but still off-limits—his hurt a wall she couldn't climb yet. The hamlet had the answers, she could feel it—its holy dirt, its god, its secrets whispering her name. She had to get there, stand where Nayantara had danced and lived, dig up what tied her to this tale she didn't write.

Nights had her pacing the cottage, the floor groaning under her antsy steps, the air thick with everything spinning in her head. The TV stayed off—its

noise couldn't touch the mess in there. She'd catch herself in the window—sharp grin, slim build—and stop, Nayantara's shadow looking back, a question in her own eyes. Part of her wanted to bolt, part wanted to stay and dig, and every morning, the hamlet's call cut deeper, a song winding through the valley's fog. Sheetal was stuck, her heart all knotted up with want and worry, knowing the answers were out there—past the hospital, in a place that felt like home and a tomb rolled into one.

One morning, the sun crept over Shivalkot's hills, slipping pale light through the cottage's grimy windows, and Chandra shuffled in, her broom scratching at the floor. Sheetal watched from the couch, her tea going cold in her hands, that restless buzz in her chest louder than ever. The hamlet had kept her up again, its whispers threading through the dark, and she was done waiting—she needed something to chase. She set the cup down with a little clink, stood, and kept her voice low but sure. “Chandra, you ever hear of a tribal village—a hamlet—around here somewhere?”

Chandra stopped sweeping, her hands tightening on the broom. She glanced up, eyes narrowing with a quick flicker of nerves, then went back to it, the bristles scraping harder. “Heard of it, Madam,” she said, slow and careful. “Don't know exactly where, though—it's... tucked away, kinda. Not many get in, just a handful. Dr. Pratap, he used to head out there a lot, way back. Probably knew the way.”

Sheetal's heart kicked up, a spark cutting through the haze of her questions—Dr. Pratap, the guy who'd lived here before, a piece of the past she hadn't clocked 'til now. She stepped closer, her shadow falling over Chandra's bent frame. “Can you dig up more? Your brother—he's got that rickshaw, right? Maybe he's heard something.”

Chandra straightened, pushing gray hair off her face, her eyes flicking to the window like the hills might be listening. “My brother... yeah, he might

know a thing or two, Madam,” she said, dragging it out, not thrilled. “I’ll ask him, real quiet. But folks don’t talk about it easy.”

“Please,” Sheetal said, her voice dropping low, tight with need. “I gotta know—where it is, how to get there. But Chandra...” She leaned in, locking eyes. “Not a word to anyone. Nothing—here or at the hospital. Nobody finds out.”

Chandra’s face creased, a flash of worry showing, but she nodded, lips pressed thin. “Won’t say a thing, Madam,” she promised, her voice steady even with her shaky hands. “I’ll talk to him tonight—no one else hears a peep.” She turned back to sweeping, the broom’s rhythm settling in, but the air stayed heavy, thick with the secret pact they’d just made.

Sheetal let out a wobbly breath, dropping back onto the couch, her head racing. Dr. Pratap’s shadow grew bigger now—a guy linked to Shri, to Nayantara, to whatever the hamlet was hiding. Chandra’s brother might have the hookup, a rickshaw guy who knew the valley’s twists, and with him, her shot at chasing that call. But keeping it quiet—she felt that need down to her gut, a guard against eyes she couldn’t trust yet. The hamlet was out there, its pull a low growl, and Sheetal sat there, stuck between scared and dead-set, the first shaky step toward the truth starting to take shape in the morning quiet.

Next day, Chandra slipped back in, her steps softer, broom under her arm. Sheetal looked up from her tea, steam curling up untouched, her nerves strung tight. Chandra’s eyes darted to the door, then back, her voice a whisper as she leaned close. “My brother knows it, Madam,” she said, quick and careful. “He’ll take you—drives out that way sometimes. But he says it’s dicey, not safe really. People don’t go unless they’re called. Said since you’re a doctor, though, they might let you in... maybe if you’re checking on somebody.” Her brow wrinkled, doubt flashing, but she shook it off, standing straighter.

Sheetal's heart jumped, a rush of grit drowning the flicker of fear Chandra's warning lit up. This was it—her line to the hamlet, thin but real, a chance she wasn't letting go. She set the cup down, the clink loud in the stillness, and gave Chandra a firm nod. "Thanks, Chandra," she said, low and solid. "I'll tell you when I'm set—just make sure he's ready. And please... not a word." Chandra nodded, their deal locked tight, and got back to her chores, the broom's scrape steady against the heavy vibe of what they'd started.

Days smeared together, the hospital's grind a dull buzz against the racket in Sheetal's head, until one crisp, golden morning broke, the air alive with a sharp edge. She found Shri in his cabin, bent over journals, his pen pausing as she walked in. "Sir," she started, keeping it light but rehearsed, "one of these days, I wanna poke around out there. Need a break from the same old—clear my mind a bit." She flashed a small smile, hands clenched behind her back, hiding the pulse hammering under her cool act.

Shri looked up, his tired eyes squinting a little, sizing her up. He leaned back, chair creaking, and rubbed his jaw. "Exploring, huh?" he said, voice steady, but something thoughtful flickered in his look. He wondered if she was testing the valley, seeing if Shivalkot could stick—or if she'd bolt again like last time. "Don't wander too far," he warned, a hint of worry in there. "Take a nurse—Lata, maybe. Safer."

Sheetal's smile stiffened, her will locking in. "No, sir," she pushed back, softening her tone but holding firm, a quiet beg underneath. "I need to go alone. Only way I can think straight—see what's what." She met his eyes, pushing him to get it, even if she couldn't spill what was driving her—not yet.

Shri's forehead creased, worry digging deeper into his face. He started to say something, then stopped, letting out a soft breath. Her stubborn streak reminded him of Nayantara's quiet spark, and it hit him somewhere he couldn't name. "Alright," he gave in, voice heavy, like he didn't have a

choice. “If that’s what you need. Just... watch yourself, Sheetal.” He couldn’t hold her back, even if it felt like letting go of something he couldn’t reel in.

She nodded quick, a “Thanks, sir,” slipping out as she turned, her steps fast to hide the shake in her hands. The hamlet felt closer now, its call a steady beat in her blood, mixed with the risk Chandra’s brother had flagged. She’d go alone—no nurses, no one watching—just her doctor cover and a burning need for answers. Shri’s warning stuck in her ears, a thin tie back to the hospital, but the unseen’s pull was bigger, hauling her toward a place promising truth—and trouble—neck and neck.

Morning cracked the dark wide open, sharp and clear, a thin mist wrapping the cottage like a blanket, blurring its edges in the dawn’s hard light. Outside, Chandra’s brother waited, his rickshaw hunched like some antsy animal, its engine grumbling low and rough, cutting through the quiet. Sheetal stepped out, all tight purpose, every move pushing back the fear gnawing at her gut. Her satchel hung heavy, packed with basics—bandages, flashlight, notebook—its weight keeping her steady. A stethoscope swung around her neck, cold metal flashing her intent, catching the weak sun. But her face—she’d turned it into someone else’s: thick foundation smoothed her skin pale and strange, red lipstick slashed her mouth sharp, kohl darkened her eyes into deep, unreadable pools. Her hair, usually loose and loud, was yanked into a tight knot, pinned with a silver clip that shone like a signal, a dangling earring swinging with every step—a loud distraction to hide who she was.

Buried in her satchel, wrapped in a rag, were two photos—one of Nayantara, her own face, bright and kicking, the other of Mrigendra, his worn grin locked under a full moon glow—quiet keepsakes of the truth she was chasing, their edges roughed up from her fidgety hands.

She walked up to the rickshaw, breath even but short, her pulse banging loud in her ears. Chandra's brother—a skinny guy slouched under a beat-up cap—tilted his head, eyeing her with a mix of nosiness and wariness, like he could smell the fake on her. “Ready, Madam?” he croaked, voice like rocks grinding, slicing the misty air. She gave a quick nod, sharp and sure, and climbed in, the rickshaw's torn seat creaking under her. Her hands clamped tight on the satchel, her pulse spiking as the thing jolted forward, tires crunching dirt, throwing her into whatever was waiting—a world full of shadows, ready to eat her up.

The ride dragged on, the road twisting deeper into the valley 'til the forest swallowed them, trees looming tall on both sides, branches knitting overhead, a stream flashing silver through the brush, mountains standing guard way off. Sheetal leaned out, scarf flapping, blown away by the wild beauty—raw, untouched, hitting something deep inside her. The rickshaw bounced hard over roots and dips, but she didn't care, eyes locked on the view, a low hum building in her chest like the ground knew she was back. After what felt like forever, the trees split open, and there it was—the hamlet, tucked in a clearing, rough and old, watched over by Lord Vajradhar.

The statue stood big at the entrance, carved hard and cold, its empty eyes catching the morning light—just like in the temple, the storeroom, her broken flashes. A rush shot through her, hot and sharp, pinning her there as she climbed out, the rickshaw's rumble fading off. She stood glued, staring into Vajradhar's eyes, a pull so strong it snatched her breath—familiar, bossy, like it'd been waiting forever. Two kids hung around close, barefoot and quiet, watching her with big, steady stares. One stepped up, a boy maybe seven, hair messy, eyes cutting right through her getup. Sheetal managed a shaky smile, her hand slipping into her satchel for the photo—Mrigendra, his proud face stuck in time. She held it out, fingers trembling a little. The boy looked it over, then nodded, something clicking between

them. He grabbed her hand, small but strong, and pulled her past the statue, into the hamlet's guts.

Every step felt weird, like the ground was moving—not for real, but down deep, like her life's pages were flipping back, each move peeling off years. The air buzzed with something she knew—mud huts with straw tops, a whiff of smoke, a stream she couldn't see but felt anyway. The layers of who she was now started falling off, showing a past she hadn't lived but knew in her bones. Her breath caught, everything humming—laughter under a full moon, the weight of red dust, a guy's voice saying her name. She didn't fight it; she couldn't. When they hit a bunch of old cottages, walls beat up by time, she just *knew* where to head. Her feet took over, pulling her to a low door wrapped in vines, like she'd walked it a million times.

The boy stopped there, letting her hand go, and shouted, "Dada!" in a high, clear voice before running off, leaving her alone, heart slamming against her ribs. She fixed her scarf, the stethoscope cold on her chest, and waited, the hamlet's beat matching hers. A couple minutes dragged by—two, three maybe—'til a guy stepped out from a hut's shadow. Veerendra came into the light, taller than she'd pictured, lean but solid, eyes sharp and guarded under dark hair. He walked over slow, sizing her up—glasses, scarf, stethoscope—a stranger with a point. "Who're you?" he asked, voice low, suspicion thick, carrying the hamlet's weight in every word.

Sheetal didn't move, Mrigendra's photo burning in her satchel, Vajradhar's stare pressing at her back. She was here—where the truth was hiding, where the past was calling—and there was no backing out now.

Chapter 27

Sheetal stepped into the cottage, her boots scraping the lumpy dirt floor, the air hitting her like a sour punch—wet wood and rot hanging thick. Shadows stuck to the walls, peeling and blotched with black mold, jumping in the shaky glow of a single oil lamp flickering on a beat-up table. Her heart was pounding, each thump a loud roll of nerves as Veerendra stood there—tall, worn, his face cut deep with sorrow and doubt. She clutched her stethoscope, its cold bite digging into her hand, and forced her voice to hold steady even though it wanted to crack. “Dr. Shridhar sent me,” she said, flashing Mrigendra’s photo, “to check on him.” Her face felt tight under all that makeup—thick foundation caked on, eyeliner sharp as knives—itching like crazy, her hair yanked into a slick bun, hiding who she really was from that morning’s mess of a disguise.

Veerendra’s eyes shrank to slits, dark and glinting with something jagged—hurt, suspicion. “Why now?” he growled low, his voice almost lost in the cottage’s creaking bones. Shri’s name floated there, heavy like a ghost dragging old baggage, and his shoulders sagged like it was crushing him. “Fine... come in,” he grumbled, stepping aside, his tone sour, his stare following her like a hawk ready to swoop.

The place was a wreck—dust spinning in the lamplight, a dead hearth piled with old ash, its stones busted and cold forever. A bed slumped in the corner, sagging under a thin, grimy blanket, shoved away from the window where weak daylight leaked through cracked glass. Sheetal’s chest squeezed tight, her breaths short as the room closed in, something tugging at her—quiet, weird, like a voice she couldn’t catch. A shaky shape moved on the bed, bony hands clawing the air. “Who’s there, Veeru?” Mrigendra’s voice scraped out, rough and thin, his body trembling as he tried to sit up.

“A doctor from the hospital,” Veeru said, crossing over in a couple steps, his hand soft on his dad’s shoulder, steadying him despite his rough edges.

Mrigendra's head snapped up, his cloudy eyes straining her way, blind and wheezing hard. Sheetal stepped in, grabbing his skinny arms as he wobbled, propping him up. His fingers locked onto hers—hot, frantic, like talons—and his voice busted out wild. “Nayan? Veeru, is it Nayan?”

Sheetal's breath snagged, a shock ripping through her—Nayan. The name from those photos, the face that was hers in those old shots from the storeroom. Her pulse went nuts, her head spinning as she stared into his blind, desperate eyes. Veeru's jaw clenched, irritation flashing over his face. “No, Baba,” he said, firm but fraying, “she's not Nayan. She's a doctor—Shri sent her.” But Mrigendra's grip tightened, nails scratching her, his stare digging in like he could make her into someone else.

“How's Shri?” he asked, his voice shaking, a hungry edge cutting through.

“He's... good,” Sheetal said, throat dry, her hands holding him steady as she scrambled to keep it together. “Who's Nayan?” she pushed, her voice dropping low, the name ringing in her like a gong—she knew that face, *her* face from those pictures.

Mrigendra's weak smile flickered, confusion creasing his hollow face.

“Shri didn't tell you?” he mumbled, head tilting like he was waiting for the quiet to answer.

“Nope,” she said, shaking her head, her pinned hair pulling tight. “He keeps his secrets locked up tight.”

“She was my girl,” Mrigendra said, his voice cracking into a sob, thick with a love that wouldn't fade. “My brightest light.” His head dropped, tears shining on his beat-up cheeks.

“Was?” Sheetal's voice sharpened, a chill crawling up her back as she leaned in, eyes locked on his face. “What do you mean, *was*?”

Mrigendra's breath hitched, a rough, torn-up sound slicing the quiet, and he turned away, his head sinking into the dark like he could dodge his own words. His hands shook in hers, frail fingers rattling like dry leaves, and his voice fell to a whisper—a fresh cut bleeding out loud. “She’s gone,” he rasped, every word jagged, “28 years now.” That number landed hard, final, his voice choking into a sob, swallowed by the heavy stillness wrapping around them.

Sheetal's heart slammed, a wild stumble smashing her ribs, a sharp stab cutting through—gone? Dead? Those photos burned in her head: Nayantara's fierce grin, *her* face staring back, tangled in a life she didn't know. But then—28 years. It hit like lightning, a cold zap tearing through her, her breath locking up. She was 28. Exactly 28. Her pulse roared, loud as hell, as it sank in—could it...? The thought hung there, half-formed, a shard of ice sticking in her gut, her head tipping toward something huge and scary she couldn't grab. Her hands shook, the stethoscope slipping against Mrigendra's chest, its weak, jumpy beat anchoring her as the room spun—shadows and echoes whirling, ready to drag her down.

“I'm so sorry,” she got out, her voice cracking, breaking under stuff she couldn't say, her throat choking on the question she couldn't ask. She pressed the stethoscope harder, its cold bite grounding her as she checked his pulse—automatic, numb, a lifeline while her brain screamed. “Rest up,” she said, easing him back onto the bed, his bony frame sinking into the dirty blanket as she dug shaky hands into her satchel for vitamin packs. “Twice a day,” she told Veeru, shoving them at him, her voice thin but cutting through the fog. “He's okay for now, but these'll help.” Her eyes flicked to Mrigendra, then off, that 28 searing behind her eyes, a puzzle she couldn't crack, a shadow creeping closer with every shaky breath.

Veeru grabbed them, nodding quick, tossing them on the table with a clatter that bounced in the quiet. Sheetal turned to bolt, the damp air sticking to her

like a wet rag, and stopped at the door, her pulse hammering loud. “Can I ask something?” she said, her voice wobbly, a thin hope threading through as she faced Veeru.

He crossed his arms, eyes squinting. “What?”

“Can you show me around?” she asked, forcing a stiff smile, her hands twisting up. “This place—it’s so... wild, so different. I wanna see it.” The words masked the antsy pull in her gut, something she couldn’t name, begging her to dig deeper into the hamlet.

Veeru stared, brow creasing, then shrugged, his guard cracking just a bit. “Fine,” he said, voice rough, tinged with nerves. “Come on.”

They stepped out into the hamlet—mud huts sagging under worn-out thatch, walls chewed up by rain; a well with a busted edge, water dark and still; a stretch of bare dirt where old life whispered in the dust. Veeru pointed quick—a leaning barn, a rusty pump leaking into a puddle—his words short, but Sheetal’s steps slowed, pulled by something she couldn’t pin down, a gut feeling steering her through the mess. The air buzzed, thick with invisible stares, and her breath picked up as they hit the ceremonial grounds. The Tree of Truth loomed there—twisted and ugly, its bark carved with deep scars, branches clawing the sky like bony fingers. The sun hammered down, throwing sharp shadows that jittered over the dirt, and Sheetal’s hand hovered near the trunk, a shiver hitting her hard, pulling her in and freaking her out.

“Back off,” Veeru snapped, voice low and sharp, stepping close. “That’s not a plaything—it’s sacred, older than any of us.”

Before she could say anything, a shadow dropped over the grounds—six guys, moving fast, faces set hard with doubt. Samar led them, big and solid, eyes like cold stone, gripping a carved staff tight. He slammed it into the dirt with a thud that rang out like a shot. “Who’re you?” he roared, his

voice cutting the quiet like a knife, his crew spreading out to box her in.
“What’s an outsider doing here?”

Sheetal’s blood froze, her feet stuck as their stares drilled into her, hard and unforgiving. “I—I’m a doctor,” she stuttered, voice shaking, hands clutching her satchel like armor. “Came to check on his dad—Dr. Shridhar sent me.”

Samar’s lip twisted, eyes narrowing thin. “We didn’t ask for you,” he said, cold and slow, every word a punch. “Nobody’s come from that hospital in years—not since Shridhar ditched us. Only Dr. Pratap showed up uninvited. You’re full of it—why’re you really here?”

“I—I swear, it’s true,” she choked, throat closing as the guys edged closer, their shadows eating the light. “I just wanted to help—”

“Help?” Samar barked, stepping up, his staff tapping a slow, creepy beat. “Who told you where we are? How’d you find us? What’re you after?” His voice climbed, a storm kicking up, and his crew piled on—*Who sent you? What’s your angle?*—their questions stacking up like rocks, smashing her down.

Sheetal’s knees shook, her breath coming in quick gasps as panic clawed her chest. “I don’t know—I don’t—” she sputtered, tears burning up, spilling hot down her face. “Please, I didn’t mean anything bad—” Her voice cracked, hands trembling as she stumbled back, the Tree’s shadow hulking behind her.

Samar’s stare turned hard, his jaw locking tight. “She’s hiding something,” he growled, spinning to his guys, his staff cracking the ground loud. “We’ll get the truth out—tie her to the Tree!”

“No!” Sheetal screamed, her voice raw, ripping across the grounds as two guys grabbed her arms, their hands like steel, dragging her to the trunk.

“Let me go—please, I don’t know anything!” She kicked and twisted, boots

scraping dirt, her sobs turning into wild begs—“I’m telling the truth, I swear!”—but the ropes snapped around her wrists, cutting in, pinning her to the bark. It scratched her back through her shirt, rough as hell, and she yanked at the ropes, her yells bouncing—“Somebody help me!”—tears streaming, smearing her makeup into messy streaks.

Veeru hung back, fists clenched, breathing fast. Mrigendra’s “Nayan” rang in his head, but this chick—face all wrong, story shaky—wasn’t his sister. Doubt chewed at him, keeping him stuck; he wanted answers too, and the tribe’s call was unbreakable. He swallowed hard, his quiet weighing him down.

The village priest stepped out of the crowd—skinny as a stick, draped in black feathers that rustled soft, his headdress jingling with beads and bones, a staff topped with a snake skull shining in the sun. He lifted it high, his voice busting out in a deep chant—“Vajradhar, rise! See her soul!”—and the crowd rushed in, dozens strong, their yells hitting hard: “Judge her! Cleanse us!” Torches sparked up, flames spitting embers that spun into the sky, the air getting heavy with sage smoke and a buzzing, electric vibe. Drums pounded, their beat shaking the ground like a pulse, prayers twisting through the haze—wild, loud, a wall of sound and spirit prickling her skin.

She thrashed against the ropes, wrists bloody, her voice shot from yelling—“Stop, please, I can’t—” Her fight faded, the ordeal dragging on—thirty minutes, forty, an hour—her body slumping, head drooping as exhaustion sank deep. The chants roared louder, a wave crashing over her, and the Tree shook under her, its bark heating up, glowing faint and weird, spreading a sick green light from the roots up, wrapping her in it.

Mrigendra hobbled out, his cane jabbing the dirt, his breath a wheezing mess as Veeru ran to hold him up. “What’s all this racket?” he snapped, voice weak but fierce, his blind eyes swinging around uselessly. “Veeru, what’s going on?”

“They’re judging her,” Veeru said, voice tight, cracking under pressure.

“She says she’s a doctor, but Samar thinks she’s lying—they’ve got her on the Tree.”

The glow flared bright, blinding, and the crowd gasped, stumbling back as the Tree jerked hard. Then, out of the smoke swirling at its base, two shapes burst out—wild things made of shadow and fire, rippling like black water, red eyes blazing, fangs flashing in growls that shook the dirt. They charged out, huge paws tearing up the ground, their roars drowning the chants with a bone-rattling boom. The crowd freaked, bolting in a mess—guys tripping over roots, women grabbing kids, torches hitting the dirt to fizzle out—as the beasts stalked, snapping jaws and swinging claws to push them back.

Sheetal’s head sagged, her sight blurring, her body limp in the ropes as the glow pulsed around her, her yells down to busted whimpers. The beasts circled, shifting—wolves one second, snakes the next—then lunged at the tribals, their hot, stinking breath right in their face. Sheetal flinched, a sob ripping out, but the ropes broke—cut by nothing she could see—and she dropped, hitting the ground hard, knees folding as she curled up, half-gone, crying into the dust.

Mrigendra didn’t budge, his cane dug in, his blind stare locked forward—too blind to see the chaos, too bullheaded to run. “What’s that?” he barked, clutching Veeru’s arm as the roars died off, the beasts melting into smoke wisps.

Veeru gaped, breath shaky, stuck between shock and fear as the grounds cleared out, the air still snapping with leftover juice. “She’s loose,” he said, voice wobbling “... freed by the Lord himself.”

Mrigendra’s brow scrunched, catching her soft, torn-up sobs through the quiet. “Why’s she crying like that?” he demanded, his voice shaking with confusion and a twist of pity. “Get her inside, Veeru—now. She’s had enough.”

Veeru froze a second, eyes on Sheetal—makeup smeared into black streaks, hair spilling loose, body quaking in the dirt. She didn't look like Nayan, not like this, but something—her voice, her hurt—gnawed at him. He scooped her up, her weight light and fragile in his arms, and hauled her back to the cottage, the Tree's glow dying out behind them, the truth still a storm brewing in the dark.

Chapter 28

Sheetal crashed to the ground, the dirt smacking her hard as the ropes—snapped by some invisible yank—flailed loose, their ragged ends whipping around like pissed-off snakes. Dust kicked up, choking her, sticking bitter in her mouth as she clawed at the earth, nails cracking on roots poking out like old bones from the ceremonial grounds. Her body shook hard, a sob ripping out—deep, ugly, straight from her gut as she scrabbled to get up, to shake off the nightmare pinning her down. Tears poured hot and fast, cutting streaks through the mess of her makeup, her red lips quivering, her kohl-smeared eyes darting wild with fear and something else—something busting loose inside. The Tree of Truth hulked over her, its twisted shape clawing the sky, its bark still flickering with a creepy glow that burned into her, like it'd ripped her open and dumped someone else's life into the hole.

Her head was a storm, a mess of screams and flashes slamming around—broken pictures, voices, a flood of stuff smashing her sanity to bits. The Tree had done its job, brutal and unforgiving, and Nayantara's life hit her clear as day, not fuzzy anymore but a full-on, shattering blast. She saw the hamlet lit up under a fat moon, drums pounding in her blood; she felt red dust heavy on her forehead, incense stinging her chest; she tasted Shri's sweat as he held her tight, his voice rough in her ear—"Nayan, I love you!"—a promise sealed in blood right under this damn Tree. It wasn't some dream—it was *her*, sinking into Sheetal's bones, mixing with her heartbeat, her gasps, her yells. She sucked in air, choking on it, her hands clawing at her shirt like she could tear it out, stop it, but it kept coming—Nayantara's life was hers now, no denying it, alive and kicking.

Through the blur of tears and grit, she caught a shaky figure—bent, wobbly, his cane jabbing the dirt like it was all he had left. Mrigendra. Her dad. The word hit like a thunderclap, splitting her wide open, and she *knew* him—not some random old guy, not just a patient, but the man who'd rocked her to

sleep, his voice soft against the dark, his hands tough once, wrestling pigs, now frail but still *hers*. “Why’s she crying like that?” he croaked, his voice shaking with a dad’s worry, his blind eyes twitching uselessly as he leaned on Veeru, who held him up, pale and rattled. “Get her inside, Veeru—now!”

Veeru—her brother—lurched toward her, his face all shock and doubt, his breath catching as he dropped beside her. “Come on,” he muttered, rough and cracking, sliding his arms under her and hauling her up from the dirt. She went limp, shaking hard, sobs jerking through her as Nayantara’s memories flared—Veeru’s laugh by the creek, his big shoulders lugging wood, his sneaky grin now faded with years. She grabbed at him, fingers digging into his shirt, her cries spiking—“Veeru, it’s me!”—but the words drowned in her throat, lost in the mess as he carried her to the cottage, the Tree’s glow dimming behind, its truth a fire roaring in her blood.

Sheetal sprawled across the bed, her body heavy, sinking into the creaky mattress that groaned like it was crying too. Dust floated in the weak lamplight, the air thick with mold and old ash, pressing on her chest as she fought to pull herself together. Her breaths were short, torn—each one a scrap against the sobs clawing up, choking her as she shook, her smeared makeup like battle scars of tears and dirt. The Tree’s glow still burned in her head, Nayantara’s life a wildfire tearing through her, scorching her with stuff she couldn’t unsee. She raised a shaky hand, her voice thin, barely there over the pounding in her skull. “My satchel... water,” she rasped, the words scraping her throat raw, a plea about to break.

Veeru froze a second, his shadow big in the dim, then jolted over, grabbing the satchel off the table and shoving a chipped clay cup at her, water splashing over the edge. “Here,” he grunted, voice rough, tight, his eyes flicking between her and the door, where the hamlet’s quiet felt like a trap waiting to snap. Mrigendra shifted close, his bony frame perched on a stool, his cane tapping the floor in a jittery beat that scratched at the silence.

“Veeru, what’s going on?” he wheezed, voice wobbling with nerves, his blind eyes jumping around like he could catch something he couldn’t see. “Who is she? Why’s she like this?”

Sheetal’s hands fumbled the satchel, stuff spilling out—vials clinking, papers rustling—‘til she snagged a pill, choking it down dry, its bitter kick steadying her as she slumped against the wall, head drooping. Sleep wouldn’t come, a mean tease she couldn’t grab, and her eyes drifted, empty and spooked, between Veeru and Mrigendra. The room snapped into focus, a busted crack in her world: the bed—jammed in a dark corner, not by the window where it should’ve been; the curtains—gone, leaving a hole in the wall; the hearth—dead, its stones split and cold, no fire for years, a grave where heat used to live. Her chest squeezed, Nayantara’s life bleeding into hers, coloring the ruin with a past she shouldn’t know.

After a tense beat, she swung her legs off, muscles yelling as she dragged herself up, the floor freezing under her feet. Mrigendra shuffled nearer, cane scraping, his breath a rattle as he reached out, fumbling to feel her there. “How you holding up, kid?” he mumbled, voice thick with worry, shaking with a hope he couldn’t pin down. Sheetal’s hand grabbed his arm, shaky but hard, and she leaned close, her voice a whisper that cut the quiet like a knife. “Baba... it’s me.”

Mrigendra went stiff, his breath snagging, then bursting out in a gasp that rocked him. “Nayan?” he choked, voice splitting with joy, doubt, love—“Nayan?” His hands shot up, trembling fingers running up her arm, clawing for her face as tears welled in his blind eyes, shining like stars in the dark.

Veeru spun from the door, stomping in with boots banging loud, his face all rage and fear. “No, Baba!” he barked, voice snapping sharp, raw with frustration. “How many times—she’s not Nayan!” His fists balled up, knuckles white as he glared at her, chest heaving with the weight of saying no.

Sheetal didn't bite, her legs wobbling as she limped to the clay sink, its edge chipped and stained from years of nothing. She cranked the rusty tap, water spitting out slow, and shoved her hands in, scrubbing her face hard 'til it hurt—washing off the thick makeup, the red lipstick, the kohl that'd hid her. Hairpins clinked to the floor, her tight bun falling loose in a wild mess of waves. She turned, water dripping off her chin, her real face out—Nayantara's face, no mistaking it, alive.

Veeru stumbled back, a choked noise slipping out, his eyes huge and stuck like he'd been hit by a bolt. "Nayan?" he whispered, the word a ghost sneaking out, his hands twitching, doubt crashing against a truth breaking him open. He couldn't move, couldn't breathe—stunned, his whole world tipping.

Mrigendra's head jerked toward him, voice climbing, begging hard. "Nayan? Veeru, what're you saying? Is it her?" His cane slipped, banging down as he reached out, hands flapping, a sob busting loose—"My Nayan?"

Sheetal hobbled back to the bed, legs shaky, and dropped beside him, grabbing his arm with both hands, holding tight. "I don't know, Baba," she said, voice low, trembling with wonder and fear, "why or how—but it feels like I'm back. The gods... they've played some messed-up trick." Her eyes stung, tears spilling as she searched his worn face, Nayantara's memories hitting hard—his songs, his strength, now weak but still hers.

Mrigendra's sobs got louder, a dam bursting as he yanked her close, hugging her tight to his chest. "Nayan... my Nayan," he kept saying, a chant of love and relief, his shaky hands running through her hair. "I knew you weren't gone—I felt you, always."

Veeru stood stuck, breath short, his voice a rough whisper as he shook his head, fighting what couldn't be. "How's this real?" he snapped, words spilling fast, brittle. "How can Nayan be back? You look like her—damn it,

you do—but you’re not my sister. You can’t be!” His hands tore through his hair, eyes wild, begging for it to make sense.

Sheetal’s lips twitched into a small, sad smile, her eyes softening as they locked on his. “Weird, huh, Veeru?” she said, voice steadying, warm and sharp. “That you don’t know the sister who loved you—the one you’d do anything for. Remember when you and Gaja would nab toffees from the village, ignoring Baba’s rules? You’d stash them back there—” She pointed, finger shaky but dead-on, to the dented pots by the hearth, their dull shine catching the light. “—and I’d dig them out, laughing, while you faked being mad.”

Veeru’s breath cut off, his face going white, eyes jumping to the pots like they’d sold him out. “How...?” he croaked, barely a sound, his legs giving a little as he lurched forward, shock pinning him there.

“And you, Baba,” Sheetal turned to Mrigendra, voice cracking as tears ran free, “you’d always say Mother was coming back—that she’d gone off on pilgrimage somewhere far. Why isn’t she here, Baba? Where’d she go?” Her sobs broke loose, a mess of hurt and confusion, and she threw herself into his arms, face buried in his chest as he held her, his own tears soaking her hair, his grip fierce even frail.

“What happened to you, baby?” Mrigendra whispered, voice breaking, rocking her slow. “The accident...”

Sheetal’s breath hitched, her hands twisting his shirt as Nayantara’s last moments slammed in—a screaming, jagged rush cutting her head open. “I see Shri, Gaja, and me on that bus,” she said, voice shaking through sobs, “then it threw us—flipping, smashing into the dark. I hear Shri yelling, frantic, calling me—‘Nayan, hold on!’—cutting through the wreck. But after that... nothing. It’s blank.” Her body quaked, wails bouncing off the cottage walls, a fresh wound bleeding out.

Veeru dropped beside her, his arm sliding around her shoulders—hesitant, then hard, his breath rough as he gave in to the crazy truth. “You’re so skinny now, brother,” she murmured, soft and sore, leaning into him, her hand brushing his thin frame. “I don’t get what’s happening—to me, to us, to Shri. Poor guy, he’s hauled this load quiet, cracking under it all these years.”

Veeru’s arm locked tighter, his breath still choppy from her words—toffees, Shri’s screams—bouncing in his skull like broken glass. But then his head snapped up, eyes slashing to the door, the evening’s thick quiet pressing in, heavy and suffocating, a hunter’s hush lighting his nerves up. His jaw clenched, panic sparking hot in his chest like a fire catching, the truth hitting hard—sharp, mean, twisting deep. “It’s not safe,” he hissed, voice a tight whisper, barely cutting through the cottage’s tired groan. “Not here—not now.” His fingers dug into her shoulder, a frantic grip as he pulled back, eyes darting wild, the air buzzing with Samar’s shadow creeping in the dying light.

“How’d you get here?” he barked, spinning to her, his tone cutting, pushing, his stare stabbing her ‘til she straightened.

Sheetal’s breath snagged, her head clawing through the fog of hurt and shock. “Auto,” she stammered, voice weak, wobbling on the edge, a tiny hope flickering. “Chandra’s brother—he dropped me. He... he might still be out there.”

Veeru bolted to the door, boots scuffing dirt as he squinted into the dusk. The hamlet stretched out—mud huts dark and hunched, the ceremonial grounds a blurry smear in the twilight, the Tree a twisted ghost clawing the fading sky. His breath sharpened, a swear swallowed as he spun back. “Can’t wait to check,” he growled, voice low and urgent, panic seeping in. “They’ll come—Samar, the tribe. They won’t drop this—not after the Tree.” He grabbed her satchel off the bed, slinging it over his shoulder with

a grunt, eyes blazing with a brother's fierce grit. "Move—walk fast, don't stop, don't look."

Sheetal stumbled up, legs shaky, the room tipping as she turned to Mrigendra. He sat slumped on his stool, cane clutched in trembling hands, blind eyes wet, lips still mouthing her name—"Nayan, my Nayan." Her chest split, a sob tearing out as she lunged to him, wrapping her arms around his bony frame. "Baba," she choked, voice breaking with love and fear, "I'll see you soon—I swear." She pressed her cheek to his, his rough stubble scratching, his warmth a quick lifeline as she hugged him hard, tears soaking his old shirt. His hands fumbled, grabbing her back, a rough "Come back, my girl" busting out as she pulled free, the sound slicing her deep.

Veeru grabbed her arm, his grip iron as he yanked her to the door. "Now!" he snapped, voice booming, urgency pumping through him. She tripped after him, boots scraping, breath ragged as they burst into the evening—the sky bruised purple, mist twisting around like ghost fingers in the half-dark. The hamlet loomed quiet and black, its edges fuzzy in the dusk, no sign of the rickshaw, just the forest's far edge where it hid, a shadow too far. Veeru pushed her on, his steps long and hard, head swinging—left, right—checking the dark for any twitch, any sound of them coming. "Keep moving!" he growled, shoving her satchel into her arms as they hit the path's curve, dirt crunching under their desperate run.

He stopped sharp, leaning close, his breath hot and shaky by her ear. "Get to that auto—don't stop, don't come back 'til it's safe," he said, voice low, fierce, a brother's order thick with fear. "I'll hold them here." His eyes locked on hers—wide, spooked, burning with a love he couldn't name yet—and he shoved her hard, hand shaking as it left her. "Go!" he yelled, stepping back, his shape a lone wall against the dark as Sheetal staggered on, clutching the satchel, legs pumping through the mist.

She looked back once, her heart locking—Veeru’s figure shrinking, boots planted, shoulders set, a guard ready for the night’s teeth. The cottage blurred, Mrigendra’s weak shape lost in the doorway, and a sob ripped from her, her promise—“I’ll see you soon”—a frantic beat in her head as she dove into the forest’s grip, the evening closing tight, danger rustling in every moving shadow.

Chapter 29

Sheetal flopped across her bed, the thin mattress creaking under her, a shaky shield against the mess still tearing through her bones. The room was a dark hole—curtains yanked shut, air thick with sweat and dust, the hospital’s faint buzz a world away. She was beat, her arms and legs heavy from the hamlet’s madness—Nayantara’s life burning in her head, Veeru’s frantic shove, the rickshaw’s bumpy getaway—but sleep wouldn’t come, a mean tease slipping out of reach. Then it hit—hard, fast knocks, a pounding storm on the door like bullets, jolting her up. Her heart slammed, a rough gasp busting out as adrenaline kicked in, yanking her from the fog. She stumbled up, legs wobbly, the floor cold as hell under her socks as she shuffled over, every step fighting the weight smashing her chest.

Her hand shook grabbing the knob, twisting it open with a groan that cracked the quiet. Shri stood there, a damn hurricane—face twisted with rage and hurt, eyes blazing under a scowl, jaw locked like he was choking down a yell. His coat hung crooked, dirt streaked across it, his breath heaving like he’d sprinted all over Shivalkot to get here. “What’s wrong with you?” he snapped, voice low and rough, slicing the stillness sharp. “You didn’t check in—everybody’s losing their minds, wondering where the hell you went!”

Sheetal blinked, head slow, his words hitting like rocks. “Everybody?” she mumbled, voice weak, fraying, confusion tangling with the ache pounding her skull.

“Yeah, everybody,” he fired back, sharp and hard, hands balled up like he wanted to grab her and shake some sense in.

She stepped back, breath short, and waved him in weak. “Come in, then,” she said, voice quivering, a thin thread barely holding her as she turned,

limping to the bed, body swaying. She dropped onto the edge, springs squeaking loud, hands gripping the blanket to keep from falling apart.

Shri paused, a dark shape in the doorway, then marched in, boots thumping the floorboards, matching the beat in her chest. He dragged a wobbly chair over, its legs screeching harsh, and sank down, eyes locked on her—dark, digging, boiling with something he wouldn't say. "Where were you?" he demanded, voice quieter but still cutting, leaning in, elbows on his knees, like he could yank the truth out of her.

Sheetal's throat closed up, eyes dropping to her lap, fingers twisting the blanket's raggedy edge. "Just... wandering villages," she whispered, dodging, the lie sour in her mouth.

"And?" Shri pushed, voice getting an edge, suspicion flickering as he sat up, the chair groaning under him.

"And what?" she shot back, head jerking up, a flash of fight cutting through her tiredness. "I felt like crap, so I came back." Her words hung there, brittle, daring him to keep at it, though her body slumped against the headboard, strength leaking out.

Shri's forehead creased, his anger slipping into something softer—worry, maybe pain. "Why're you mad at me?" he asked, voice dropping, almost begging, hands loosening as he scanned her face.

Sheetal's chest hurt, a flood of stuff begging to spill—I'm sick of questions, of hiding, of you not seeing me—but she swallowed it, lips clamping shut. "Nah, I'm not," she said, flat, worn out, a wall against the real stuff. "Just... tired." Her eyes flicked to his, then off, the lie sinking heavy in her gut.

A tense quiet stretched, buzzing between them, 'til she moved, voice going soft, a need sneaking out. "Can you check if I've fever?" Her heart thumped, a raw ache growing—she wanted his hands on her, needed his warmth to hold her steady, to feel him past Nayantara's shadow.

Shri blinked, thrown off. “Where’s the thermometer?” he asked, all business, half-standing like he’d grab it.

“Just... use your hands,” she murmured, voice shaky, thick with a want she couldn’t hide, eyes locking his, pulling him in.

He stopped, a flash of doubt crossing his face, then leaned close, fingers brushing her forehead—light, warm, a quick touch that sent a jolt down her spine. Her breath snagged, her skin lighting up under him, but it was gone fast. “Nah, you’re good,” he said, pulling back, voice cool, doctor-like, missing the chaos he’d kicked up in her.

Sheetal forced a smile, thin and shaky. “Thanks,” she whispered, eyes hanging on his, hunting for a break in his shell, a sign of the guy who’d held Nayantara and broke.

Shri shifted, chair creaking. “You eat anything?” he asked, voice easing up, worry sneaking through his irritation.

“Not hungry,” she said, voice dull, her stomach too twisted to care, the day’s weight pressing her flat.

He frowned, leaning in, eyes narrowing. “You don’t eat, you’ll get worse—you’re a doctor, you should know that,” he scolded, stern but with a care that pulled at her, blurring lines between job and something more.

Sheetal’s lips twitched, a faint ghost of a grin. “I’ll hit the canteen later,” she mumbled, eyes down, too wiped to fight, too raw to look up.

“No need,” Shri said, standing quick, chair scraping loud. “I’ll get something hot sent over. Rest.” His voice was solid, a call wrapped in kindness as he headed for the door.

Sheetal’s eyes snapped to his, heart tripping—he cared, his worry a rope tugging her, but was it for her or Nayantara’s ghost in her face? “Okay,” she breathed, soft, aching. “Thanks, Sir.”

Shri nodded, a sharp dip of his head, and walked out, door clicking shut with a thud that rang in the quiet. She stared after him, chest tight, a hunger clawing her ribs—his presence a fire she needed, gone too quick, leaving her in the dark, stuck between bone-tired and the shadows of a love she couldn't grab.

Next day, Sheetal floated through the hospital's clean halls, her white coat a weak guard against the storm still churning inside. She moved like a robot—checking charts, handing out pills, nodding at patients—face blank, like the hamlet's mess and Nayantara's life hadn't carved into her soul. The ward hummed around her, trays clanking, voices muttering, but her eyes darted, chasing shadows for any slip in the normal she was faking. Ramesh zipped by, his look bouncing off her like always, a quick ghost in his own grind—head low, hands busy, dodging her like she was trouble. She hardly clocked it, her focus tightening as Shri's big frame rolled into view, coat swinging as he cut through the ward, clipboard in hand, a giant lost in his work.

Their paths crossed by a patient's bed, a quick freeze in the chaos, and Sheetal's breath caught, fingers gripping her stethoscope as she tilted her head, digging into his eyes—those dark, locked-up pools she'd seen burn with love 28 years back, in another skin. She hunted for a flicker, a hint of knowing, anything to crack his wall, but nothing broke through. His look slid over her, cold and sharp, a pro at hiding the heat she knew was under there—care she'd caught in his touch, his voice, over and over. Her chest stung, a fierce ache to spill it—I'm her, Shri, I'm here—but fear glued her mouth shut. If he shot her down, said no flat out, it'd break her worse than the Tree did. Nah, she'd play it slow, careful, a game with her heart on the line. She'd pull him back in—step by step, quiet—'til he couldn't say she wasn't real.

Next morning, Shri stepped out of his cottage, dawn air biting cold on his skin, the hospital a gray lump against the rising sun. He stopped, breath clouding up, when a sound hooked him—a low hum, faint but nagging, weaving through the quiet like a voice from a grave. It yanked at him, a tune that used to bounce with Nayantara’s laugh 28 years ago, now twisted sad and spooky, floating out from the woods ahead. His pulse jumped, a chill crawling his neck as he chased it, boots crunching wet leaves, the sound dragging him deeper into the trees—past twisted trunks, through gold light stabbing the canopy—‘til the woods opened, and he stopped dead, air knocked out of him.

Sheetal sat on a mossy rock, back to him, dark hair loose and catching the dawn as she stared out at the view—a valley rolling out in misty greens and purples, a place time forgot. The hum spilled from her, soft but sharp, *their* tune wrapping him tight, squeezing with every note. Shri’s throat locked, hands balling up as he stepped closer, voice rough, shaky. “Sheetal, what’re you doing out here?”

She turned, a slow, sly smile curling her lips, eyes gleaming with a quiet win—she’d picked this spot, this second, and the hum was her trap, a call she knew he’d bite on. “Just feels good here,” she said, voice light, careful, hiding the chaos inside. “I come out some mornings, before work. Clears my head.” She tilted her head, the hum hanging there, a piece of the past she dangled for him.

Shri’s eyes thinned, doubt sparking as he sized her up—her cool vibe, the tune still banging in his head. “Where’d you pick that up?” he asked, voice tight, a shake underneath giving away the crack she’d wedged open.

Sheetal shrugged, smile steady, playing innocent while her pulse hammered. “Dunno,” she said, soft and smooth, a knife in velvet. “Feels like it’s always been there.” She held his stare, daring him to push, to feel

those notes—notes Nayantara hummed by the creek, in the cottage, against his skin.

Shri's jaw clenched, a mess brewing in his eyes—doubt, memory, something deep and buried—but he shut it down, face going hard like always. “Alright,” he said, short, brushing it off, turning like he could cut her thread loose. “Get back to the hospital when you’re done.” His boots crunched away, stiff and fast, running from the hum clawing at him.

Sheetal's smile stuck, eyes following his back 'til he was gone in the trees, then she turned to the valley, the view stretching wide. The hum kicked back up, quiet and sure, a mix of win and want floating out. She'd hit something—deep, hidden, a piece of his heart she'd plucked after 28 years—and even if he wouldn't say it, she felt it move, a shake he couldn't dodge. Shri stumbled back to work, chest tight, the tune a ghost stuck to him, dragging up Nayantara's voice, her touch, her love—and he couldn't figure why it was bleeding out now, picking him apart note by damn note.

That day, after a shift that left her aching to the core, Sheetal slipped into the hospital canteen, the air heavy with tea steam and old grease. The place buzzed low—trays banging, voices mumbling—a kind of hideout in her unraveling mess. She dropped into a chair by the counter, its chipped edge digging her legs, fingers messing with the pendant at her throat—a silver twist with worn scratches, something she'd dug out of her satchel, its weight tying her to a blank spot. Her eyes flicked to the hall, tracking shadows, pulse picking up with a hunter's wait—she knew Shri's moves, his late tea stop before rounds. She sat tight, pendant cool on her skin, breath even but her heart banging loud.

His shape was rolling in—big shoulders, steady walk—and as he got close to the door, Sheetal tilted her head, voice slicing the canteen noise easy and sharp. “Didi, got any fritters today?” she called to the canteen lady, light and smooth, a line tossed out she knew he'd grab.

The woman behind the counter—stocky, hands dusted with flour—looked up, wiping her face with a rag. “Some potato ones left,” she said, nodding at a tray, voice rough but kind. “Still hot.”

Sheetal’s lips curled, a faint smile hiding the storm as she spun the pendant faster, fingers quick. “Nah, Didi,” she said, voice dipping, a playful twist in it, “I don’t like potato ones. Next time, can you whip up some onion ones for me?” She let it hang, soft but aimed, her eyes sliding sideways—testing, waiting.

Shri stopped cold in the doorway, boots glued to the tiles, the air going thick as her voice—that voice—sank into him like a spike. Her fingers on the pendant, the fritters, those words—onion ones—it hit him hard, a wave of memory dragging him down. He was back 28 years, canteen alive with laughs and frying oil, Nayantara next to him, Gajendra across. The waiter dropped two plates of hot potato fritters, golden and steaming, and Shri slid them her way with a grin. She shoved them back, eyes sparkling, voice teasing low—“You know I don’t like potato ones... only onion.” He leaned in, whispering a dare by her ear—“Not even if I feed it to you?”—and she flicked a shy look at Gajendra, chowing down clueless, before whispering back, “Well, then that’s another story,” her smile a match that lit him up.

The memory slammed shut as Sheetal’s voice cut in—“Sir, join me, please!”—bright, pulling, yanking him back. Shri’s chest squeezed, breath short, Nayantara’s whisper crashing into Sheetal’s call. He forced his legs on, each step fighting the shake in his hands, and dropped into the chair across, face blank like he felt nothing, dodging her eyes—eyes that dug into him, hunted him, threatened to bust his walls wide open.

She leaned back, pendant catching the light, her smile soft but sharp, a quiet win simmering under it. Shri grabbed his cup when it came, steam curling up, and dove into hospital talk—charts, supplies, whatever—voice flat, robotic, like the fritters, the pendant, the past hadn’t just ripped him up.

Sheetal nodded, sipping tea, fingers still on the silver curve, eyes flicking to his hands, his jaw—looking for a twitch, a break. The talk rolled, boring and safe, ‘til the cups were dry, and they split for rounds like nothing moved, like the air between them wasn’t thick with ghosts.

But it was. Shri’s steps hitched as he left, tea bitter on his tongue, the echo of onion fritters—and that shy “another story”—ringing loud, a piece of her he couldn’t shake, stirring a fear and ache he wouldn’t name.

Chapter 30

For days, Sheetal played a tight, risky game, weaving herself into Shri's locked-up world like a spider spinning a trap. Every move was sharp—humming that damn tune in the ward's quiet spots, flashing her pendant where he'd see it on rounds, dropping a line about onion fritters at the nurses' desk when he was close enough to hear. She threw Nayantara's pieces at him like hooks, picking him apart slow, watching his eyes twitch, his jaw go hard, his cool slip just enough to keep her going. He never said a word about it—never let on he felt the ghosts she kicked up—but she saw it, the cracks showing, the shake in his hands when she got too near, the hitch in his breath when her voice carried *their* song. She was breaking him down, sly and steady, each bit a whisper of a past she wore like skin, pulling him back to her—slow, no stopping it.

But that afternoon, the game flipped. Sheetal was cutting through the hospital's busy halls, white coat flapping, head buzzing with her next play, when something caught her—Ramesh, zipping by with a weird little grin, clutching a beat-up leather bag. Her breath stopped, heart slamming hard as it hit her like a punch—it was Nayantara's... *hers*. The bag she'd slung on that cursed bus, straps worn thin, brass clasp dull with years, a piece of a life she'd lived and lost. Her pulse roared, anger and fear shoving her forward as she yelled, voice slicing the ward's noise—"Ramesh!"

He froze, grin fading, shoulders hunching as he turned, gripping the bag tighter. "Meet me in my cabin—now," she barked, voice cold and hard, eyes nailing him down. Ramesh stalled, feet shuffling, then trailed her, dragging like a kid caught red-handed, her boots clicking sharp on the tiles as she led him.

In her tiny cabin, the air was heavy—stuffy with antiseptic and the weight of what she wanted. Sheetal spun to him, voice low and firm. "Shut the door." Ramesh twitched, hand hovering, then did it, the latch clicking like a

judge's hammer. He stood there, bag hanging from his hand, eyes stuck to the floor, dodging hers.

“What’s that you got?” she asked, voice steady but cutting, stepping closer, her shadow swallowing him.

Ramesh gulped, his throat jumping, fingers clamping the leather. “It... it’s Doctor Saheb’s,” he mumbled, barely loud enough to hear, eyes still down.

“Where’d you get it?” Sheetal pushed, voice getting sharper, digging for the real stuff as she towered over him, breath picking up with what he was holding.

A long, choking quiet stretched, Ramesh’s hands shaking, the bag swinging a little. “Nayantara’s brother gave it to me,” he finally said, words tumbling out slow and heavy, eyes flicking up for a second before dropping.

Sheetal’s chest squeezed, a mess of questions hitting—Veeru? When? Why?—but she held them in, eyes narrowing. “So you knew Nayantara well,” she said, voice low, a dark edge creeping in as she watched him fall apart.

Ramesh was trembling now, a shaky rattle running through him, breath short. He nodded, quick and silent, knuckles white on the strap.

“Leave that bag here,” she said, her order hard, stepping in, her vibe a wall he couldn’t push past.

He jerked, head snapping up, eyes big with a fight. “But—but it’s Doctor Saheb’s!” he stuttered, hugging it close, a spark of guts cutting through his scared.

Sheetal’s eyes flared, voice dropping to a hiss, sharp and deadly. “You wanna rip his heart out with this?” She pointed at the bag—Nayantara’s ghost right there, a cut she’d used but wouldn’t let bleed him out, not yet. “You think he’s ready for that?”

Ramesh stopped, breath catching, his fight crumbling as he shook his head, slow and beat, the bag sagging in his hands.

“Then leave it,” she said, voice easing but solid, a soft glove over steel.

“Not a damn word to anybody—especially Dr. Varma. I’ll hand it over when it’s time.” She stared him down, daring him to push back.

Ramesh stood there, head low, a kid caught in her trap, the bag pulling him down. “You get me?” she asked, voice a quiet boom, done and final.

He nodded, a small dip, shoulders slumping more.

“Alright, go on,” she said, flicking her hand, turning to her desk like he was already gone. Ramesh lingered, then set the bag on the chair, leather creaking soft as it landed, a quiet guard of secrets. He shuffled out, door clicking shut, leaving Sheetal with it—her past, her tool, her tie to Shri.

She dropped into her chair, fingers brushing the bag’s rough hide, a chill hitting her as Nayantara’s life pulsed under her touch—laughs, love, gone. She’d unravel Shri, sure, but this... this was a knife she’d swing careful, a string to pull him back when the time was right.

One sharp morning, Sheetal grabbed her shot, sneaking off to the village market under a fake errand, heart banging with a plan under her cool act. The stalls were alive—vendors yelling, air thick with spice and noise—but she moved fast, satchel heavier coming back, stuffed with more than junk. At the clinic, she breezed by Shri, his big frame bent over a chart in the exam room, tossing him a quick “Morning, Sir”—voice easy, her shine a cover as she hit her work. The ward buzzed, but her eyes stuck to him, waiting ‘til he’d duck into his cabin, alone, open. When the door clicked behind him, she moved—slipping in with a smile full of secrets, her vibe a spark in the dim, paper-mess room.

Shri looked up, pen stopping mid-scratch. “Where you been?” he asked, voice rough, a curiosity he couldn’t kill slipping out.

“Oh, this morning?” Sheetal said, voice light, poking fun, leaning on the desk, fingers grazing her satchel. “Village market—had to grab some stuff.” She tilted her head, watching him, her shine growing as he nodded, eyes sliding back to his papers, dodging his own head.

“You know,” she threw in, voice lifting with a laugh, “something funny happened last time I was there.” Shri’s head jerked up, eyes locking hers, a twitch of worry cracking his front.

Sheetal kept going, laugh bright but sharp with purpose. “Ran into this middle-aged lady who thought I was somebody else. Poor thing—said she’d been in the hospital way back, and I’d calmed her down with tribal stories.” She laughed, shaking her head. “Way back—imagine that? I wasn’t even around.”

Shri’s face went white, pen clattering down, voice a scratchy rasp as fear clawed him. “What else she say?” he asked, words tight, scared of the hole her next breath might rip open.

Sheetal’s smile softened, eyes gleaming with a knowing she swung like a blade. “Said I was your fiancée—that we took off for Bombay together.” She stopped, letting it sink, watching his stunned stare widen, his breath freeze.

“And?” he croaked, voice a ghost, hands gripping the desk like it’d hold him up against the mess she’d kicked loose.

“Then nothing,” she said, shrugging easy, voice too smooth. “Her husband popped up, looked at me like I was a ghost, and hauled her off before she could spill more.” She laughed again, a sound teetering on dark, and Shri sat there, floored, her words peeling him raw.

Sheetal shifted, smile growing as she dug into her satchel. “Oh, and I got something from the market.” She pulled out silver hoop earrings, shining in

the dim light, and held them to her ears, head tilting playful. “You like ‘em?”

Shri’s heart jammed up his throat, breath choking as memory hit—Nayantara, bursting in from the market one night, their spot in the woods alive with her laugh. She’d yanked out hoops just like these, pressing them to her ears, voice teasing—“Do you like them?”—eyes sparkling as he’d grinned, pulling her in. Now, Sheetal’s question stabbed him, a ghost’s echo in her tone, and he tried to talk, mouth dry, words turning to dust.

“You don’t like ‘em?” she asked, voice playful but cutting, eyes digging into his quiet, pushing him to break.

He swallowed, voice a choked wheeze, but nothing came—shock locking his chest tight. Sheetal’s smile stretched, a teasing glint as she set the earrings down. “Fine, I won’t wear ‘em,” she said, voice dancing, then added, “Oh—and I got something for you too. Hold on...” She turned for the door, throwing him a sly look over her shoulder before slipping out, leaving him stuck, gasping after her.

Shri sat frozen, head spinning, her game tearing him up—why was she doing this?—hands shaking as the cabin’s quiet crushed in. She was back fast, door clicking shut soft, hands behind her, a teasing smile curling her lips. He hadn’t budged, still floored, eyes wide and haunted as she stepped close, her vibe a storm he couldn’t dodge.

She stopped by the table, eyes locking his, and showed her gift—a green tunic with gold threads, a dead ringer for the one Nayantara shoved in his hands years back, her voice ringing in his head—“Wear it for me tomorrow while coming to the hamlet.” Shri’s breath quit, heart pounding as he stared, the fabric a ghost of their past, her touch burned into it.

“Who... who are you?” he rasped, voice cracking, hands trembling as he gripped the chair, his world busting open.

“I’m Sheetal, Sir,” she said, voice calm, steady, a cover for the fire inside as she met his stare dead-on.

“No—no, who are you *really*?” he barked, voice climbing, raw with disbelief, eyes wild like he was facing a ghost, begging for it to make sense.

Sheetal reached into the tunic, pulling out a photo she’d stashed—a faded shot of Nayantara and Shri, laughing by the Tree of Truth, her arm hooked in his—and set it on the table, paper whispering on wood. “You mean Nayantara?” she asked, voice soft, a quiet boom that broke the air.

Shri shot up, knees wobbling as he loomed over the desk, voice a torn yell—“No... you’re not my Nayan! You can’t be—she’s gone! I saw her burn with my own eyes!” His chest heaved, tears welling, fists balling as memory and now smashed together, ripping him up.

Sheetal’s eyes softened, a thread of pity weaving through her grit as she laid the tunic by the photo. “It’s God’s call, Doctor,” she said, voice firm, final, a truth she’d taken that he couldn’t. “Nothing we can do.” She stepped closer, eyes pinning his, and added, “You looked good in it—when you wore it to the hamlet, the day before we left.”

She turned then, letting the words gut him, and slipped out, door clicking shut like a crack of thunder. Shri crashed back into the chair, breath gasping, broken—shock and hurt slamming him as the tunic and photo stared back, Nayantara’s ghost alive in Sheetal’s shine, unraveling him flat, leaving him a wreck, clawing at a past he couldn’t kill.

Chapter 31

Night crashed over Shivalkot like a heavy blanket, blacker than it should've been even with a fat, almost-full moon hiding behind thick, churning clouds. Shadows scratched at Shri's cottage, the wind howling low and sad, rattling the windows like the whole damn world was moaning with the mess tearing him up inside. He slumped in a creaky chair, whisky shaking in his hand, the dim lamp throwing a weak glow on the amber sloshing around. Every gulp burned, but it didn't touch the hurt, the shock, the nonstop spin in his head. Sheetal... Nayantara. The idea chewed at him, a hungry thing he couldn't kill, but he fought it, grabbing at denial like it'd save him. She couldn't be her—Nayan was dust, blown away 28 years back, a fact he'd carved deep. But those earrings, that tunic, her voice—those eyes—ripped his sureness apart, left him floating, drowning in his own skull.

A knock smashed the quiet—hard, sharp, banging the door like a fist, jerking him up, whisky spilling over his fingers. His heart pounded wild as he hauled himself up, the room tipping, legs heavy with booze and misery. He stumbled to the door, hand trembling on the knob, and yanked it open—the whisky fuzz blew away in a cold snap, his breath gone, his world splitting. There she was—Nayantara, real as hell, her green tunic shining in the moonlight, lips curled in that sly, knowing grin, eyes glinting with a love that stabbed him deep. Shri staggered back, shoulder hitting the wall, hands flattening on the rough plaster to keep from dropping, a choked sound ripping out as she stepped in, the door clicking shut like a lock snapping tight.

“You still don't believe me,” she said, voice low and smooth, a dare wrapped in it that sent a chill down his spine as she closed in, her vibe a storm he couldn't shake.

Shri's chest heaved, eyes big and crazy, pressing harder against the wall, voice a torn whisper. "How... how's it possible? After all this—28 years of nothing, of grieving?" His words cracked, breaking under the weight of not believing, staring at her—every line, every shine a twin to the woman he'd lost.

Sheetal—no, Nayan—came closer, too damn close, her breath warm on his skin, eyes burning into him with a fierce, steady heat. "Why you blocking out the truth?" she murmured, voice soft but hard underneath, her body right there, her smell—jasmine, dirt, memory—hitting him hard, pulling him apart bit by bit.

"Truth?" Shri's voice snapped, a rough, gut-deep yell as he shook his head, fists slamming the wall. "Truth is Nayantara's dead—gone! I held her cold hand, I saw the fire take her!" His eyes flared with pain, tears building as he pushed against her being there, the impossible tearing him up.

She stepped in more, chest almost on his, eyes going soft, breaking him worse. "She was gone," she whispered, voice shaking with love that stretched years, "but here I am—back to take what got ripped away, my love, my life, smashed in that damn wreck." Her hand came up, palm brushing his cheek—warm, alive, a lover's touch that burned—and he flinched, breath catching as her fingers traced the lines pain had cut into him. "Look at you," she said, voice cracking, full of hurt and love, "all stone now, burying that love you still got—for her... for me."

Shri looked up, her touch a shock, eyes stuck on hers—stunned, wanting, scared—then yanked away, stumbling back, hands clawing his hair as a sob tore out. "No—no—no!" he bellowed, a desperate yell to the night, to sense, to anything to hold him together. "It can't be—shouldn't be! Nayan's dead—I saw it!"

Sheetal stopped, hand dropping, chest lifting sharp as she pulled back, eyes shining with hurt and grit. "Fine," she said, voice steady now, a low rumble

shaking the room, “keep lying to yourself, Shri. Hide in your walls—I’ll wait. I’ll wait ‘til you face it, ‘til you see me here, alive, for you.” She turned, tunic swaying as she headed for the door, each step a knife in his gut, and he watched, shock pinning him, breath short and rough.

She stopped, hand on the knob, and spun back, eyes cutting through the dark, voice rising big and heart-stopping—“And by the way, tomorrow’s Karva Chauth.” The words hit like a bell, ringing heavy, stealing his air, her smile flashing—teasing, winning, gutting—as she leaned in, eyes blazing. “Last time, I fasted ‘til noon the next day,” she murmured, voice breaking with old love, “‘cause you forgot it. This time—I’m telling you now, a day early—so you figure out what you wanna do.” The door flew open with a blast of night air, and she stepped out, slamming it—a bang that bounced in the quiet, leaving him gasping, busted, alone.

Shri slid down the wall, hands grabbing his chest like he could keep his heart in, whisky glass forgotten, moon’s hidden light sneaking through—Nayantara’s smile, her touch, her promise burning in his head, a truth he couldn’t outrun, breaking him breath by breath.

Sleep dodged Shri that night, a mean shadow he couldn’t catch as he twisted on the creaky cot, dark pressing in like it was alive. The moon hung out there, a pale, bloated thing staring through the rolling clouds, its light mocking him with her words—“tomorrow’s Karva Chauth”—echoing loud, nonstop. Clarity cut through his denial, sharp now, digging deep—she was Nayantara, her smile, her touch, her soul blazing in Sheetal’s body. But how? How could love grow from ash when she looked half his age, all fire next to his worn-out shell? His head fought—heart against brain, past against now—each thought a ragged edge slicing him. He needed something, an answer, a fix, anything to shut up the storm, to make sense of this wild, aching truth eating him alive.

Next day, the hospital hummed its clean buzz, but Shri drifted through like a ghost, steps heavy, eyes dark from a night of hell. Sheetal zipped around the wards, her white coat a light he couldn't dodge, her vibe pulling his eyes no matter how hard he tried to look away. He knew she was fasting—Karva Chauth, her quiet promise for him in every look she threw, soft but sharp, a love he couldn't miss. Their eyes locked once, twice, quick hits that burned him—her hope smashing his guilt—and he'd turn, chest tight, hands shaking as he ran from her glow.

Midday, he slumped at his desk, tiffin box in front of him a weak anchor in the mess. He cracked it open—rice, dal, simple stuff—and the smell hit, twisting his gut as he saw her, starving, waiting, her fast holding for him. His throat locked, shame slamming him—how could he eat while she went hungry for a love he wouldn't own? He snapped it shut, loud, breath rough, and bolted to the canteen, box heavy in his hands. The canteen lady looked up, hands dusty with flour, as he shoved it at her. "If somebody can eat this, please," he rasped, voice torn, breaking, "I... I can't today."

She nodded, eyes wondering but soft. "I'll find someone," she said, taking it, and Shri spun off, heart banging, the move a quiet give he couldn't name.

Sheetal kept at her rounds, steady but fading, the fast chewing her strength. Still, her eyes hunted him—quick looks as he passed, her smile weak but solid, a faith he felt like a sting. Night dropped, the hospital hushing down, and she slipped to her cottage, stepping out to stare at the moon—full now, silver spilling over her, watching her wait. She stood there, beat, hungry, breath clouding in the cold, stars blinking as she held on, heart thumping with hope and hurt. Exhaustion dragged her in, hand on the door, ready to shut it—when a shadow filled the frame.

Shri stood there, tiffin box in his hands, face raw with a love that stole her breath. Sheetal's smile broke out, bright, shaky, as he stepped in, door

clicking shut, the room closing to just them. He set the tiffin down, eyes stuck on hers, voice soft, breaking—“I’m starving, Nayan. Can we eat?” The words were a rope, a truth, and she fell apart, rushing into his arms, head against his chest, his heartbeat loud under her ear.

“I knew you cared,” she whispered, voice thick with tears, shaking with relief as she held him tight, “I knew you’d see me—see us—someday.” Her fingers dug into his shirt, rooting her to him, her fast unbroken ‘til now, this moment.

Shri’s arms locked around her, hand cradling her head, touch soft, sacred, as he ran fingers through her hair, voice a cracked murmur against her head. “You’re right, my sweet flame,” he said, the old name slipping out—back from the past, alive again—“I should’ve known you the second you walked in, should’ve felt Lord Vajradhar pulling this off all along.” His chest shook, a sob swallowed as he pulled her closer, her heat melting the rock he’d turned into.

They dropped to the floor together, tiffin open between them, eating under the moon’s glow sneaking through the window. The night rolled out, their voices weaving a shaky story—laughs by the Tree, whispers in the woods, the crash that took her—mixed with scared talk of a future shadowed by time and years. But in that tiny, flickering space, wrapped up in each other, the past bled into now, and for one wild night, love beat the grave, fragile but fierce, theirs to hold ‘til dawn hit.

As their talk faded and the empty tiffin sat ignored, a heavy quiet fell, cut only by the lamp’s faint sputter. Sheetal shifted in his arms, head on his chest, breath steady—‘til it hitched, a shiver running through her. Shri felt it, hand stopping in her hair, voice soft against her forehead. “What’s wrong, Nayan?” She pulled back, eyes catching the moonlight, burning with a restless, haunted spark, voice dropping to a shaky, urgent whisper. “I went to the hamlet, Shri,” she said, fingers clamping his wrist, tight as hell

as she dove in. “I saw it all—the Tree of Truth, Samar, Baba, Veeru—every step, every word, every tear came rushing back.” Her voice surged, spilling fast and vivid, eyes far off but fierce as she laid it out—the ride to the hamlet, the Tree showdown, Samar’s looming threat, Baba’s weak cries, Veeru’s last stand—every bit pouring out raw with awe, fear, and shock, painting it clear for him alone. His hand slipped, smacking the floor, breath catching as shock tore through, voice a rough scrape—“Alone?”—his head reeling from her solo dive into that cursed mess without him. But then it clicked, a sharp truth cutting in: she’d gone to grab herself back, to bring up the Nayanantara he’d mourned, and his chest squeezed, love and fear twisting as he leaned in, voice hoarse, desperate. “Nayan... what about that night—the crash?”

Sheetal’s face went pale, eyes drifting to nothing, breath short and choppy. “I’ve always shoved it down,” she whispered, voice trembling, fingers digging into his skin. “A shadow I couldn’t look at, but...” She froze, a gasp ripping out, eyes flaring with a cold, creeping fear. “It’s not right—it doesn’t feel like a damn accident anymore.”

Shri shot up, cot creaking under him, heart slamming like a trapped animal. “What do you mean, not an accident?” His voice broke, heavy with dread, hands fisting the blanket as her words ripped open a scar he’d thought was done.

Sheetal grabbed his arm, nails biting in, voice fraying with panic. “I don’t know—days back, at the temple, heading home, it hit me.” Her eyes darted, wild and wet. “Flashes—sharp, busted-up bits. Somebody was there, Shri, trying to shove me down, to finish me.” Her breath shook, a sob building as she stared at him, begging.

“Who?” Shri’s voice boomed, raw and frantic, hands grabbing her shoulders, shaking with a rage he couldn’t hold. “Who was it, Nayan—tell me!”

“It’s not clear!” she cried, voice busting apart, hands twisting his shirt as tears ran. “Just shadows, a blur—it’s killing me, Shri, but I can’t see— unless we go back. To the temple.” Her words hung, a shaky mix of hope and hell, eyes locking his with a fierce, broken fight.

Shri’s gut knotted, cold fear pooling, but her stare—cracked but steady— held him. He nodded, jaw tight, voice a low growl. “We’ll go. First light.” The deal landed, heavy and charged, the night’s quiet snapping with the promise of answers.

Before dawn broke, Shri dragged Pratap’s beat-up hatchback from the shed, engine coughing alive in the gray half-light, fog rolling thick and swallowing the road. Sheetal sat next to him, hands twisted in her lap, breath fogging the glass as they drove in tight silence, the temple’s pull a dark string yanking them on. Shri’s grip on the wheel was steel, pulse banging, while Sheetal stared out, face white but hard, chasing shadows she couldn’t pin.

The clearing cut through the mist like a wound—pines stabbing up, the temple’s shape a faint, creepy blur. Shri pulled off, tires crunching gravel, and they climbed out, air biting their skin, sharp and cold, fog wrapping them like a shroud. Their hands locked fast, fingers gripping hard, a quiet swear born from that night—the bus’s groan, the yells, the drop. They wouldn’t let go, not now, not again. The fog got thicker, cold sinking deep as they pushed through, the temple’s stone steps rising up, a ghost in the haze leading them in.

They dropped to the wet dirt by the temple’s base, Sheetal curling into Shri’s arms, back to his chest, his heartbeat steady under her shakes. Her eyes swept the mist—sharp, antsy—but it gave nothing, a gray wall mocking her hunt. Time dragged, heavy and choking, ‘til a crack split the quiet—a big, jagged rock busting from the bushes, crashing down into the valley with a thud that shook their bones. Shri jumped up, shoving Sheetal

behind him, voice a rough yell—“Who’s there?”—bouncing back empty, lost in the fog’s weird hush.

Sheetal clung to his back, fingers digging in, breath hitching as the thud jolted her—like a key twisting in an old lock. Shri spun, hands grabbing her face, and stopped—she slumped against a gnarled tree, eyes squeezed shut, body quaking like something grabbed her. “Nayan—Nayan, look at me!” he whispered, fast and soft, thumbs brushing her wet cheeks, but her lips moved, muttering too low to hear.

“Nayan, what do you see?” he pushed, voice cracking, dropping to his knees in front of her, hands holding her steady as she rocked, stuck in the vision’s grip.

Her whispers got loud, a broken wail tearing out—“Someone... hiding in the bushes...” Her voice shook, tears pouring as she grabbed his shirt, nails ripping at it. “I held a vine, chasing your screams, Shri—I heard you—but then...” She gasped, a sob busting through, eyes still shut, lost in it.

“Then what, Nayan?” Shri’s voice roared, desperate, hands shaking as he held her, dread and anger surging.

“Then... his boots,” she sobbed, body jerking, “smashing down—on my head—throwing me over...” Her cries broke, a flood of pain and memory, hands clawing him as the truth ripped free. She leaned in, lips by his ear, and whispered a name—soft, shattering. Shri’s eyes blew wide, breath stopping as it sank in, a shadow turning real.

“He killed me, Shri!” she choked, voice rising raw and gut-deep, tears soaking his shirt as she clung, the betrayal burning hot.

“Oh God—” Shri’s voice busted, horror grabbing him as he yanked her close, her sobs drenching his chest, her whispered truth a knife through his heart. “Nayan, wake up—we have to get out...now!” She mumbled on, trapped in it, and he pulled her up, her body limp against him, tears hot on

his skin. The fog closed tight, choking, as he dragged her back through the clearing, branches cracking like bones, pulse hammering wild.

The car loomed in the haze, a lifeline in the gray, and Shri shoved her in, slamming the door before jumping behind the wheel. The engine growled, tires screaming as he floored it, driving like hell was chasing, road blurring, fog swirling behind. Sheetal slumped next to him, sobs fading to rough breaths, hand still fisted in his sleeve as the cottage came up—a shaky hideout from the nightmare they’d dug up. He killed the engine, chest heaving, and turned to her, voice a busted promise—“We’ll end this, Nayan. Together.” Her eyes flicked open, meeting his, and in that cracked, teary stare, their bond locked hard—raw, shocking, unbreakable, tied to a name he now carried like a damn curse.

Chapter 32

Shri hunched over the shaky table in his cottage, the weak light flickering, throwing sharp shadows that scratched the walls like they wanted blood. His fingers jittered as they brushed the edge of a cold tea cup, chipped and dead, matching the ice creeping through his veins. Every morning yanked them deeper into a chokehold—Sheetal, his bright, breakable lifeline, was dangling on the edge, every breath she took a spit in the face of a truth that could cut her down. If *he*—the bastard who’d snuffed her out once—caught wind she was Nayantara back from the grave, she’d be gone fast, wiped out in a blink, a death warrant scratched into the dark corners of her waking mind. Shri’s head thrashed, clawing for a way out—Bombay, a messy sprawl where they could vanish in the crowd, where the air might not stink of fear. But that hope soured quick; even there, they’d be cornered rats, jumping at every noise, hunted by a ghost whose name scorched their tongues. Nah—running was a weak dodge, a cheap patch on a gushing wound. This had to end—here, now, in a firestorm of payback. Still, the weight smashed him flat, a rock on his chest: he couldn’t take that son of a bitch alone, not this time.

Dawn cracked open, a sick smear of light fighting through fog so thick it strangled everything outside. Shri’s hand shook as he scratched a note—*Veeru, come soon. Cottage. Tonight.*—ink bleeding into the paper, smearing under his sweaty grip as he shoved it to Ramesh passing by, voice a rough snap: “Get it to Veeru—fast!” Grit surged, a jagged blade slicing his fear. Veeru—Nayan’s hard-headed, bull-strong brother—had already locked eyes with Sheetal in the hamlet days back, seen her soul burn through her stare, claimed her as his sister reborn, his blood raging to protect her since. That night, they barged into Shri’s tight little hideout, the air buzzing with a dread that hit like a drum.

Sheetal sat by the window, her shape a hard line against the moon's cold glare, fingers gripping the pendant at her throat—a beat-up thing shaking with her past. Veeru paced like a caged animal, feet grinding the floorboards to dust, his big frame wound tight with rage and love, while Shri leaned on the table, voice low and hard, cutting through the thick tension.

“She knows too much,” Shri said, eyes jumping to Sheetal. She met them, steady, a quiet storm brewing in her look. “He wanted us all dead that night, Veeru—her, me, everybody—and he’ll damn sure try again if he sniffs out she’s *her*.” The words—Nayantara reborn—stuck in his throat, too big, too raw to spit out, but they sat there, a shared knife between them.

Veeru stopped cold, mid-step, jaw clamping shut, fists balling ‘til his knuckles shone white. “Nobody’s tearing her from me again,” he growled, voice a deep, gut-born roar, thick with 28 years of shoved-down pain busting loose, a promise carved in blood and ash. “She’s back—my sister—and I’ll rip him apart first.” His eyes flared, hot with fury, locking on Sheetal, who gave a small, shaky smile—a sister’s trust, a spark he’d die to keep lit.

The hours bled out, their voices swelling like a tide smashing the flickering light—face him, trap him, hit him hard. Sheetal’s whispers cut in, sharp as broken glass, freezing the air: “It’s gotta be soon, Veeru—I see him now, every damn line of his face—but I won’t let you bleed for it.” Shri’s pulse slammed, her words a live spark in his chest; she’d named him in the dark, a quiet confession they’d breathed to Veeru, a secret tying them in a deal of steel and revenge. They hashed out a plan—rough, wild, a desperate roll with death—‘til the light got flipped off, dropping them into a moonlit quiet, heavy with purpose. Veeru took off at first light, his shape a ghost swallowed by the fog, a fighter charging into hell.

Deep in the hamlet's beating heart, where the twisted, grabbing branches of the Tree of Truth stood like a guard against a bloody dawn, Veeru found Mrigendra sprawled on a worn-out cot outside his mud hut. His body sagged under a ratty blanket, his scarred face a roadmap of old fights, but his eyes burned with a dad's fierce, never-quit love. Veeru dropped to a knee beside him, wet dirt cold on his skin, voice a low, urgent growl spilling the night's hard truth—Sheetal's danger, the crash's cold killer, the name they all carried like a loaded piece. "He meant to bury her back then, Baba," Veeru rasped, throat raw, "and if he figures out she's Nayan, your girl, she's dead again—we can't let that go down."

Mrigendra's hands locked up, firewood snapping loud in the quiet, his eyes lifting—sharp as a blade, a chief's fire blazing under years of wear. "I let her down once," he croaked, voice cracking like dry ground, "stood there while the fire ate her, my hands stuck by fate. Not this time—over my damn corpse." His fists smashed together, shaking with a rage that rattled the earth, a fury let loose, and Veeru's nod was rock-solid, their team locked in the fire's hot glow—a dad and brother, armed with a name, ready to torch the world to save her.

As dusk bled red across the sky, Veeru stormed the temple, its cool stone a hard slap against the fire roaring in his blood. The new head priest stood waiting—big, broad, eyes like black glass shining with a guarded edge, saffron robes brushing the floor as the idol of Vajradhar loomed inside, its empty stare a cold judge over everything. Veeru got close, breath rough, voice a shaky whisper cutting the holy quiet. "You saw her—Dr. Sheetal—tied to the Tree that day." His words hung, sharp and slow, a hook digging into the priest's head, his eyes hunting that stone face for a twitch.

The priest's head tipped, his black stare sharpening, a flicker of worry crossing him. "The woman who got loose," he muttered, voice low, careful, the memory of that night stirring under his words. "What about her?"

Veeru's throat tightened, his next words a slow, heavy step. "Since that day, she's been seeing stuff—visions, busted-up flashes of a life ripped apart 28 years back." He stopped, letting it sink, the air getting thick as the priest's eyes jumped, snagged by something weird. "She feels it deep—her death wasn't luck. It was murder, set up by somebody she trusted."

The priest's calm shook, his big frame tensing under the saffron, a spark—doubt, fear—lighting in those hard eyes. "Visions of what?" he pushed, tone a knife coming out, digging in, his breath picking up like he felt the storm rolling in.

Veeru's voice dropped, a hot, shaky hiss full of awe and sureness. "Of Nayan—my sister. Baba and me, we've been watching her since—every word, every shake—and we know it now: she's our Nayan, back in her skin, her soul clawing up after that crash took her." The truth hit like a bomb, slow and huge, the air shaking with it—his sister, burned and gone, now breathing again in the woman the priest had tied to the Tree, her spirit busted loose by that very ritual. The priest's face cracked, his cool mask splitting as awe and dread hit, his eyes going wide, jumping to the idol like it might wake up under this weight.

"She's digging deeper," Veeru rasped, voice torn with hurry, "desperate to see his face—hoping it hits soon, the one who kicked her over." The words bounced off the old walls, a storm breaking free, the priest's hands twitching like he wanted to grab the impossible. He leaned in, whisper a cold, sharp cut through the temple's hum: "If this is real, it's a damn wildfire. We cover her, steer her—get ready for the blow when it lands."

Veeru's chest locked, fear and steel fighting inside, the shaky deal a rope stretched tight over a drop. Outside, the wind screamed through the pines, a wild howl matching Sheetal's own—her head a furnace of memory and threat, her past a ghost sharpening its teeth. Time was a rope burning through, the noose pulling tighter every second. And somewhere in the

night's dark folds, a guy they all knew—his name a quiet poison on their lips—watched, breath steady like a hunter, waiting for her to trip into his jaws.

Back at the cottage, Shri paced like a trapped animal, floorboards groaning under his restless stomps, eyes flicking to Sheetal with a crazy, desperate glint. She sat still—too still—hands clamped so hard her knuckles glowed white, stare lost in the moon's cold, mean light stabbing through the window. "He's out there," she murmured, voice a shaky mix of ice and heat, "and I'm scared he'll feel it—everything I know." Shri stopped sharp, her words a shot blasting the quiet, his heart slamming like a hammer. She knew—the bastard's face carved into her soul, a truth she'd whispered to him in the dark—and now that fear, rough and sharp, tore at her, spilling out between them. "Then we move quick," he growled, voice low and wild as he loomed over her, "before he hits first." The room buzzed with their shared panic, a storm crackling—two souls on a razor's edge, the name burning silent in their locked eyes, a quiet terror shoving them toward a fight that could save them or drag them into a bloody pit.

Meanwhile, their plan was rolling, a thin thread spun in the cottage's moonlit dark now stretching tight across the hamlet's restless gut. The priest, his black eyes still scorched by Veeru's world-shaking truth, moved fast. As night threw its heavy blanket over everything, he called a secret meeting in the temple's deep belly—a damp stone cave where torchlight danced like old promises. Chief Samar was there, lean and wired, sharp eyes glinting with a worry that matched the moment. Next to him stood two elders—Raghunath, bent and rough, gnarled hands gripping a staff, and Kamala, her lined face cut with a fierce mom's grit, her stare slicing the gloom. Above them, Vajradhar's idol loomed, its hollow eyes a quiet judge over the mess brewing down below.

The priest stepped into the circle, saffron robes flaring in the torchlight, voice a low, deep hum shaking the stone. “You all saw her—Dr. Sheetal—tied to the Tree that day.” His words fell like sparks, lighting memory, his gaze sweeping them with a weight that pinned them down. Samar’s brow creased, fingers twitching tight for a second, a flash of something—worry, maybe knowing—crossing him before he nodded slow.

Raghunath shifted, staff tapping the floor, voice a rough scrape. “The one who escaped—what’s this about her now?”

The priest’s eyes thinned, his next words a slow, careful unraveling. “Since that day, she’s been haunted—visions, busted flashes of a life torn off 28 years back, clawing up.” He stopped, air getting heavy, the elders leaning in, Samar’s breath snagging as the priest’s words pulled them in. “She knows her death wasn’t chance—a murder, set up by somebody she trusted.”

Kamala’s hands gripped her shawl, voice a shaky whisper. “Whose life’s she seeing?”

The priest’s voice sank, a hot tremor running through, each word a brick stacking up awe. “Nayan’s—our Nayan. Veeru’s sister, Baba’s girl. They’ve watched her since that ritual—every shake, every word—and they’re dead sure: she’s Nayan reborn, her soul dragged back from the ashes, alive in Sheetal’s skin.” The truth slammed down like thunder, slow and shattering, the air trembling—Nayan, their lost blood, mourned in fire and quiet, now back in the woman they’d seen at the Tree, her spirit sparked by the priest’s own hands. Samar’s eyes popped, raw shock flashing over him, hand jumping to his chest like it’d calm his heart. Raghunath’s staff slipped, banging stone, while Kamala’s breath broke into a soft, choked sob, eyes shining with a mom’s torn hope.

“She’s pushing deeper,” the priest pressed, voice rough with rush, “desperate to name him—the one who killed her, stole her life. She’s

close—too damn close.” The cave hummed with the aftershock, their breaths ragged, Samar’s jaw locking as he leaned in, voice a low, fierce murmur cutting the haze. “If this is real—if he finds out she’s back—he’ll come before she can talk. We can’t let him take her again.”

Raghunath’s head dropped, shaky hands clamping his staff, voice a gravelly swear: “Then we watch—keep him blind.” Kamala’s eyes flared, whisper a steel line: “We guard her—hold tight ‘til she knows.”

The council locked into a tight, whispered deal—agreement sealed in the torchlight’s shaky glow, a shared promise to cover Sheetal, hide her truth from the hunter still lurking. Samar’s fists balled, face hard with a quiet, burning will, voice steady as he added, “She’s ours—Nayan or Sheetal, don’t care. He doesn’t touch her.” The words hit true and the priest eyed him, a spark of trust settling—Samar’s worry matching theirs, no hint of a lie in his stance.

The meeting broke, the three slipping into the night, steps eaten by the temple’s stone grip. Outside, the wind kicked up to a wild scream through the pines, a restless howl chasing the stars. The priest’s crew had spun a web of secrets, a quick gasp of time—but the clock was a mean bastard, ticking down to a fight they couldn’t duck. Somewhere in the hamlet’s dark veins, a guy they all knew waited, his vibe a quiet poison, blind to the noose tightening around his prey—or his own damn throat.

Chapter 33

The council's deal was a shaky whisper, meant to stay buried in the temple's stone gut. But secrets in the hamlet cracked like dead leaves—by dusk, word was creeping through the dirt paths, eyes flicking in the dim light, the air snapping with a betrayal nobody could pin down. The bastard caught it, his pulse jumping, cold sweat prickling his neck. He knew where she was—Dr. Sheetal, stuck in Dr. Pratap's cottage, an easy mark. As twilight bled into pitch black, he slipped out, a shadow in the dark, boots quiet on the hard ground. The woods across from the cottage hid him well—he climbed a twisted oak, bark rough under his hands, and crouched there, a vulture after its prey, eyes sharp with a killer's calm.

Hours dragged, cold sinking into his bones, breath puffing short and tight. Then—a flicker at the cottage door. He went stiff, peering through the dark. A woman stepped out, lit by the faint glow leaking inside. His heart slammed, a sick thud in his chest. This wasn't the Sheetal he'd clocked in the hamlet, softened by some trick. This was Nayan—hair a wild black spill, jaw cut sharp, eyes burning with a fire he'd snuffed out 28 years back. The priest's talk, Veeru's hot promise, hit him like a punch: she was Nayan, back, no denying it. His fingers dug into the branch, nails scraping wood. Tonight—he had to finish it tonight, or her truth would bury him alive.

The cottage lights faded, then went out, drowning everything in black. He dropped quiet, landing low, wet grass hushing his steps as he crept closer. The door was locked tight, mocking him, but he circled, a wolf hunting a sheep. Windows—locked, locked—'til one gave, a soft groan as the doors opened. He stopped, ears pricked, then slunk in, a cat after meat. The room was a mess of shadows, air heavy with cedar and sleep. His eyes sharpened—there, on the cot, a shape under a blanket, still as a corpse. Blood roared in his head, drowning everything. He lunged, knife glinting, stabbing down—once, twice, three times—each hit a ghost of that valley

night. But no blood came, no scream broke the quiet. His blade hit nothing—fabric, stuffing, a sick joke.

A switch flipped, light blasting in, harsh and blinding. He whirled, chest pumping, sweat burning his eyes, and saw he was trapped—five guys, a wall of muscle and hate. Veeru towered, shaking with a fury that could split rock, his growl a deep snarl: “Thought you’d get her, you rat?” Shri stood next to him, eyes blazing with a lover’s rage, fists so tight his knuckles cracked. Three hamlet guys backed them—Raghunath’s worn glare, Kamala’s hard stare, another’s quiet threat—ropes swinging in their hands. Sheetal stepped out of the dark, her face Nayan’s twin, voice a shaky whisper: “I saw you—by the vine, kicking me...” Her eyes went big, wet with fear and memory, hands trembling as she relived the drop. Veeru bellowed—“Bastard!”—and they charged, a mess of fists and yells, slamming him down, ropes cutting his wrists as he kicked like a caught animal.

Morning hit, a pale, hard light over the hamlet square. The crowd piled in, a restless buzz of whispers and stares, as Samar—tied up, messed up, shirt ripped—was shoved into the middle. The head priest stood high, saffron robes sharp against the fog, face a mask of grim anger. Then Sheetal stepped in, and a gasp tore through—a sharp, raw shock. She was Nayan’s ghost in the flesh—cheekbones high, eyes a storm of fire and pain, every bit a dead ringer for the girl they’d lost. Old women grabbed their shawls, old men stumbled back, whispers blowing up: “It’s her—Nayan—look at her!” The air hummed, alive with awe and disbelief, their eyes pinning her like she was a vision they couldn’t shake.

Veeru stepped up, voice a boom over the noise: “Last night, this scum snuck into the cottage—knife out, ready to kill her again!” He stabbed a finger at Samar, chest heaving. “We were ready—fooled him with a dummy. He stabbed it ‘til he saw us.”

Shri's growl cut in, low and poison: "Thought he'd finish her—thought we'd let him. She saw it all—lived it again right there." His eyes flicked to Sheetal, softening, breaking: "Tell 'em."

Sheetal's breath caught, voice shaky but climbing, slicing the crowd's hush. "The bus—I remember the dark, the trees closing in. It skidded, flipped—I was hanging by a vine, yelling for Shri. He..." She pointed at Samar, a tear cutting her cheek, words raw with hurt. "He was there—kicked me, over and over, 'til I fell into the valley. I saw his face—his eyes—before I went down." The crowd jerked back, gasps and shouts—"No!" "Him?"—their shock alive, eyes bouncing between her Nayan-face and Samar's hard glare.

The priest's voice rang, a heavy toll: "Samar—what did you do?" His stare drilled into him, unrelenting, the Tree's shadow hanging heavy behind.

Samar yanked at the ropes, voice a rough yell: "I'm your chief! You got no damn right to drag me here like this!" His eyes flared, spit flying, a king knocked down fighting for his throne.

Sheetal's look went cold, voice a steel wire through the noise: "The Tree of Truth—let it judge him." The crowd froze, a breath sucked in together, the name a lightning strike. Samar's face went white, his scream busting out: "No! You can't—not that! It'll kill me—you don't know what it'll do!" His legs gave, panic wild in his eyes, but the priest's nod was solid.

"Tie him," he ordered, voice cold as rock. Veeru grabbed Samar's arm—"Move, you coward!"—and the men dragged him, kicking and howling—"You're nuts! Let me go!"—to the Tree of Truth.

The ritual kicked off—chants rolling like far-off thunder, incense smoke thick and sour, the air buzzing with a power that stung. Hours bled out, the crowd stuck, holding their breath, watching Samar twist against the ropes, sweat pouring down his gray face. Then—a shimmer, faint at first, on the

Tree's bark, a glow growing like a pulse, sick and alive. Its twisted branches stretched like something waking up, roots thumping under the dirt. The priest leaned in, voice a hard beat: "Samar—what did you do? Why?"

Vines broke through the soil, slow and snaky, curling up like they were tasting the air. Samar's front cracked, his sob a rough wail: "I loved her—Nayan—more than my own damn life!" His eyes locked on Sheetal, wild, begging. "She was everything—my heart, my tribe—and she was leaving, marrying him—some outsider! I couldn't let her go!"

The vines climbed, brushing his legs, tightening. His voice shot up, words spilling fast: "The bus to Bombay—I set it up. Spilled oil, threw nails on the road—knew the dark would cover me. I waited in the bushes—watched the tyres blow, the crash. Shri was too far, but her—she was hanging there, screaming..." He choked, tears cutting through dirt. "I—I kicked her—God help me—kicked 'til she fell. Didn't know why—just couldn't stop..."

Sheetal gasped, hand jumping to her mouth, voice a busted cry: "Oil? Nails? You—you rigged it?" Her knees buckled, Shri grabbing her as new horror hit—stuff she'd never seen, now tearing her open. The crowd blew up—"He did what?" "Murderer!"—their shock a blaze, faces twisting with rage and betrayal at Samar's spill.

The vines shot up, wrapping his chest, his neck, choking his yells into gurgles. Shri held Sheetal tight, whisper fierce in her ear: "He's done—look away." Veeru's fists shook, voice a low hiss: "You stole her—my sister..." The priest stood still, eyes on the Tree as its glow flared—a blinding, hot pulse lighting the square like a storm's core. Samar jerked, a last, choked gasp—then dropped, limp, the vines sliding back into the ground, full.

A quiet slammed down, thick and heavy, the crowd staring at Samar's busted body—chief no more, just a husk in the roots. Sheetal's sob broke it,

raw and sharp. Shri's arm tightened, voice a torn promise: "It's over." The priest lifted his hands, murmur a heavy echo: "Vajradhar has judged."

The hamlet spun, eyes stuck on Sheetal—Nayan's face, alive, no doubt—whispers swelling into a wave: "She's her—our Nayan..." A woman dropped to her knees, crying, another grabbed her kid, staring like it was a miracle. The Tree's glow dimmed, but its call stuck, a mark in the air, and Sheetal's shaky breath carried a past finally cracked open.

Days later, the hamlet buzzed with a life it hadn't seen in years, its scars soaked in the hot glow of dusk. The tribe piled under a sky lit up wild—red, orange, purple smashing together in a crazy dance—a killer backdrop for a party 28 years late. Their Nayan, back as Sheetal, was marrying Shri, a tie pulled from the wreckage of heartbreak, betrayal, and a justice that shook their bones. The air snapped with a hope so strong it felt alive, every beat a shout of win, every look a burst of joy reborn.

The clearing by the Tree of Truth—once a grim judge—now exploded with life. Torches flickered, throwing a jumpy gold light over mats and wildflowers tossed in happy chaos. Drums pounded a raw beat, booming through the old pines, calling the tribe to see a miracle snatched back. Women in red and saffron spun in tribal dances, anklets banging like a storm of bells, while men clapped and stomped, their chants twisting the holy into a rough, free song. Kids darted through, their yells a bright streak in the rhythm, eyes shining with the night's wild magic.

Ani and Neha stood near the heart of it, Neha's camera hanging off her neck, hands quick as she snapped the joy frame by frame. Their teens—Aniket and Nehal—buzzed next to them, caught in the high. Ani's arm rested on Neha's shoulder, voice a rough murmur of wonder: "Sheetal—their Nayan. After all this..." Neha dropped the camera, lens fogging as a smile broke: "Twenty-eight years, Ani—and we're whole again." Aniket, all wiry energy, elbowed Nehal, voice cracking with hype: "The Tree's

gonna light up—just watch!” Nehal, braid swinging, shoved back, grinning: “It better, or I’m climbing it myself!”

Ramesh stood beaming, clapping off-beat with a shy, catching joy. Lata swayed close, her worn sari glinting in the torchlight, her soft hum mixing with the chants. The canteen lady pushed through, tray of hot chai a steady rock, voice a warm yell: “Grab one—warm up for the night!” Chandra, her brother, and a cluster of hospital folks—nurses in wrinkled saris, a doc loosening his tie—hung at the edge, smiles shy but growing, pulled from clean halls into this blast of color and family.

At the center, Sheetal stepped out—a sight that stopped breath and time. Her red lehenga glowed like coals in a wind, gold threads flashing under torchlight, hair a black flood spilling loose, framing a face that was Nayan’s reborn—sharp jaw, fierce eyes, a soul you couldn’t miss. The crowd locked up, then broke into gasps—a wave of shock, old women clutching their hearts, men bowing like a ghost walked out of memory. “Nayan!” an old voice cracked, shaking with awe, and whispers flared: “It’s her—those eyes!” The air shook with their respect, pinning her as a miracle in flesh.

Shri walked up, kurta plain but kingly, eyes stuck on her with a love that beat death’s cold hands. His breath hitched, a grin splitting wide as he rasped, “You’re here—really here, Nayan.” Sheetal’s lips trembled, her smile fierce but soft: “Took me a lifetime to find you again, huh?” The crowd leaned in, holding their breath, their words a holy spark in the party’s storm.

The head priest, saffron robes a light against the dusk, lifted his arms, drums shutting up under his call. His voice boomed, deep and loud, a shout to the stars: “Tonight, we fix what got broke. Tonight, Nayan and Shri tie their souls—28 years of dark burned up by this.” The tribe blew up—cheers tearing the night, hands clapping a beat that shook the ground. Veeru, huge next to Mrigendra, swiped his eyes, growl turning to a laugh: “My sister—

right where she's supposed to be!" Mrigendra, face lit with a dad's pride, nodded, whisper a prayer: "She's home, my girl's home."

Sheetal and Shri faced off, marigold garlands shaking in their hands. Sheetal's voice cut clear, ringing through the dusk: "Shri, I'll be your partner—in this life, and every one after." The promise glowed, forever and bright, and Shri's eyes shone as he answered, voice thick: "Nayan—Sheetal—every lifetime, I'm yours. No dark, no fall, will take you again." They slung the garlands over each other, the crowd roaring—shouts of "Live long!" crashing into a wild rumble, feet slamming the dirt in hard cheer.

Then—a low, deep hum shook the ground, a jolt that stopped every heart. Eyes whipped to the Tree of Truth, its bark flickering—a faint beat, then a big bloom of gold light, growing brighter, hotter, a flare cutting the night. Gasps broke out—"It's alive!" "Look at it!"—kids squealed, elders dropped to their knees, hands locked in wonder. The light throbbed like a heart, strands of shine twisting up, wrapping Sheetal and Shri like a starry crown. Sheetal's laugh burst out, wild and bright, hand grabbing Shri's: "It's us—it's blessing us!" Shri pulled her close, voice a rough promise: "Our dawn, right now."

The drums slammed back, a big roar, chants soaring into a holy storm—"Vajradhar, bless them"—as the tribe let loose, a whirlwind of color and move. Ani spun Neha into it, her camera swinging as she laughed, lens lost in the swirl. Aniket grabbed Nehal's wrist, yanking her into a messy spin, their whoops drowned by the beat. Ramesh clapped harder, grin splitting wide, while the canteen lady danced with her tray, chai splashing as she sang: "To love!" The hospital crew shed their stiffness, swaying with the rhythm, swept into the tribe's fire hug.

The Tree's light pulsed on, a warm, alive glow washing the clearing—new life for the newlyweds, new air for the tribe. Sheetal pressed into Shri,

whisper a spark in his ear: “This time, no bus. We stay here.” He kissed her forehead, grin bold and blazing: “Forever.” The party roared, a fierce, wild grab at light—28 years of pain torched in a blaze of love, unity, and hope, the hamlet reborn under a sky screaming with stars.

A New Beginning

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