

RATI MEHROTRA

To learn what she can become,  
she must first discover who she is.

NIGHT OF  
THE RAVEN,  
DAWN OF  
THE DOVE



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# CHAPTER 1



IGHT BREEZE WAFTED THROUGH THE LATTICED WINDOWS of the royal bedchamber, carrying with it the scent of night-blooming jasmine and drying the sweat on Katyani's brow. The night was warm—too warm for spring. She'd been waiting for the assassin for over an hour, hidden behind the half-drawn drapes, inhaling their musty odor and trying not to sneeze. Her right foot had gone to sleep, and the windowpane dug into her back, but she dared not move. A nightjar called, its trilling coo startling her before devolving into a series of clicks. She clutched the wooden pipe in her hand, her nerves thrumming with anticipation.

Moonlight filtered into the room, hiding more than it revealed. But she knew every inch of the space, from the ornate wardrobe in one corner to the gilded mirror opposite, from the rich tapestries that covered the wall to the massive four-poster bed in the middle—the bed on which the king and queen of Chandela would have slept tonight had Katyani not made them switch rooms. The blue butterfly tattooed on her neck gave a single reassuring beat of its wings. The queen was safe—for now.

The door edged open, and her heart jumped. She strained her eyes, peering through a crack between the drapes. A dark figure crept into the room, moonlight glinting on the blade in his hand. Black-masked, cat-footed, silent as death, he approached the bed and raised his blade.

Now. Katyani stepped out and blew the sleep dart from her wooden pipe. It flew straight and true toward the intruder's chest. At the last moment, alerted by the minute *whoosh* of air, he tried to twist out of reach. But the dart buried itself in his shoulder. He clutched it and staggered back to the door, which had been left unguarded for him.

He had great vitality; she had to give him that. The dart would have paralyzed an ordinary person instantly. But he managed to make it out the door before collapsing.

She went into the corridor and rang a brass bell embedded in the wall to summon Garuda, the elite royal bodyguards. Then she bent over the unconscious assailant to examine him. Torchlight flickered from sconces further down the corridor, revealing a bald, skinny man clad in a black cotton tunic and pants, his face covered with a mask that appeared to be melded to his skin. His hand was still curled around the hilt of his weapon: a double-edged dagger with an ivory handle. There was no insignia on his clothing or his blade, but interrogation would soon reveal who he was working for. Triumph welled up in her. They'd finally caught one of the bastards alive.

Five burly guards dressed in the Garuda uniform—dark gray knee-length tunic, leather sword belt, baggy pants, and white turban—came running up as she patted his body down for weapons. At their head was Tanoj, the chief of Garuda, a heavysset, gray-haired, middle-aged man with piercing eyes and an unmistakable air of command. He frowned as he took in the scene.

“One of the men can do that, Katyani,” he said, a note of reproof in his deep voice. He'd known her for years, taught her what she knew of sword fighting, and he still never got used to seeing her manhandle male offenders. His attitude irked her, but she wasn't going to argue with him in front of the others.

“Yes, sir.” She withdrew a kukri knife from one boot and a push knife from the other and handed them to Falgun, a junior guard. “Have these examined. Be careful. The edges might be poisoned.” As they'd learned to their detriment from the *first* assassination attempt, six months ago. The guard who'd handled those weapons had been sick for weeks.

Falgun bowed and took the knives with a gloved hand.

Tanoj squatted beside the comatose man. “Have you identified him?”

“We'll soon see.” She began to peel the mask away from his face. A smell of burning flesh seeped into her nostrils, and she snatched away her fingers. “Damn!”

His face was melting before her eyes. She tried to smooth the mask

back into place using the hilt of her dagger, but it was too late. She coughed and scooted back, her gut clenching.

Tanoj backed away as well, his lips pinched, his eyes hard. The third time in six months an assassin had died before he could be questioned. The king and queen would *not* be happy.

“What happened?” sputtered a guard from a safe distance behind her, holding his nose.

She sighed and got to her feet, tasting the bitterness of defeat in her mouth. “He’s dead.”

“But we haven’t interrogated him yet,” said Falgun, sounding outraged.

Tanoj rose, rubbing his chin as he contemplated the body on the floor, the face a ruin of melted flesh and bits of burned cloth. “The mask was poisoned,” he grated. “Only his handler could have removed it safely. A clever way of ensuring his silence.”

“What are we to do now?” asked another guard, his hand on his sword, as if a sword would solve this mess.

“Try to find out who he is,” said Tanoj. “Take all precautions when removing his clothes and examining his weapons. Wash your hands afterward. I don’t want anyone dying of carelessness.” He leveled a finger at Katyani. “You. Report to the king and queen.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Yes, sir.” That was her job as his second-in-command, especially when there was nothing good to report. It was not a task she was looking forward to. The queen would be disappointed in her failure, and she hated disappointing the queen.

She turned away as the guards rolled the corpse onto a sheet. The royal couple were sleeping in the west wing of the palace tonight. She’d made them and Crown Prince Ayan change rooms every night since her network of spies had gotten wind of yet another assassination attempt. And she’d made sure the room they actually slept in was different from the one ostensibly planned by the palace staff. The assassin might get wind of the room switching, but he couldn’t read her mind. That strategy had paid off tonight.

*Partially* paid off. As she walked down the marble corridor, she replayed the events of the last hour in her head, wishing she had not been so eager to pull off the assailant’s mask.

She'd been promoted over the heads of older, more experienced men in Garuda. No one grudged her this; they all knew the special relationship she had with the queen. Still, *Prove yourself*, said their eyes. *Prove you're worthy of your post*. Every moment of every day since her promotion, she'd been judged on her abilities, her successes, her failures.

Her record so far? Six months, three assassination attempts, and zero leads. Queen Hemlata would not be pleased with her latest blunder. She would certainly not consider Katyani's request to get out of accompanying the princes as their bodyguard to that remote school run by—what was his name?—Acharya Mahavir.

Katyani didn't want to leave the palace. She wanted to stay right here and protect the queen. What would happen to the bond she shared with Hemlata if she was away from her for so long? But the queen had dismissed all her pleas and concerns with implacable calm.

She slipped through a narrow door into another corridor, curving around the inner walls of the north tower. The flickering light of torches fell on the Kurukshetra battle scenes painted on the wall: war chariots clashed, horses charged, elephants trumpeted, and soldiers bled, while above them, Krishna watched with beatific, blue-faced serenity.

At the end of the curving corridor was what looked like a dead end with a floor-to-ceiling painting of the palace itself. But place a palm on the dome, and the whole section of wall swung open to the whispering gallery that ran the circumference of the central hall. She could have taken a more obvious route to the king and queen by going through the entrance hall and up a different staircase to the west wing, but where was the fun in that?

The palace was a labyrinth, but it was a labyrinth that was dearly familiar to her. Not even King Jaideep knew it better than she did. She'd always won the games of hide-and-seek she'd played with Ayan and his cousins, Bhairav and Revaa, when they were children. Even now, there were secret passages in and around the palace that she hadn't fully explored.

And the queen wanted to send her away from here. Katyani understood *why* but she hated the thought of leaving her home, leaving Hemlata.

She had almost reached the secret door hidden by the painting when a soft footfall sounded behind her. She stilled.

There it was again. Someone was tailing her, and by the sound of the

footsteps, she thought she knew who it was. She backtracked so she was hidden by a curve of wall and strained her ears, waiting for the right moment to surprise her follower.

Someone exhaled inches away.

Katyani stepped around the corner and said, "Boo."

"Ahhh!" Revaa clutched her chest. "Katya, you nearly gave me a heart attack."

"You're terrible at this," said Katyani in a stern voice, trying not to smile. "I could hear your footsteps a mile away. I could hear you *breathe*. You shouldn't be out tonight at all."

"If I don't practice, how will I get better?" protested the younger girl, scowling. She'd made an effort; her waist-length hair was gathered in a simple plait, and her round face was devoid of makeup or rings. She'd dressed in plain black robes without a speck of jewelry on her plump royal person and worn soft cloth slippers on her feet. But it would take more than that to sneak up on a member of Garuda.

Katyani gave Revaa's plait an affectionate tug. "My sweet sister, the nieces of kings may not be spies. Sadly, they may only be the cossetted and coddled wives of handsome princes."

"You call me sister, but you don't really feel that way about me," Revaa grumbled. "Or you'd teach me, despite what Auntie says."

"I dare not disobey the queen, and you know it well." Katyani leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead. Without her heels, Revaa only came up to her chin, and without makeup and jewelry, she looked twelve instead of fifteen. "Go back to your room, love. I must report to your aunt and uncle."

Revaa pouted. "Do you promise to come by later?"

"I promise." Katyani blew her another kiss as she walked reluctantly back the way she'd come.

It was too bad the youngest member of King Jaideep's family was also the most ambitious. She was quick and clever and would have made an excellent spy with the right training. Instead, she was stuck being the pretty little princess of Chandela. Katyani did what she could, giving her lessons on spy craft, self-defense, and poisons and their antidotes. But she had to be discreet about it.

She went to the end of the passageway and placed her palm on the painted dome. A soft click and a whirr, and the wall swung open. She stepped past it and entered the whispering gallery. Here were no torches, no paintings, and no sculptures. Above curved the dome of the palace, vanishing into darkness. A waist-high railing ran the length of the narrow walkway. In the distant hall below, two guards stood at attention, unaware of her presence.

She exited the gallery at the opposite end, went down a short flight of stairs, and arrived at the royal couple's temporary bedroom. The two men who stood guard at the brass-studded double door saluted and stepped out of her way, and she knocked in the code she shared with the queen. The door creaked open, and a slim, beringed hand pulled her into a lamplit room.

The blue butterfly tattoo on Katyani's neck fluttered, and she bowed. "Your Majesty."

The queen shut the door and turned to Katyani, her face alive with anticipation. "Tell me everything."

Hemlata was surely one of the most beautiful queens in all of Bharat, with her high cheekbones, lustrous eyes, and an aquiline nose set in an oval face. Tall and statuesque, she wore an embroidered silk gown and an ivory comb set in her perfectly coiffed ebony hair. In contrast, Katyani was clad in the Garuda uniform and had barely combed her unruly hair that morning. Why bother when it would do whatever it wanted anyway?

The queen wasn't just a pretty face, though. Anyone who made the mistake of thinking that soon paid for it when she directed one of her incisive remarks at them, delivered in a velvet voice, which made it worse.

Katyani glanced at the four-poster bed set against the opposite wall. The translucent white drapes were drawn, so she couldn't make out whether it was occupied. "The king?"

Hemlata gave a dismissive wave. "Let him sleep. I'll fill him in later. Come, sit."

She led Katyani to a rosewood divan. As succinctly as possible, Katyani told her all that had transpired. As she described how the mask had dissolved the assassin's face, Hemlata grew still, and her eyes narrowed. Katyani sensed her displeasure and frustration through their bond.

"I'm sorry," she said, her voice faltering as sick green waves of the queen's disappointment rolled through her, rocking her core. "I botched it." She'd known how Hemlata would feel, and she'd known how those feelings would affect her. But the reality was worse than her imaginings. This, the third time they'd failed to catch the assassin alive, had hit the queen the hardest.

Hemlata took a deep breath and another. Slowly, the waves of negativity retreated. "Our murderous mastermind has been one step ahead of us all the way."

Katyani swallowed, relieved the queen had controlled her adverse emotions. Hemlata might not blame her, but the depth of her displeasure sharpened Katyani's sense of guilt. "You think it's one person behind all these attempts?"

"One person, or a group of persons." Hemlata frowned and plucked at the threads in an embroidered silk cushion. "The methods are all diverse, yet they fall into a pattern."

"I should stay here in the palace." Katyani leaned forward, knowing she was taking a risk by bringing this up again. "Protect you and the king."

The queen sat up and squeezed the cushion as if she would throttle it. "We've discussed this, Katya," she said sharply. "There are enough people here to protect myself and the king. *You* need to safeguard the princes. You're the only one I trust to go with them."

"Tanoj has thirty years' experience in combat and spying," she pointed out.

Hemlata snorted. "Tanoj will never be more than what he is. But you are like my daughter. Acharya Mahavir's gurukul is the most famous ethics and military arts school in Bharat. He is renowned in all the kingdoms for his spiritual power and monster-banishing skills—skills that would be valuable for you and the princes to develop. This is a tremendous learning opportunity. In three days, you will accompany Ayan and Bhairav to the gurukul. I'm not about to change my mind."

Of course she wasn't. If Katyani had managed to capture the assassin alive, if they had interrogated him and found out who he was working for, she could have argued that *none* of them needed to go anywhere.

Hemlata gripped her shoulder. "Don't be sad. It's only for five months."

Five months sounded like forever, and Katyani's stomach shrank at the prospect. "I've never been away from you for more than a few days," she muttered, twisting her hands in her lap.

Hemlata's face relaxed into a smile. She ruffled Katyani's hair, sending a sweet wave of affection to her. "Are you worried about the bond? Don't be. Nothing can break it before it's time. And when it's time, you and I will both know."

*When your blood debt is paid*, she did not say, but it was what Katyani knew to be true. It was something she both looked forward to and dreaded.

"Any news from the peace envoy sent to Malwa?" she asked.

The queen's lips tightened. She clasped her hands, gazing into the distance with large, anxious eyes, as if she could see the unfolding conflict. "He has returned with ill tidings. Talks have broken down. We hope to avoid another all-out war, but it might come to that."

Katyani grimaced. They'd had fifteen years of tenuous peace with their warlike neighbor. Certainly, it could not last forever. Malwa was ruled by the Paramara dynasty, ancient foes of Chandela. They disputed Chandela's rightful claims to many of its border towns and territories. If King Jaideep, his father, and his grandfather had not fought them to a stalemate in previous wars, the Paramaras would have swallowed half the Chandela kingdom by now. Shamsheer Singh, the current regent of Malwa, was reputed to be a cold and heartless man. *Not* someone she wanted to meet in her lifetime.

"At the same time, there have been three assassination attempts, and we've been unable to discover who is behind them," the queen continued. "I fear these two things are related, that Malwa is trying to break us from both within and without. I want the crown prince out of harm's way, and there is no safer place in all of Bharat than Acharya Mahavir's gurukul."

"I thought you didn't like that weirdo," said Katyani, making a face.

"Katya!" Hemlata put a finger on Katyani's lips. "He's not a weirdo, no matter what you may have heard. Never say so again; it will bring bad luck. He is a man of great spiritual and magical powers. And it's not that *I* don't like *him*. It's that *he* doesn't approve of *me*."

"Because of the bond," said Katyani. "Right?"

Hemlata sighed. “Men prefer to keep power to themselves. They make rules that dictate who gets to use it, and how, and why. I broke those rules when I saved you with my magic, and I’ll never regret it.” She opened her right palm and planted a kiss on the blue butterfly tattooed there—a mirror of the one on Katyani’s neck.

A warm glow suffused Katyani. She had no memory of how she’d come to have the tattoo, but Hemlata had told her the story many times. When Katyani was three, her parents—vassals of King Jaideep—had died, and she’d fallen mortally ill. None of the queen’s physicians could do anything for her. As her life ebbed away, Hemlata had turned in desperation to forbidden magical arts. She’d created a soul bond between herself and Katyani and *commanded* her to recover. Baby Katyani had obeyed. The blue butterfly was the only physical reminder of that spell.

But the bond the queen had created to save her life had persisted. Katyani had grown up knowing, at every moment, where the queen was in the palace and how she was feeling. Hemlata had been able to admonish her or lavish affection on her at will, all without speaking a single word. Petitioners used to seek Katyani out to ask her whether the queen was in a good mood before approaching the throne. She hadn’t realized there was anything unusual about this situation until she was older and understood how rare a true magical bond was.

“Acharya Mahavir is not a patient man or a forgiving one,” warned the queen. “You must not anger him. If he says anything about the bond, stay silent. Make sure Ayan and Bhairav don’t get into trouble.”

“Revaa won’t be happy to be the only one left behind,” said Katyani.

Hemlata rolled her eyes. “Revaa is promised in marriage to the crown prince of the Kalachuris. It’s an excellent match and ensures we have one less neighbor to worry about. What will they think if they hear she’s traipsing about in a gurukul full of strange men? The sooner my niece accepts her fate, the better. It’s a fate most girls would kill for.”

*But it’s not what Revaa wants,* Katyani could have said. Except they’d had this conversation before, and it never went well. She might be “like a daughter” to the queen, but the rules for real princesses were obviously different than they were for adopted ones. Katyani thanked her lucky stars for that.

Hemlata grasped her hand. “One day, Ayan will be the king,” she said in a serious tone, “and you will be his most trusted advisor. Take this as an opportunity to learn statecraft and cultivate royal friendships.” Her hand tightened on Katyani’s, rings digging painfully into her flesh. “Please. For my sake.”

She really knew how to manipulate people. A mixture of annoyance and affection rose within Katyani. She bowed her head, giving in. “I’ll try my best, Your Majesty.”

But it was with a deep sense of foreboding that she left the queen’s bedchamber. Of course she would do as Hemlata wished. But what would it cost them both?

## CHAPTER 2

**T**HE NEXT DAY, KATYANI WOKE EARLY SO SHE'D HAVE THE training ground to herself. Two days left to enjoy training in peace and quiet. After that, who knew? A school in the middle of a forest rumored to be infested with monsters—no, she could not picture it. A workout would take her mind off the unknown, make her less anxious about the future. She'd already made her preparations: all four of her spies would now be reporting directly to Tanoj, as would all of Garuda. Falgun had been given a temporary promotion to take her place.

The training ground was a large enclosure west of the palace, surrounded by a seven-foot-high brick wall and open to the sky. She arrived soon after sunrise but, to her surprise, the ground was occupied. As she pushed open the creaky wooden door to the yard, she heard grunts and the clash of swords. Tanoj said in a long-suffering voice, "Not like *that*, Prince. You'll end up stabbing yourself."

"Maybe I should," said Bhairav in an aggrieved tone, panting as he leaned on his sword. "Then they won't send me anywhere."

Katyani shut the door behind her, lips twitching. The two were standing in the fencing arena: a grassy, circular patch ahead of her. Tanoj often gave Bhairav extra lessons in an effort to improve his skills and bring him up to Ayan's level. Pity classes, Ayan called them, because swordsmanship did not come naturally to Bhairav. None of the fighting arts did.

"You'd better not stab yourself," she said, strolling up to the arena. "I'll have to carry your wounded, bleeding body to the gurukul. And you know how blood attracts monsters."

Bhairav turned to face her, scowling. “Why do *I* have to go? Ayan is the one who enjoys that sort of thing.”

“What does Ayan enjoy?” came a familiar voice from behind her. Ayan pushed open the door and entered, a cocky smile on his face.

“Monsters,” she told him.

“Fighting,” Bhairav corrected her. “And I simply do not. I would much rather be in a library. Surely I am more use in a library!”

“Sadly, you are no use anywhere,” Ayan informed him. “Leave you in a library and you’ll forget to eat and drink, and in a few weeks, we’ll be prizing your lifeless hands from some dusty old tome on magic no one’s read in a million years.”

Tanoj cleared his throat. “If you are here to practice, do not waste time, Crown Prince.”

Chastened, Ayan walked up to them. Tanoj threw him a wooden sword. Bhairav was obviously tired, but Tanoj tried to persuade him to spar with his cousin.

Katyani did stretches to loosen her body, content to watch the drama for the time being. Early-morning sunlight bathed the yard, and the grass glistened with dewdrops. Her pulse slowed as her mind relaxed. The training ground had been one of her favorite places ever since she was a child. She’d wielded the wooden swords, shot arrows at the painted targets, hurled spears at the straw dummies, and even punched the grain sacks, making the men laugh, until she grew older and better at it than them. No one had laughed at Katyani in a long time.

Bhairav finally agreed to spar with Ayan, probably to make Tanoj shut up. The results were predictable. Ayan beat Bhairav back to the wall of the storage shed and had his sword at Bhairav’s throat in less than a minute. Bhairav threw his sword down in disgust. Tanoj made him pick it up and put it away in a rack with the others.

Katyani fell into a series of squats, struck, as always, by the similarities and dissimilarities between the two royal cousins. Tall, bronze skinned, well built, and fine featured, both of them drew adoring glances wherever they went. There was just a year’s gap between them; Bhairav was eighteen—same as Katyani—and Ayan was seventeen.

The differences lay in their skills and temperament. Ayan excelled in

swordsmanship, archery, wrestling, horse riding, and stick-fighting. He was the one opponent Katyani enjoyed sparring with. Bhairav, in contrast, was better at statecraft and science. He would make a great advisor or ambassador for the kingdom one day—if he didn't expire in a library, as Ayan had predicted.

Bhairav stamped over to her. "Do me a favor, Katya, and beat my cousin. Look at that insufferable grin on his face."

She rose from her squat and swung a friendly punch at him, which he deflected. "With pleasure. But what will I get out of it?"

"The satisfaction of beating him," Bhairav said, raising his eyebrows. "What can be better than that? Besides, us orphans ought to stand up for each other."

Katyani laughed and gave him a fist bump. The "orphans" thing was a running joke between them. It was, of course, true that they were orphans. Bhairav and Revaa's father, Prince Karandeep, had been killed in the same battle with Malwa that took the life of Katyani's own parents. Their mother had died some months later of "a broken heart." Katyani didn't remember her own parents, and she wondered sometimes if that wasn't a blessing. Bhairav had been nearly four when his mother passed, and he still talked about her, still missed her. Revaa envied him his memories—she'd been a baby at the time—but she was more interested in molding the present to her advantage than dwelling on the past.

Katyani went up to Ayan. "I am here to take revenge on behalf of all the orphans of Chandela. Also to wipe the silly grin off your face."

"I am your crown prince," said Ayan with a lordly air that made her want to smack him. "I order you to be beaten by me."

Tanoj snorted. "The day she yields to you because of your title is the day you both stop being my pupils."

"I was only joking," said Ayan, his eyes widening.

"Then fight like you both mean it," grated Tanoj, throwing Katyani a wooden sword, which she caught.

"Go, Katya!" called Bhairav from behind them.

"Not fair," protested Ayan. "The crowd is rooting for her, sir. The crowd favorite always wins."

Tanoj pressed a hand to his temple. “Go, Ayan,” he said in a flat, I-can’t-believe-I’m-doing-this voice.

Ayan leaped at her, and she barely stepped back in time. He pressed forward, pushing the advantage of his initial surprise. She danced sideways and thwacked his forearm, making him wince.

“Minus points, Crown Prince,” shouted Tanoj, circling them.

Ayan bore down on her, but she kept her distance from him, not letting him close in. He had the advantage of size and weight, but she was nimbler on her feet and way more patient. She kept it up for several minutes until she sensed his frustration, then gave him an obvious opening, raising her sword for an overhead strike. If he had been thinking, he would have realized it was a feint—they’d sparred nearly every day of their lives, and he knew all her little tricks—but he was too intent on winning. He thrust his sword at her chest. She threw herself low, swept up from underneath him, and knocked the sword out of his hand.

Bhairav clapped his hands and crowed, “Once again, Katya displays her superior swordswomanship against the unworthy crown prince of Chandela.”

Ayan grabbed her wooden sword. “I’m not done yet!”

“You would be dead if that was a real sword,” Tanoj noted. “Accept that you have lost this round.”

Katyani hooked her foot around Ayan’s leg and jerked, toppling him to the ground. But he was still hanging on to her sword, which meant she tumbled to the grass along with him. Ayan tried to wrestle her hands back, but she kned him in the stomach, making him groan in pain. Bhairav joined in and ended up landing on them both, nearly squashing her. She extricated herself from the princes, breathless with laughter, covered in grass and mud.

“A win for Katyani in the sword fight, a draw in the tomfoolery,” said Tanoj in a dry voice. “Don’t behave like this in the gurukul. Remember, you will be representing the kingdom of Chandela. Have some dignity.”

“Yes, sir,” said Katyani, wishing more strongly than ever she could get out of going.

Tanoj checked the sun, which had risen further. “Time for breakfast.”

He glanced at Bhairav. "If you wish, Prince, I am available in the evening for another practice session."

"Okay, sir, although I don't see why you waste your time with me," said Bhairav.

"I also do not see it," began Ayan, but Katyani dug an elbow into his side, making him shut up.

Soldiers had entered the training ground by now, although, as per protocol, they ignored the princes and focused on their own warm-up exercises. Ayan, Bhairav, and Katyani bowed to Tanoj before leaving.

"Smell those roses?" Bhairav sniffed deeply as they strolled past the rose gardens on the way to the palace. Gardeners were already at work, pruning the bushes, watering the plants, removing weeds and dead leaves. Large, luscious pink and red roses bloomed on the bushes, bending the stems with their weight. "It's the last we'll get of their fragrance till next year."

"Maybe there are roses in Nandovana," said Ayan. Nandovana—the forest in which the gurukul was located—covered a large swath of central Bharat, crossing the boundaries of five kingdoms: Chandela, Paramara, Yadava, Kalachuri, and Chalukya.

"Such roses don't grow wild in jungles," scoffed Bhairav. "They have to be cultivated. You don't know much botany, do you?"

Ayan grinned. "A flower is just a flower, but I know a hundred ways to kill an enemy soldier."

Bhairav rolled his eyes, but Ayan had made a fair point. It wasn't necessary for the crown prince of Chandela to know about plants. He had gardeners for that and advisors for everything else.

"Two days left," said Katyani. "Enjoy the baths and the food. After that—who knows?"

Bhairav clutched her sleeve, looking appalled. "Surely they will have baths."

Katyani hoped so. But she took extra time with her bath that day, soaking in the jasmine-scented water until her maid Chaya inquired if she wanted her skin to prune permanently.

After breakfast, they were summoned to the palace library by Shukla, the chief royal priest.

The palace library was Bhairav's favorite haunt. Located in the top section of the western tower, it occupied three levels, connected by a winding staircase. The lowest level was the most frequented, containing books on history, science, mathematics, and philosophy. The middle level had older manuscripts, maps, and documents in various languages from around the world. Visiting scribes and scholars could request access to this level. The top level was locked and barred to outsiders; it housed ancient books of magic, inherited from the founders of the Chandel dynasty. Only the queen had the key, although most of the books were indecipherable even to her. She had brought Ayan, Bhairav, Revaa, and Katyani there a few times and explained about the magical wards on Ajaigarh Fort, although only Bhairav had been keen enough to ask intelligent questions and request permission to return.

One of King Jaideep's ancestors had created magical wards to protect the fort from the monsters in Bharat. A yatu or vetala approaching the walls of the fort would combust. Such advanced magic was beyond Queen Hemlata—beyond anyone in the family. With each succeeding generation, it seemed, the powers of the Chandelas had faded until now even the simplest of spells was difficult to summon. The queen went over the basics with them, but magical theory bored Ayan and Revaa to tears, and Katyani had no gift for it, much as she wanted to please Hemlata. Bhairav enjoyed the *reading* more than the actual *doing*, and at last the queen gave up, contenting herself with teaching them how to maintain the ancestral wards with a daily ritual that involved fire, sandalwood oil, and a chant.

Shukla met them in the middle level of the library. Bookshelves lined the curving wall, as high as the ceiling, so the occupants of the room were encased in a cocoon of books. Some people might have enjoyed the dust and the old-book smell, but it made Katyani's nose itch. And sure enough, as soon as she entered, she gave an enormous sneeze.

Shukla narrowed his eyes at her as the princes joined their hands and bowed to him. A thin, cadaverous man with sunken eyes and a crooked nose, he reminded Katyani of a bird of prey that had gone hungry for far too long. "So inauspicious," he muttered.

Katyani wiped her nose with a sleeve and glared at him, and he averted his gaze from her with a contemptuous sniff. *Stuffy old hypocrite.*

The mere fact of her existence, with the forbidden mark of the queen's spiritual sacrifice, was enough to make her suspect in priestly eyes. But she had also been the worst student the Ajaigarh priests had ever endured. She questioned instructions, refused to take part in rituals, played pranks on the priests, and ran away from punishment. It was difficult to say who was more relieved when the king released her from formal education: the teachers or the pupil.

"Sit, Princes," he said, indicating the mats around him, pointedly not including her in his address. She sat anyway, right opposite him so he would be forced to look at her. Bhairav and Ayan sat on either side, suppressing grins. They knew her long-standing enmity with the priest.

"Acharya Mahavir is a renowned teacher," he began. "You are lucky to be able to study with him."

"What's he renowned for?" asked Ayan. "Apart from being a crank."

"Monster-banishing skills," said Katyani, remembering what the queen had told her.

Shukla threw her a disdainful look. "Also *ethics*," he said cuttingly. "An important part of your education."

"I don't see why we have to go to the middle of a monster-infested forest and learn ethics from a crank," said Bhairav. "Ajaigarh already has the best teachers in Bharat. Like you, Panditji." Unlike Katyani, Bhairav had been a model student. All the priests loved him.

The compliment obviously pleased Shukla, but he summoned a stern look. "He is not a crank. He is a great sage, one of the most formidable persons in all of Bharat. He has the kind of spiritual power that can stop an army in its tracks. Be diligent in your studies, and you will be able to enhance your own spiritual strength under his guidance."

"I thought spiritual power is innate," said Katyani. She wasn't much into the theoretical aspect of it, but she knew that just as every living thing was made of the five basic elements, so also every living thing had spiritual power. Tanoj had taught them meditation and yoga techniques to harness that power. Magic—what the queen had done to bond her and save her life—was the use of power that didn't rightly belong to you.

Shukla's lips thinned. "If you had ever paid attention in *my* classes instead of playing the disruptive fool, you would know that with the right training, a true warrior can access ever greater pools of power within himself."

Katyani could have sworn he'd never said that, but she held her tongue.

"Acharya Mahavir is also famous for his curses," Shukla continued. "If someone angers him, he has the ability to curse them such that whatever he says comes to pass. You'd better be respectful to him. Don't make him angry, or you will regret it." He glared at Katyani. She resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him.

"The forest is not a safe place," he went on. "It's full of yatu, vetalas, and pretas. Acharya Mahavir will teach you how to deal with them."

Ayan perked up, looking interested. They'd had a few, distant encounters with yatu, away from Ajaigarh, but none at all with vetalas or pretas. Of course, pretas were invisible, so they were hard to spot, let alone exorcise. Vetalas—evil spirits that occupied corpses and preyed on humans for their blood—preferred to dwell in forests. They were rumored to be able to tell the future, but humans in their vicinity generally didn't last long enough to have much of a future.

Even yatu were few and far between these days. The kingdom of Chandela had been overrun by them in bygone years, but Jaideep's father, Vishwadeep, had driven them back into the jungle.

"We're pretty safe from monsters here," said Katyani. "They can't enter the fort, and yatu were removed from the kingdom years ago."

"That doesn't mean they can't come back," said Shukla. "They probably *want* to come back. Remember, humans are their natural prey. The queen wants you to learn how to subdue them."

"I thought my mother was sending us there to keep us safe?" said Ayan.

Shukla smiled. It was not a nice smile. "Crown Prince, do you know how a mother bird teaches her baby to fly? She pushes it off the nest. This is the next phase of your education. Learn to fly, if you do not wish to fall."

He dismissed them, and they filed out, a little wiser than when they had filed in.

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations,  
and events portrayed in this novel are either products of  
the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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