

Section 1

Ishya's return to town is a matter of great fanfare. Anaya has never seen her family or her village so animated as today. Neighbours call at their door, bearing gifts and asking after the prodigal daughter. They leave, promising to return later, leaving the rest of the family to their bustling. Amma takes over the kitchen, whipping up dishes Anaya hasn't seen before. Appa leaves for the field, assuring Raju Mama that he'd return with the best mangoes and coconuts, "Though, I'd wager she'd love to climb the trees to grab them herself just like the old days!"

Raju Mama is busy yelling at the boy he's hired to finish patching up the tiling on the roof. He is standing in the courtyard holding the ladder, threatening to come up there himself if the boy doesn't do a better job of lying the tiles flat. Anaya thinks the tiles look just fine, but when she mentions that Raju Mama shoos her away, asking her not to get underfoot when everyone is so busy.

Anaya makes her way to the prayer room. Pati is settled on her grass mat, concentrating on her chain of beads and the count of her prayer when she wriggles her way into her grandmother's lap. In all of her 60 years of ancientness, Pati is still strong and spry. She scoops Anaya into her arms, hands her a banana to keep her occupied and quiet, and finishes praying before she entertains her.

"Are you excited to meet your cousin?"

"No."

"No?" Pati laughs, "And why not, little monkey?"

"Raju Mama yelled at me. I didn't even make any trouble this time! And Amma is making tasty food for her and won't give me any. It's not fair." She pouts. A dribble of banana falls from her chin.

"You poured rangoli in the batter yesterday, is that not making trouble?" Pati stands, still holding her, and carries her to her bedroom. "Come, you can help me choose some jewellery to gift to Ishya."

Pati unpacks packet after packet of bracelets, armbands, waistbands, anklets, necklaces and earrings. They shine in brilliant shades of gold and silver, some twinkling with gems of different colours. Anaya reaches for a diamond earring. Compared to her own silver stud, this earring is so pretty! She wants it. But when she asks, Pati chuckles and promises to save it for when she's older.

"But Ishya gets a gift now. I want one too!"

"Akka is going to get one as a wedding present. If you want one now, you'll have to get married."

Anaya makes a face, “Ew.”

Pati laughs and brings her downstairs to discuss Ishya’s wedding preparations with Rani Mami.

Mami is racing around the house, finishing arranging everything for her daughter’s return. She’s fretting over a pile of mangoes from their orchard (Ishya’s favourite to eat) and the clay pots filled to the brim with curry, rice, papad, and pickled chillis under Thatha’s supervision.

“This is for my granddaughter”, he scolds, “you’d better make sure everything is perfect!” Then he hobbles out into the courtyard, leaning on his walking stick and rebukes his son about how poorly the tiling boy has done.

“You better not have paid him more than five shells for a shoddy job as this. I told you I’d do it myself, but nobody here listens to me. You all think you know so much better. If even one thing is out of place when my granddaughter comes home, I will give her the house instead of you.”

Pati makes a dry comment about how dramatic her husband is and pulls Rani Mami away from the food, “I’m sure Sanjana has done fine with the food. Come, we must check the remaining items for her return.”

Pati, Amma and Mami have spent the better part of the last four months putting together a wardrobe for Ishya. The moment they received the letter announcing her return, they sprung into action, collecting fabric, accessories and new linens for her room, fretting about the scarcity of products these days.

“The merchant said that the roads from Gularan are no longer viable for trade. I wonder how she will get through safely,” they whispered while Anaya dozed off in her mother’s lap. Fading to sleep, Anaya had wondered why Mami was sobbing about a merchant.

Amma and Rani Mami were often travelling for the next several days. With trade routes becoming unreliable, the pair travelled to nearby towns with better connections and manufacturing of their own to buy everything they needed: dyes, silks, string, a collection of spices, and even some pieces of furniture. One evening they came home celebrating that they’d negotiated a piece of land for her nearby.

Meanwhile, Anaya was having her own adventure at home, watching her father, uncle, and grandfather cook together. She didn’t even know they could cook. “I made sure that they wouldn’t be completely useless to their wives!” Pati explained proudly when she cast Anaya staring in shock.

Anaya thought that pride was unnecessary. They didn’t cook very well at all.

After buying everything, the women turned from shopping to sewing them into various dresses. “She says she took a vow of asceticism. How can it be? A noble’s daughter,” Rani Mami sews a blouse angrily. “How does she think she will get married like this?”

“Rani Akka,” Amma chuckled, hemming one of Anaya’s skirts, “knowing her spirit marriage isn’t a part of her plan. You will have a battle ahead of you to convince her.”

“There isn’t time to be convincing her. She’s 25 years old. I was hoping she would know better by now. I sent her to study because she needed to have her mind occupied. She wanted to travel. I said yes. I’ve done everything she wanted. It’s time for her to grow up and face reality now.”

Pati had sat with them, looking through some list, “She will be a riotous one, knowing the blood that flows through her veins. But children should listen to their elders, who know better. She will get married if she knows what’s good for her.” Pati handed her the list and said, “Here is a list of educated grooms for her to choose from. I have already vetted them thoroughly. Let us have her married as soon as she arrives.”

Section 2

The day Rani Mami travels to Amaravanthe, Anaya is sent with her to keep her from being underfoot. Anaya had tried to promise that she'd be quiet and good and play by herself, but Amma reminded her of the incident with the neighbour's cows' tails catching on fire, and she knew that she had already lost that battle. Amongst the stress of setting up the house to invite a girl who hadn't been home in 10 years, the family had forgotten to prepare for the festival. While the family works under Thatha and Pati's strict supervision, Mami and Anaya, soothed by bribes of spun sugar candy and a new toy, are tasked with fetching Ishya and some supplies from the market.

Amaravanthe is bustling with people preparing for the festival. The festival—Anaya really cannot tell which one; there are so many that all look the same— also brings an additional influx of merchants to town for the monthly Hatta. The market itself isn't large; the regular vendors occupy stalls and platforms that line the roads of the junction. The travelling merchants do their best to set up their carts and blankets laden with goods along the edges of the street and the walking paths, but many of them spill out further along the two main streets and even down many of the more minor side roads. Anaya has never seen so many people in this town at once.

The narrow dirt streets are near overflowing, making the rivers of bullock carts and horse riders navigate around vendors who leak into the main road from the edges of shop-lined sides. Riders curse at the people underfoot. Someone's wife is yelling at him for putting off the shopping until today when she'd been telling him to go for weeks. Anaya can't help but giggle, overhearing the lady's threats to make her husband sleep with the cows if he could do things right.

Rani Mami looks over the town sadly, lamenting that the crowds seem so subdued compared to her childhood, "No matter how far the war, Anaya, it affects us all." Anaya doesn't know what war is, but if it makes Rani Mami and the rest of the town sadder than when they were kids, she figures it's best not to talk about it. She had more important things to think about.

Anaya pays extra attention to all the food she can demand as payment for her excellent behaviour. The passing carts are laden with what she is sure must be everything in the world. There are carts carrying produce, probably harvested freshly just that morning, from the nearby fields. They hold towers of fresh fruits and vegetables and piles of flowers— jasmine, marigolds, and pansies— that look so soft that Anaya wants to bury herself in them. Artisans and merchants from other towns laid out large blankets with their wares spread over them.

"Come, come, ladies, I have only the purest jerry and silks from Mysore for you today," a merchant bellows for attention, adding to the cacophony of vendors vying for attention. A group of older girls surround him to stare at the colourful fabrics he shows off. They speak in a language that Anaya doesn't fully understand, but their excitement is evident, even if the boy with them looks annoyed.

While the group explores the collection of fabrics, he seems to be standing guard, looking at the rest of the crowds wearily. He carries a sheathed talwar in one hand, clutching a large bag in the

other. He is stiff even as one of the girls he's with pulls him through the crowds with a gentle hand on his arm, telling her brother to calm down. "Bhaiya, we're not in Khachi anymore. Relax, please? No harm will come to us here."

Across the street, another little girl shrieks in delight as her mother buys her a bird-shaped water whistle. Peppered between them are the more permanent stalls selling more wares like stacks of pots and earthenware. Anaya's eyes catch onto a man mixing spicy bhel and another spinning sugar and dreams of tasting the spice and sweetness on her tongue later this evening.

Rani Mami is a fast woman. She walks fast, she talks fast, and she haggles just as quickly. Going from store to store, the pair quickly put together their haul, leaving a trail of disgruntled vendors in their wake. Bell peppers, cauliflower, carrots, onions, and spinach for the week (half off), new clothes for her daughter (25 shells off), a toy that mami had caught Anaya staring at (to be kept a secret from her mother), and some dye for her husband's beard (a quarter of the original price).

"How ridiculous!" Mami berates yet another vendor, "Since when is a pavadaï for a small child so expensive! Look how small she is, there's barely any fabric here, and you want me to pay 100 shells for this!"

"It costs 80 shells to make! And do you know how high the transportation costs are now? We have to get cotton all the from Sina!"

"Ridiculous, don't try to scam me! There are cotton crops all over the South! It looks so cheaply made. I can't be worth more than 60."

"Absolutely not. 90 is the lowest."

"I won't pay you a single shell more than 75. Take it or leave it."

The vendor rolls his eyes with a "Pah!" Mami hmphs at him and marches off with Anaya in tow.

"Mami! What about my dress? Please, I want it. It's so pretty."

"Hush, child, we'll get the dress. Keep walking."

"But-" Anaya gazes desperately at the blue and pink pavadaï, and she's dragged away until Mami quips at her not to look back.

"I promised you we'd get it. Don't worry."

Anaya resigns herself never to see the dress again. Another one of those lies adults tell her to keep her from fussing. How rude. They've passed three stalls, and she's given herself up to the rabbit hole of resentment—the world is so unfair to her!—when they're stopped by a man running after them.

"Ma'am! Ma'am, come back!" He skids to a halt beside them, holding a now-packed pavadaï out to them, "I will sell it for 80 shells, okay? Just 80."

Mami quirks an eyebrow, "I said 75."

“Fine! Fine! 75!”

Mami pays him, and as the man stalks off in defeat, Mami gives Anaya a smug, victorious look, “See.”

They continue through the town to the wharf. The crowds grow thicker the closer they get to the river. The people look haggard and worn, too; some sit on the ground despite the lack of space. Anaya desperately clutches her aunt’s hand as she half-jogs to keep up, doing her best to hop over stray limbs and pebbles, but every so often, she stumbles and has to be pulled upright by her hand.

The afternoon heat gets to both of them. Mami grumbles under her breath about the crowds, the hot, sticky weather, and the poor quality of the overflowing 50-year-old basket that rests on her hip. She does not complain about the number of people in tattered clothes who sit along the street in silence, looking miserable. “They are refugees, Anaya; they have lost their homes to the war and have come here to be safe. We will help them after we fetch Ishya,” Mami tells her when she starts complaining about the dirty people.

Hefting the slipping basket back onto her hip, she comments that she wishes she had a young boy that she could put to work instead of having to fret about her wayward daughter.

“When you grow up, Anaya, be better than your cousin, okay? Listen to your mother well. Ishya, this brat, is going to be the death of me, I swear.”

“Is it because she cuts her hair short? Like a boy?”

“Ah? Aiya, who cares about how she cuts her hair. I just wish she wouldn’t go gallivanting across the world by herself in this day and age like some deviant!”

“What is gallivanting?”

“It means to run away and not listen to your mother.”

Section 3

Ishya hadn't run away. Anaya's cousin is a free spirit, hungry for knowledge and burning with curiosity. The kind of curiosity that often turned into a disaster for the rest of their village. In comparison, Anaya's "naughtiness" was child's play.

When she was 5, Ishya decided she wanted to meet god. Rani, raised a religious Hindu, tried to instil the discipline of daily ritual in her daughter in hopes of teaching her faith and the value of the regulation and introspection that came with putting your fate in the hands of the Almighty.

Ishya was unconvinced. "How do you know that god is even real," she asks, picking at the grass mat she's forced to sit still on until the prayers are over. Rani basks in the post-ritual peace, lighting another incense stick and scooping the heat from the camphor flame to her daughter's forehead. She places a dot of vermilion there and guides Ishya's hands to pray.

"He is because I say so."

"Wouldn't that make you a god then if you can control that?"

"I am not a god, Ishya."

"Exactly. So how can you say god is real and make him exist?"

"He is real if we believe he is real."

"But you believed that I didn't spill the bucket of milk this morning, but that doesn't make my lie real."

"You spilt the milk? Ishya you-" The conversation ended for that day with Rani chasing her cackling daughter out the front door. Incurable, she lamented. Rani had fired the cattle herder for lying to her.

After Rani's constant lecturing about god, Ishya was determined to once and for all prove (or disprove by virtue of failure) the existence of god, so her mother would leave her alone. If gods exist, the stories said they only showed themselves to the most worthy people. If she could meet a god, she could prove, in one go, that she was already worthy, so she didn't have to pray.

Ishya, a scientist through and through, began her summons in the most basic way. The gods, she reasoned, would not want to be seen by everyone. It would have to be a secret meeting where no one would see them. So, that night at 2 am, she snuck out of bed and climbed to the top of the tiled roof. Channelling her energy of her mother calling her father from across the fields, she shouts, as loudly as she can, "GOD. GOOOOOD! GOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOD?"

She doesn't meet any gods that night. She does meet a panicked flood of neighbours spilling from their houses, worried that someone was hurt. And then, she meets her mother's glare and knows she's in trouble.

Her second attempt to meet a god draws straight from the story of Narasimha. She takes a stick, finds the town's banyan tree, and proceeds to beat it, waiting for a deity to come face-to-face with her. The town elder wrestles her from the tree and tells her to get the devil out of her before he calls her mother.

Her third and final plan is the one that seals its fate as town lore. Ishya's deduced that the gods descend to earth from the heavens to protect good people from wrongdoers. Well, all she had to do was create a victim worth saving. She had reasoned that the most pious man in town would be the priest, and he would therefore be the most worth protecting if one were a god. Ishya had asked the priest to show her the shrine upriver from their village. While the priest had been distracted cleaning the idols and telling her their stories, she shoved the man into the wicker boat and pushed him out into the river. The priest yelled and begged to be brought back, "I can't swim!" but Ishya promised that a god would come by to save him any minute now. She watched from the shore until the priest floated back into their town, dismayed that no god had appeared in the end.

When she got home after her jaunt in the woods (she was reflecting on what went wrong with her experiment), the priest was at her doorstep, his yellow robes still dripping, yelling about what Ishya had done, "You must learn how to control your demon child before she leads us all into trouble! In all my years, I have never come across anything so preposterous and disrespectful."

Rani had to soothe the priest with a meal, a new robe and extra offerings for the temple. The moment he left, she pinned her with a glare, "Are you out to embarrass me? What were you thinking? What on earth would possess you to push the priest into the river? Are you crazy?"

Ishya can't really justify herself beyond looking guilty and apologetic. Rani gives up on this conversation, throwing her hands up in exasperation, "Of all the people in the world, why did I have to have the feral child? It must be my karma; she's real Shani in my life," she grumbles as she stalks off to calm herself.

Ishya's father is eventually the one who puts an end to this experimentation. Though he was also cultured Hindu through and through, he was not wholly religious like her mother (much to Rani's dismay). Rani had called him back from the fields early that day, and upon learning about her latest shenanigans, he told Ishya that all the gods and their abilities reside within and around them. Calling them gods and treating them as special powers in the universe made it easier for humans to understand and access them. To pray is to focus on our own determination to bring out the qualities we wish for in ourselves and the motivation to work for them. "So be sure to pray every day, and you can grow well."

While no more priests were endangered during Ishya's youth, she continued to wreak havoc across the town whenever any curiosity struck her. Some mornings found both her and the neighbour's cow missing. Ishya had wanted to know whether a lost cow could find its way home

and led it into the woods in the middle of the night. They both return later in the day, unharmed and muddy. Another day she had disassembled her father's cart to learn how an axle worked but couldn't quite figure out how to put it back together. She once "borrowed" a book from a neighbour's son and hadn't returned it until she saw him racing around town searching for it. The poor boy was nearly in tears before she remembered that it was her to take the book.

By the time she was 11, no longer able to put up with her antics, Rani and Raju dropped Ishya off at a gurukul in the woods near Copur run by a brahmhuni and her husband, who taught both boys and girls. They prayed that the teachers would be able to keep Ishya more in line, hoping that keeping her mind occupied would keep her from causing trouble.

Rani had worried about whether her daughter would be accepted into the school for the whole trip. What if they turned her away for being a mere farmer's daughter? What if she was disregarded or scorned for being of low birth? Rani had scolded Raju the entire trip, "I told you to start a trade. We wouldn't have to worry so much if we were merchants."

"We are not wanting as we are, my dear."

"Did I say that I wanted more?" Rani sobbed, cradling Ishya's head on her lap, "I have never wanted anything more than we have. I just worry, what if they're cruel to her? Or neglect her? What of the other children from the noble families?"

"Guru Navya is renowned for being strict and just. She will treat her well and watch over her. Let's not worry without cause."

Section 4

Anaya licks away at her crystal candy while they wait for Ishya's boat to arrive at the wharf, shielded from the midday sun by the veil of her aunt's sari. Mami mutters about giving her daughter too much freedom and how girls who don't listen to their mothers end up dead.

Boat after boat passes the pier carrying lotuses, people, and boxes. At long last, a wicker-topped boat approaches the shore. The passengers are hidden by grass and bamboo arches as it floats closer. It docks shortly afterwards, unloading a small group of travellers. In the afternoon sun, the arrivals are mostly wealthy patrons rushing to the market for last-minute groceries and novelty items and a few road-weary voyagers from far away villages. When it seems that the last of the passengers have alighted, the oarsman disappears into the housing of the boat and reappears momentarily, supporting a young woman dressed in a white, long-sleeved tunic and skirt. She has a similar white cloth wrapped around her neck. Rani Mami gasps, horrified, and races forward to meet them, crying out, "Ishya?"

The lady grunts as the oarsman helps her to settle onto a small stool and looks pointedly towards the boat at another girl who gracefully steps out of the boat, holding her vermilion skirt carefully, "I'm here, mother!" She grins as Rani Mami sags in relief.

Mami runs forward, pulling her daughter down to hug and fuss over her. Anaya is much more fascinated by the strangeness of this other girl's dress.

"Why are you wearing long sleeves? Aren't you hot?"

The new lady looks back at her as though startled by being spoken to. "Ah, you must be the famous Anaya." She waits for her to nod and greet her before she continues, "These aren't my sleeves, little Anaya; they are bandages." The woman sounds distinctly tired.

"Is that what's on your face?"

"Yes."

"What happened that you need bandages on your face?" Anaya blurts out.

"Anaya, we do not ask such probing questions." Ishya cuts in before Ezhil can begin to look uncomfortable.

Ishya has broken free of Rani Mami's fussing. With Mami assured of her safety, Anaya, feeling miffed at being scolded by a stranger, finally meets her cousin. She is tall, taller than anyone Anaya has ever met, she's sure. She carries a quiver of arrows and a sword on her back, with a bag and a blow slung over her shoulder. The weapons make her the most incredible person Anaya's ever met.

When she squats down to take her hand and introduce herself, Anaya sees a glint in her eye and a playfulness in her grin that immediately identifies her as a kindred spirit. And then she pulls

from her pocket a curious-looking rock and, with a wink, whispers that the stone will hatch into a friend for her to pull pranks on her mother with. Anaya is sure she's met her favourite person ever.

"Ishya, who is this you've brought with you?" Mami interrupts. She is looking at the new girl with slight disapproval. Mami disapproves of wearing white as fashion, especially on such a holy day.

"Amma, this is Ezhil. We met with Gharogpur on my way back. She is widowed, alone and hurt. I had to bring her here with me."

"Namaste, Rani Aunty." the lady in white tries to bend down from her stool to touch Mami's feet until she's stopped.

"Please, dear, no need for all that in your state."

"Thank you, Aunty. I hope it's all right that I burden myself with you for some days."

"Nonsense, child," Mami says with a soft smile in place of her earlier irritation. She pets Ezhil's hair, assuring her she's welcome as long as she wishes to stay. "You're so well-mannered. Perhaps you can teach my brat some things."

They were supposed to walk back across town, but seeing Ezhil's condition, Mami talks to a farmer from a village neighbouring theirs to give them a ride back. Ishya lifts Ezhil onto the cart and then swings Anaya up too. Rani Mama refuses to be manhandled in such a disgraceful way and clambers up with the boatman's stool.

The ride is long and tedious. Anaya has already seen the endless plains of vegetation a million times, so she plays with the large egg and listens to Ishya and Rani Mami bickering. Ezhil looks like she's fallen asleep on Ishya Akka's shoulder.

Mami is irritated. "I can't believe you travelled West in a time like this. All these travels, I hope you're aware of what's happening in the world, Ishya. How could you carelessly put yourself in danger like this?"

"Amma, please," Ishya breathes, "Calm down. It's not such a big deal."

"Not a big deal? Look at your friend, Ishya! Look at the state of her! What if that had happened to you? Who knows what those heathens would do if they were to catch one of us? I sweat just thinking of it, and you dance around these battlefields like it's a joke."

"I was never in danger, and I know how to protect myself." She gestures to her stash of weapons.

"Is that what they taught you? I should never have sent you to that school. I should have kept you home and beat some sense into you as the priest told me to."

“You don’t mean that.”

“I don’t know what I mean.” Rani Mami gives up, exasperated, “There is no reasoning with you/ I give up.” She pulls a packet from her basket, produces some fruit, and thrusts it into her hand, “Eat. You must be hungry, eat.”

Ezhil is gently nudged awake and handed some food. Anaya takes the silence to ask her burning questions, “Why did you go gallivanting? Is it because you were scared of Rani Mami?”

Ishya chuckles, “No, I just wanted to see the world. It’s so big with so much to explore. It doesn’t do to stay in one corner, hm?”

“Why didn’t you come home to meet me before now?”

“Ah, I was so far away. When I heard about you, I started running back immediately! But it took me this long to get back,” she pouts.

Anaya is delighted. She giggles, “Akka, you’re so silly! Since you’re back, does that mean you’re not scared of Rani Mami anymore? That’s so brave! Rani Mami is scary,” she says, crawling to sit by Ishya’s other side.

Her cousin brings her close and asks indulgently, “Oh yeah, what did my mother do to you? Tell me, and I will punish her with my mighty sword!”

Anaya begins to complain enthusiastically, recounting the tales of Rani Mami chasing her with a broomstick and all the times she had scolded her for throwing rocks at dogs and spilling all the batter in the kitchen. Both Ishya Akka and Ezhil Akka listen with utmost seriousness to her long list of complaints and promise her restitution the moment they arrive home.

“Ezhil, dear, do you have children of your own?”

“I don’t know, Aunty.”

Section 5

Ishya arrived at Hazarigudi following whispered rumours of an immortal who had descended from his mountain centuries after his ascension to help with the impending war.

“You and I know that there is no such thing as boons, powers, and rakshasas,” Guru Navya had said when she asked Ishya to find him, “But there are phenomena beyond our comprehension all around us, and there are conmen who would pretend miracles for their gain.” Her guru had showered her with blessings and sent her on her way, telling her it was her duty to protect people from things beyond their understanding.

Clues and gossip of his movements led Ishya all the way to the North Eastern border and then back to the Western frontier. A tea shop owner in Chaindakot claimed that the Yogi went further North. A priest in Bandarpur was sure the Yogi’s movements pointed towards him going East.

"He’s in the Ishwara temple-”

“No! The Krishna temple!”

“No! The Karthikeya temple. I’m sure of it!”

Though the man remained elusive, the Yogi had garnered a large following who spread the word of his power and prowess.

In town centres and evening gossip sessions, travelling disciples of the Yogi would sing praises of his name and generosity. “The gods have forsaken us, so the Yogi has descended from his immortal abode to come to our aid.”

“He sacrificed the purity of his soul for us, mere mortals. He risked the gods’ wrath to heal a child that the enemy mutilated. The doctors claimed the child was beyond saving, but the Yogi could do what no mortal can with his powers. The Lord manifested himself before Yogi Ipamrita and warned him: Do not seek to use your gifts for mortal gain, Yogi, lest you face the consequences. The Yogi disobeyed, proclaiming his loyalty to humanity and saved the child anyway. A man who goes against the gods will lead us to salvation from this heathen army.”

“He brings knowledge of absolution. He can deliver us from our misery. Only he can secure the future of our people, our ways, and our identity.”

The support for the Yogi was widespread, as was the people’s desperation for salvation, for relief from the death and terror of invasions. So, when men dressed in orange travelled from village to village spreading word that the Yogi had discovered a way to achieve the impossible: to provide children with powers beyond their imagination and the secret to eternal life, hundreds of children were sent to study the Yogi’s methods.

The men claimed that the Yogi accepted disciples up to the age of 13. Families sent their children, as young as five, and prepared themselves to hope for survival until their children could return, grown and enlightened with divinity, to save them.

It sounds too good to be true. Thinks Ishya as she learns more about this man. It took three years for the rumours to change from awe-inspired tales of Yogi Ipamrita's super-human exploits to questions about the children he took. The orange-clad men continue to take children from towns large and small, but none have been seen since.

"It must be a rigorous technique to learn." says a fruit vendor.

The lady selling vegetables next to her pipes in, "Ah, I told my son that important things take a long time to learn and that he must work hard. I am not worried. He will return to me soon."

Ishya isn't convinced. There was something suspicious of the Yogi's pristine reputation in the villages while no one in the cities had heard of them. Surely, anything of such power that would turn a tide in a war would be a popular topic of gossip in the capital. This man was avoiding detection. None of the reasons why could point to anything good.

The trails eventually led her to Hazarigudi, a small village near the Temple of Divinity, where the Yogi had supposedly meditated for weeks seeking out the gods' aid before he had a breakthrough in saving humanity. Hopefully, she could ask the temple's grounds people about the mysterious man in the morning.

The woman who points her in the direction of the village tells her, "It's a 6-hour walk, though! And it's already late, so you'd better spend the night here."

The woman offered to let her sleep on her porch. The weather is cool enough to keep away the mosquitos, and the woman offers her an extra blanket as she tells Ishya about her daughter, who she sent to study with the Yogi a year ago.

"Ah, I was just going to get her married—the landowner's son had taken a liking to her, you know—but she's always been an adventurous one, and when she heard that she could study, she just had to go. Luckily she was young enough to go."

"You would have her married so young?" Ishya couldn't help but ask.

The host looked at her sadly, "Ah, young miss, you know how men are. They see a young, single girl, and they lose all sense. It's not like the cities where there are guards around to keep us safe. I couldn't risk losing her to them. Better that she's safe and protected as soon as possible." She smiles, "Though, with the Yogi here to save us, I suppose that's no longer necessary."

Ishya smiles back, "I'm sure you'll see her soon."

As the town wound down to sleep, Ishya was shaken out of her drowsiness by a man approaching the house across the street. The draping of his robes told of his ascetic traveller, but

regardless, it was an odd hour to come begging for alms. The door opens to a mother and her two children. She watches the mother hand over her two children—the youngest still needing to be carried—and kowtow at the man's feet, quietly thanking him for giving them hope, promising that her children were smart and would learn well.

She should have left it alone, Guru Navya told her not to interfere unless she was certain of the situation. But Ishya knew that there was nothing good to come of a school that no one could find. What sort of school hides children from the world? Who would take young children and keep them from their families with no contact? What teacher doesn't know how long their education will take?

Ishya didn't know where the children would be taken or what would be done. But with even a slight risk of them being in danger, she would not allow it to unfold before her.

She followed the man as they left the village and ventured into the forest. At first, they travel along the path that leads to the Temple of Divinity, but soon they veer off, picking through the untamed underbrush. The toddler—he couldn't be more than three—is asleep in the man's hold, and the other boy is half asleep as he stumbles along, blindly following the strong hold on his hand.

Ishya knew that if she were to follow long enough, she would be led to the grounds where they kept the children. But, as the minutes passed, the woods seemed to warp around them, turning darker and exuding a heavy mist that felt almost oppressive. There were theories of energies, both good and bad, that interact in the world, resulting in phenomena no one could understand. Ishya had studied all of them with curiosity. But she had never seen anything like this at play. Whatever this was, it was not meant to exist. Even the children were starting to feel the discomfort, whimpering and asking if they could go home.

The scholar in her wanted to follow further, learn more and figure out what this was. Trees around them grew more shrivelled, leaking blood-like sap. Shadowy figures— Ishya was certain they were corpses— hung off the branches, some of them positioned as though they were reaching desperately for something but frozen before they could. No, Ishya knew she was growing closer to being outmatched— she had no idea what was going on. She had to save these children, and she had to move fast.

She pushed away the voice of her guru, telling her to be honourable no matter what she did. She drew her blade, leapt from behind to catch the man around the neck and cut him before he even realised she was there. Only cowards attack from behind. Ishya is happy to be cowardly to keep two children from becoming accessories in this demonic forest.

It took her some time to soothe the children. The boy was mistrustful of this strange woman considering where they were. She assured him she wasn't the witch that froze the bodies. The toddler cried endlessly, frightened by being suddenly awoken. She explained to them, as best she could, that the man was dangerous, that their mother didn't know. "I will take you home safely."

The boy, Han, he called himself, was very sceptical of Ishya until they arrived at a familiar patch of the woods, and then he shot off in glee, running all the way home.

The boys' mother received them with confusion and then sobbed relief as Ishya explained what had unfolded that night. "There is no divine intervention that can save us all." She explains, "The King and his warriors fight for our freedom every day. Keep your boys safe. Do not believe in men who claim to hold the answers of the universe."

The mother thanked her, still in tears, and offered her a meal before she left the village. Ishya had declined, still reeling from the nausea of her first kill and the heavy air of those woods. She promised to accept dinner when she returned to tend to the boys' scrapes in the morning.

Though she was tired, she needed to find those woods again. Without the boys being held hostage, she could investigate what they saw. She walked for hours, well past the location they were at that morning. She spent hours widening her search parameter, looking for any hints of the dark mist or the hanging corpses. The woods looked pristine. Lush and teeming with deer and squirrels as though the horror scene from that morning was a dream.

Ishya walked back to the village, troubled and confused. When she arrived at dusk, where the village once stood, she was met with smouldering ash. A man—the same one she thought she had killed—was standing in the remains, torch in hand, staring unblinkingly at her. Between one breath and the next, he vanished into the air.

Ishya had circled the village frantically, digging through the crumbled heaps of buildings, looking for any survivors. She found one.

A girl, roughly her age, dressed in all white, with bandages along her arms and neck, lay face down at the edge of the town. Choking back the tears (from the smoke, she told herself), she tore pieces of her underskirt into strips and wrapped them around the bleeding gash at her forehead. Hoisting her on her back, she dragged her for several miles down the path to the Temple of Divinity. They had to have someone who could help.

As it turned out, the Temple of Divinity was large enough to house a town full of people on its town. Ardhangini, they called it. The large Temple of Divinity, supposedly built by a god to honour his wife, his better half, made up the city's centre. The complex square housed 108 shrines dedicated to the local gods and spirits of importance and three large structures atop stairs. The largest was dedicated to the Goddess, the other two to her husband and son. The tall gopura of the structures, capped in gold, was visible from miles away, even through the thick forest foliage. The hand-painted statues that adorned the gopura told the stories of the Goddess, her glories and how loved she was by her husband. The central courtyard was protected with four layers of concentric squares between walls between which an entire city had come to life.

The four North gates are open, letting through a constant flow of people and carts. Some of them are regular citizens, and most of them are employed in some form by the temple. The town glows with candlelight under the dim moon.

Seeing Ishya dragging the limp body, the people quickly ushered her through the gates, leading her to a healing pavilion somewhere between the first and second walls. Someone helped carry the girl off her back and lay her down on a cot. The doctor had instantly recognised her. “Why, it's Ezhil! What happened to her? She was only delivering sacred food to the nearby village.” “You know her?” Ishya sits heavily.

“Of course, she works here on the grounds. She’s a town favourite.”

“I don’t know what happened,” Ishya breaks down into sobs, telling the fate of the town nearby. She doesn’t tell them that it was she who had them killed; she who betrayed their kindness.

Ishya fell asleep on the floor beside Ezhil after the doctor begged her to stay the night and recuperate from her terrible day.

When she woke, Ezhil was still sleeping. The doctor, wrapping fresh bandages around her neck, explained that Ezhil had come to the temple with no memories and extensive burns along her arms. No one knew where she came from, but she arrived wearing all white, so everyone assumed she was a widow, “she chooses to continue wearing white, just in case.”

“And the burns?”

“Who’s to say,” the doctor says, “it could be that she was stopped from performing sati; it could be that she was caught and tortured before she ran away. We found her by the West Gate. She’s probably from one of the occupied border towns.”

“Do women do that now? Sati? I thought it was only in fantasies.” Ishya confesses, “I don’t think I could do that, even if I loved my husband. I would probably rejoice in my freedom after being released from the shackles of marriage.”

“We cannot presume to understand another’s anguish. Some women do it now because it's better than the alternative.”

“Being lonely?” “Being a target.”

The silence sits heavy between them.

“If she did choose to leap into a fire, to take such an action when no one asks of them, she must have been distraught. Regardless, she is safe now.”

Ishya learns more about Ezhil over a meal. The townspeople tell her that she spends her days serving the temple and helping older people around the town.

“A young girl like that ought to get back out there and find another catch,” tuts an elderly woman as she stops by to share chai and snacks, “Poor thing.”

When she woke that evening, the town collectively breathed a sigh of relief. Her guardian, Pooja Pati, as the town called her, muffled her hiccups as she berated her daughter for worrying them all.

“Pooja Pati,” Ezhil teased back, “I’m just keeping you young. Stress is good for the heart.”

She received a light swat on the leg, and the room devolved into giggles.

With Ezhil awake, Ishya thought again of the town of ashes and the two boys she thought she saved. She wandered deeper into the town and found herself at the foot of the Goddess Temple. Its stairs went so far that, in kneeling, it looked to go into the sky. Once she sat, Ishya found she could not move. Leaving the courtyard’s serenity was too much, too soon. For months, she knelt on the hot stone of the central courtyard, as still as a banyan tree, her focus unwavering. She claimed she was meditating. Ezhil thought she was punishing herself.

When the layer of dust under Ishya’s peripheral area grew obvious in contrast to the pristine flooring surrounding it, Ezhil stood inches from her, catching Ishya’s attention with the sudden shadow in the afternoon sun, and demanded, “Well? Will you let me sweep there, or will you kneel here until the temple falls to time?” Ishya started, her voice croaking with disuse, “What?”

“You have to move. What gives you the right to languish in your guilt while others suffer? Get up.”

Ezhil, dressed all-white, cut a blinding figure in the afternoon light. As Ishya craned to look at her, she saw the sun halo around her head, bathing her in a heavenly glow as though she was the messenger sent from the Goddess herself to urge Ishya onward in her mission.

Ishya stood shakily. When she was settled on a raised ledge, Ezhil handed her cups of water and a bowl of rice porridge. “I know what happened with the town,” she starts.

“No, you don’t.”

“The village burning wasn’t your fault,” Ezhil tries.

“It was, though, it was.” the story poured from her mouth, like Ezhil, with her mere presence, somehow pulled the story from her soul.

“It still isn’t your fault.” Ishya’s eyes snapped open, meeting Ezhil’s in weary surprise. She continued, “Even if it was, punishing yourself here for the rest of eternity isn’t the answer. You tried to help the boys. You meant well, but you were hasty. If you want to repent, you’ll just have to do better next time.”

Ezhil gave her a soft smile. Ishya finds that smile more healing than months of introspection.

Section 6

The cart enters the town right as Ishya tells another tale about the fuzzy creatures living in the icy mountains' caves for the North. After stories of the underground magic snakes of the rolling desserts and the glittering fairies of the ghats, Anaya is all but certain she's being lied to, but the stories are too fun, so she allows it.

Their village is much quieter than the busy streets of Amaravanthe. Instead of streets of businesses, their town of Thishi is a quiet ring of houses surrounding a small temple at the centre. One main road leads straight through the temple, allowing for small mud streets to branch out, leading to fields of vegetables and flowers. Many houses, built of the fields the family tends to, are made of mud with thatch roofs. Some richer families who live in the town centre have houses that have wood to hold the weight of two floors.

From the moment the village chief noticed them roll by at the mouth of the main road, a frenzy grew in their wake. Calls of, "They're here! They're back!" and "Ishya, putti! You've arrived! We'll come to see you later, okay? Settle in well!" The shouting wakes Ezhil, who chuckles about the fanfare welcoming home the celebrity. Anaya realises then that Akka is, in fact, somewhat of a celebrity, even though the only thing she is notorious for is causing chaos. Famous is still famous, though! Anaya would have to use this pull to get Krishna Uncle down the street to give her extra candy.

As they roll up in front of their house, just outside the centre ring of the town, Ishya helps everyone down and asks her mother if she'd show Ezhil to her bedroom to rest. All the bandages she wears mean she gets tired quickly. Then she turns to the rest of the family, crowded just outside the doorway, waiting for her arrival. They rush at her the moment Ezhil leaves the radius of Ishya's arm around her waist. Amma strides forward to pat and pinch her cheeks, "Aiyoh, child, you're so skinny that won't do, that won't do at all. Don't worry. I made all your favourites. We'll fatten you up in no time."

Appa and Raju Mama's three sisters are also here with their families, and Ishya has to weave between them as she's tossed around from hug to hug. The women older than her stroke her head and crack their knuckles on their temples as they tell her how pretty she's grown. "The last time I saw you, you were just as tall as my waist," says an aunt as she rattles the girl in her grip. Anaya isn't sure she knows who this Aunty is. But, to be safe, she takes advantage of everyone's attention being on Ishya to hide in a corner behind a shelf. She does not want to be caught in this circle again.

Ishya tries to touch everyone's feet to greet them, but they are too swift in pulling her back up to fuss and coo over her. The akkas draw her into conversations about her travels, and "Wow, Ishya, how do you manage your hair so well when you're travelling all the time? You must teach me." One of them thrusts a baby into her arms, demanding that she complement what she made. The youngest akka is in is in awe after finding out that she had trained in muscle. "All that muscle! I could never," she gasps. That is true. The youngest akka is rather lazy.

The older boys stare in fascination at her weapons and in jealousy at Ishya's muscles. They mess with it until Ishya threatens to use it on them if they don't leave them alone. They try to play the part of dignified older brothers, asking her about her travels, about whether she's taking care of herself, and threatening her about any potential boys in her life. "I hope you told any men who bothered you that you have six older brothers who will hunt him down and beat him to a pulp!" "Oh please", she snorts, "you were knocked out by a mango pit, and you fainted when you saw a spider."

"I was three!" Arun Anna squawked in return.

When she finally escapes from the clutches of overeager relatives, she makes her way to Pati and Thatha, who do let her touch their feet before drawing her to sit between them.

"Were the roads good to you?" Thatha asks as though he would personally beat them to submission if they so much as caused a bump in her road.

When she nods, he continues, "Good. Listen, Ishya, I have made your father fix up this house just for you, okay? If anything or anyone troubles you, come to me, and I will teach him a lesson." With that, he hmphs righteously and gives her a firm pat on the back.

Pati cradles Ishya's face and tells her she's become too pretty. "Always a danger, being too pretty. But no matter, it is better than being ugly." she waves off her own comment. "Tell me, dear, how was your trip home from school? Did you do well? What did your Guru say about performance?"

"She says I am her prized disciple, Pati."

"Very good! Very good. It will make things much easier for us. With a glowing recommendation like yours, we can have our Varun and Anaya study under Yogi Ipamrita's tutelage. Fortune smiles upon us, all thanks to you, my dear. Anaya is sure to find a good match when she's older with such a good education." Pati nods to herself.

"Ah, Pati-" Ishya starts looking panicked.

"You've done well." Pati cuts her off, "There is nothing more you need to do now. Come them. Let's wash up and eat before the townspeople arrive to greet you. They've been pounding on our door for days!"

Before she can try to protest again, she's herded towards the kitchen with more comments about how tired and thin she looks. Anaya rather thought Ishya was perfectly squishy. But no one listens to her.

The meal goes by noisily. All 20 family members settle on the ground with their banana leaves. The two youngest sisters are told to serve everyone. Amma wrangles Anaya and the other toddlers into a circle around her and feeds them all together, plopping balls of rice into each of their hands, while Pati says she will eat later and settles behind Ishya to oil her long hair. She

talks to Ezhil, urging her to eat more, “You’re too skinny, tsk. Both of you need to eat better on your travels. How will we find you husbands otherwise?” Ishya stiffens at that while Ezhil laughs awkwardly. They glance at each other.

Lunch ends with the boys racing outside to hunt for sugar cane, followed by Anaya’s dad and uncle chasing after them to ensure their fields aren’t ruined. Soon, it’s just the women sitting on the courtyard ledge. Pati announces, “Ishya, your mother, aunt, and I have found you several suitable bachelors in the area. You may pick whomever you like. You are to be married by the end of the harvest season.” She pauses and turns to Ezhil, offering, “We can find you a man too, dear. You’re our daughter now, too.”

Ezhil chokes, shyly mumbling her gratitude. Ishya stars in horror, “No,” she cries, “I’m not getting married. Why would I be getting married?”

Rani Mami sighs, resigned. She expected this, “What do you mean ‘Why’ Ishya? Because it is time for you to get married. You’re much too old already.”

Ishya raises an eyebrow, the judgement clear on her face.

The rest of the women scramble to persuade her, “Ishya, you’re 25! It’s time you settled down,” says the oldest cousin, cradling her fourth baby. “You’ll be so lonely otherwise.”

“Being married is so fulfilling. It’s an adventure of a new sort. You surely aren’t expecting to travel forever,” asks Amma.

The women talk over each other, claiming it is simply because she had to. “Look, all of us got married!”

“I hated the idea at first, too, Ishya, but then I met him, and he’s so perfect! You will feel the same way, too. I know you will.”

Ishya silences them with a shot, “Stop it! I am not getting married. Not now, not ever. I will not ‘come around’ when I meet anyone. You cannot make me.” She looks like she wants to say much more but holds back when Ezhil reaches out to squeeze her hand. She takes a deep breath.

Pati speaks, finally, quiet and authoritative, “You do not have a choice in this matter. You will meet the boys on the list, and you will choose one. It is for your good.”

“I would rather die,” Ishya says, standing. “If you think to force my hand on this, I will take my sword, and we will leave.”

Gasps sound across the room as Ishya stomps out of the room. Ezhil chases after her quietly, promising to talk to her.

“I was afraid of this,” whimpers Rani Mami, “What do I do now, Amma?” She looks despairingly at her mother-in-law.

“Tell Raju to take her weapons. How uncultured, waltzing around the country like a bloodthirsty hooligan. If she refuses to cooperate, we will choose someone for her. The boy whose books she used to steal,” she pauses in thought. She nods a moment later, “He will do. He has a strong countenance that will keep her in check.”

“But Pati, he’s 45. He’s so old!”

“Shut it! Who are you to butt in when the adults are talking?”

Amma asks, “Mehek has a point, though, Amma. Surely there is someone younger?”

“That is of no consequence. What is important is that she is married and kept under control before she ruins herself and us with her.”

“She’s not,” pipes up the youngest cousin, Rukmani, “She’s not one of Nastriya, right?”

“Shut up! How could you bring up something like that?” snaps Rani Mami, “Do not terrorise Pati so. Ishya is not. She cannot be.” “There’s nothing wrong with it. There are so many—“
“Hush, Rukmani, that wouldn’t do.”

“Well, why not? At least she’d be married!”

“It is not about the marriage,” snaps Pati, “it’s about who can protect her. She needs to stay hidden. Do you know what they are doing to women near the border?”

The room goes quiet. Rani Mami whispers, “We were lucky with you all. You chose to get married. My girl,” she sobs, “so headstrong. Why can’t she just be simple. All she has to do is do as he says she could live happily, but she insists,” she hiccups, “she insists on making us all worry.”

Amma slides over to wrap an arm around her. “Akka, we will figure it out.”

“I warned you not to send your daughter to that school, Rani,” Pati says again, “She wouldn’t be so out of control if you raised her right. We’re going to be the laughingstock of the town! What will people say? That we can’t even keep our girl in line?”

Rani Mami hides her shoulder in her hands to cry harder. Pati continues, “I can’t handle the shame. I’m telling you this right now. If that daughter of yours brings us shame, I will slit my own throat!”

The conversation devolves. Amma pushes Anaya out of the house as they talk over each other, begging Pati not to say such things. Anaya thinks this is far too much drama and toddles off to look for her new cousin.

She finds Ishya and her friend leaning against the back wall of the house. Their hands are held tightly between them, and they press together in their whispered conversation. Anaya can't hear everything, but she can make out enough.

"They're just worried about you, my love."

"I know, I know. But, I can't believe they'd... I can take care of myself. If they'd seen what I..."

Ezhil leans forward to pull her into a hug. "It took you a year to come back to me." She says, "I will be with you always from now. We will do whatever you want."

"I have to see my mission through." Ishya pulls away, "I have to before Anaya..." she trails off.

"Then that is what we will do."

Anaya decides this is the perfect time to stop hiding and barrels into their legs.

"Are you really going to run away?" She asks into the skirt, "Please don't you have to teach me how to stab people with an arrow."

She's picked up with a soft laugh, "Then I promise I won't leave until I teach you, hm?"

"No! Don't leave at all!"

Ishya smiles, giving her a tickle, "So needy already. Very well, I will see what I can do."

The pair ask Anaya to give them a tour of the town, and she drags them in a loop, telling them about all her favourite nooks and crannies and pointing out her favourite cow. The town is quiet as everyone naps in the early-afternoon sun.

As they make their way back, angry voices call from inside the house, "Ishya! Where is that disrespectful brat? I will teach her a lesson." Raju Mama is back from the field.

There is shouting from within the house. Someone is begging him not to do anything drastic. A number of the neighbours are milling around the front of the house, craning their necks to see inside and watch the drama unfold. "Apparently, she ran away and took Anaya with them!" A murmur echoes through the crowd. They offer up their carts or cows or horses and to chase her down themselves. People speculate amongst themselves, wondering how shameless a daughter has to be to run from her family after stealing a meal. "I bet she's pregnant!" one lady gasped. "We almost offered up our son to that hooligan," another comments.

"They should have expected this. Do you remember how she was as a child? The priest thought she was possessed!"

The screaming inside continues, and Anaya sees her mom run outside, awkwardly making excuses to the neighbours. “Ah! You know our Ishya, always up to antics. Nothing is wrong. Nothing is wrong. Please, go about your day. So sorry for disturbing you.”

Held in Ishya’s arms, Anaya looked up to see a grim look on her cousin’s face, as though she’d made a decision a decision to leave after all.